

The tax man

Doucette named to panel to simplify taxes

By Marina Nicola / CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Frustrated tax-paying Nevadans now have a new outlet for their concerns — and that outlet's name is Justin Doucette.

As part of a continuing effort to become "user-friendly," the Internal Revenue Service and the Treasury Department have appointed Las Vegas resident Doucette to be a member of the Taxpayer Advocacy Panel (TAP), a group of volunteers that work with the IRS to improve and simplify filing taxes.

Formerly known as the Citizen Advocacy Panel (CAP), TAP was established in June 1998 under the Federal Advisory Committee Act to improve the IRS' responsiveness to taxpayers' needs and concerns. Earlier this year, TAP expanded from its initial core group to launch a nationwide search for representatives from each state.

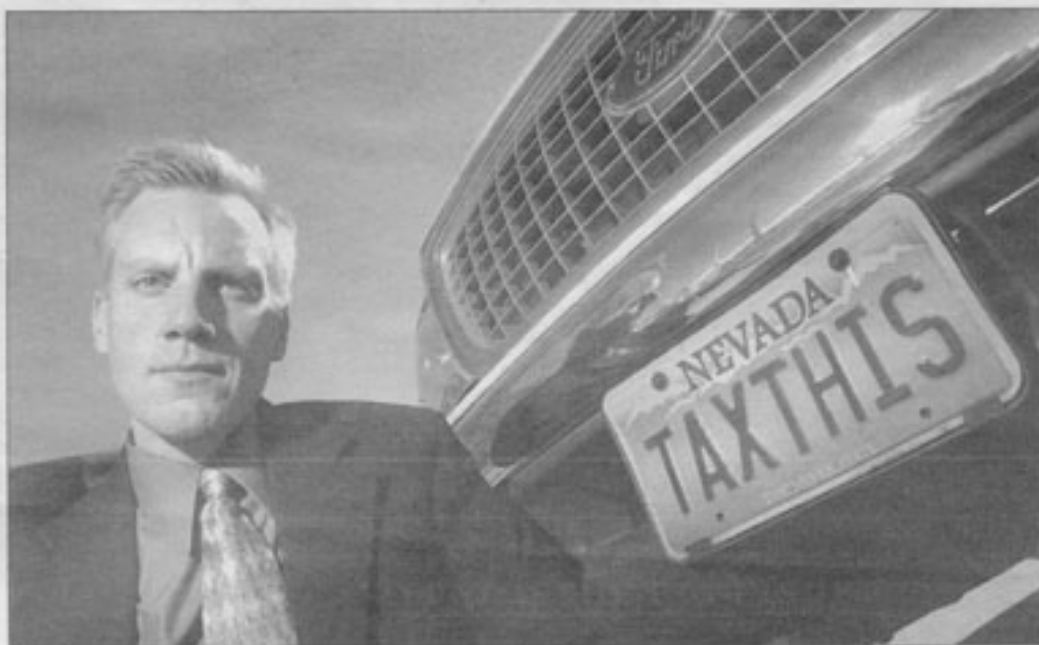
More than 1,300 applications came in, 11 of which were from Nevada. Each state received one panel member per 1.5 million taxpayers (according to the IRS, only 950,000 Nevadans file taxes every fiscal year). In total, 102 spots needed to be filled.

"The new panel members have an important job to make sure the IRS provides world-class service to taxpayers," said Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill, whose agency oversees the IRS. "Now that we have expanded TAP to all 50 states, we can ensure taxpayers from every corner of the country will have their voices heard."

After a lengthy interview process consisting of piles of applications and days of out-of-state interviewing, the panel chose Doucette, a certified public accountant, a partner in the national restaurant chain, Coyote Cafe, and a salesperson for Sunbelt Business Brokers.

"I have two small kids. I want to set an example that if you want to affect change, you have to get involved," Doucette said. "I, like everyone else, have opinions of the tax structure so I wasn't going to let this opportunity go by."

"The panel can't change statute as much



Las Vegas businessman Justin Doucette has been appointed to the Internal Revenue Service Taxpayer Advocacy Panel. His license plate, saying "Tax This," is a tongue-in-cheek reflection of his belief in limited taxation. LORI CAIN / IN BUSINESS LAS VEGAS

as I wish, but that's not the type of change we will be empowered to make. If this panel becomes nothing more than a sounding board and a way for people to voice concerns, that, to me, will make this worth it."

Doucette is quick to clarify the panel will not be a spokesperson for disgruntled taxpayers in disputes with the IRS.

Instead, he says the panel will make the IRS aware of "fundamental flaws" in forms that are usually overlooked. For example, a colleague alerted him about one flaw in a tax depreciation form for small business owners. The form lists five places to categorize assets. But according to the tax code, up to seven can be listed.

Doucette says this is a small matter but that tax forms are filled with hundreds of inconsistencies that if fixed, would collectively save Americans thousands of hours.

Ultimately, National Taxpayer Advocate Nina Olson will compile an annual report for Congress listing the top 10 concerns of taxpayers.

Volunteers are required to spend at least 300 hours per year. Although only appointed last month, Doucette has already dedicated nearly 50 hours working with the panel and predicts his time commitment will be closer to 400 hours this year.

Several weeks ago, panel members convened in Washington, D.C. for a three-day orientation. Doucette says that is when he realized how diverse the group is.

Members of the panel include accountants, business people, military members and politicians — including mayors from California and Colorado. Doucette recalls meeting one fellow member who had served in the military.

"He told me we were like an aircraft carrier. We will slowly move one degree at a time. We won't make immediate broad sweeping changes but we will over time," he said.

Additional information on the panel is available at www.improveIRS.org.