

A tax receipt at last?

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It looks like the U.S. government may be well on its way toward issuing each taxpayer an itemized receipt. [As I've said before](#), this is a really good idea.

A bipartisan bill to establish a tax receipt has been [introduced](#) in the House, following a similar move last month in the Senate. Tennessee Democrat Rep. Jim Cooper offers a [sample](#) (pdf) of what the receipt would look like.

I wish Cooper's receipt broke down more of the budget lines into subcategories. It'd be good, for instance, for taxpayers to know how much of their spending on ground transportation goes to highways, as opposed to railroads and mass transit. (I'd also like a footnote pointing out that we routinely spend our income taxes on highways even as conservatives repeat the false line that gas taxes cover them, but that's probably too much to wish for in a bipartisan proposal.)

If the extra lines of numbers pushed the receipt past the page break, they could always eliminate the separate bit at the bottom with the numbers about the national debt. That chunk of scary boldface type takes what's otherwise a nonpartisan service and gives it an political slant: We should be informed about where our tax dollars go, because the government spends way too much money. Stop the madness!

Actually, we should be informed about where our tax dollars go because we deserve to know, and because it's good for democracy. But the bill wouldn't have Republican names on it without a spoonful of ideology to help the public service go down, and I'm mostly just glad this thing might get done.

In the meantime, the White House website has a nifty [online tool](#) that will generate a 2010 income tax receipt for you. But the problem isn't that people who tend to visit government websites can't figure out where their tax dollars go--the information has long been readily available to anyone who wants to know. The real problem is that most taxpayers are far less proactive about informing themselves.

Passing a bill that sends a receipt--even an imperfect one--to each one of us would be a huge step forward. I'm convinced that our conversation about government spending would be far healthier if all taxpayers earning \$50,000 a year knew that when someone says we spend too much of their money on, say, Community Development Block Grants, we're not talking about hundreds of their dollars.

We're talking about \$17. If you think that's too much to spend toward funding locally controlled efforts to do things like put roofs over people's heads, we'll have to agree to disagree. But an itemized tax receipt would at least help us start with the facts.