

## What's Next?

by Tim Size, Executive Director, Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative, Sauk City

This is the best of times and the worst of times. I've always wanted to start with this line taken from the beginning of Charles Dickens's "A Tale of Two Cities." It certainly fits well today. Some may quibble with the "best of times" but as an aging optimist, each new day above ground is always welcomed.

President Obama has now signed into law the largest economic stimulus bill we have ever seen in the U.S. There are without a doubt some good things and some not so good things in it. Strong feelings for and against the wisdom of many of the provisions exist.

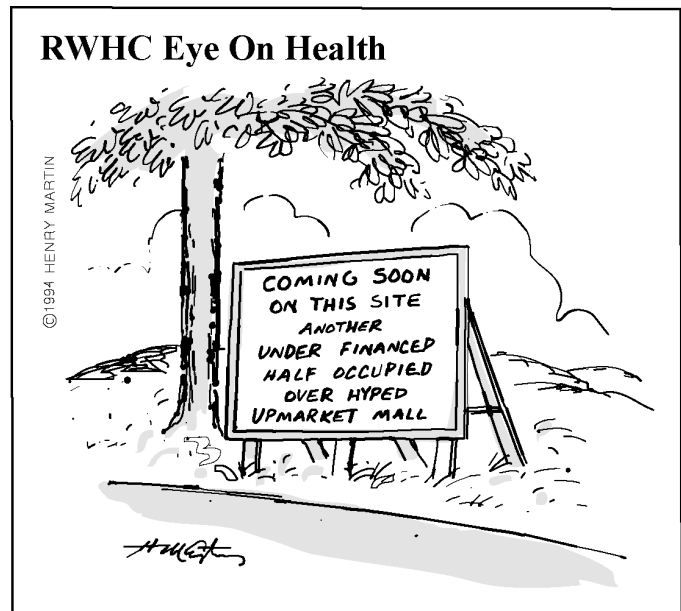
Don't get me started about the tradeoffs that were made or not made to help rural health. In any event, I'm moving on and leaving to people with more time and more inside knowledge to understand what happened. (Being asked to write an editorial is really great for a person's mental health.)

This was a huge bill with many complex issues that arguably needed to move very quickly to help slow a tanking economy. In this situation, I agree with the old adage, "it is better to be approximately right than to be exactly wrong."

There was widespread agreement about the need for the government to have stepped in. You don't have to be a "Keynesian economist" to see that. When many to most of us get worried about our economic security, we spend less. It is just common sense that the Federal government needed to act to fill the gap temporarily by spending more. Action was needed to limit the recession's impact on our fears and loss of jobs.

We clearly need to be prepared for a rocky road over the next year or more. We will individually and collectively face many more important tough questions. However, the toughest question will be what do we want next for our country? I, for one, believe that we will be better off if our collective answer is not getting back to the last two decade's "business as usual."

We need to seek a "new normal." We need a country that works to avoid the traps of excessive consumerism and borrowing while making sure basic needs are met. This excess hit us both as individuals when we bought housing well beyond our needs and means, and when our Federal government added recklessly to our national debt.



Our banking system lost its way. There are many individuals, of both major political parties, who have more than a fair share of responsibility for our current mess. And we the people also played a starring role. As individuals, we need to borrow for appropriate education, transportation and housing. Our organizations need to borrow to grow jobs. But we have become a culture too comfortable with borrowing from tomorrow's basics for today's luxuries.

It is my hope that we as a people find a better balance, individually and collectively, between consumption and investment.

My father came of age in the "Great Depression." In many ways he was not a role model, but like many of his generation, that experience led to life with a healthy measure of thrift and making good use of what he had. When my wife and I cleaned out his house after he passed, our favorite discovery was a box carefully labeled and full of "String Too Short To Use."

I am not suggesting that we should turn into a redo of those from an earlier era. However, I do believe we have an opportunity, in our homes, at work and in our communities to have a discussion about who we want to be, to make better use of the "short strings" that come our way.