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The end of the year is always a good time for reflection, a chance to take stock of where we stand and to lay out expectations for the new year.

The turning of the calendar often finds people making resolutions to exercise more or learn a new language, but it's also a logical time to review personal finances. It's the end of the tax year, and a good time to make household budget plans for the coming year.

Personally, I like to compare the year-end balances of my savings and loan accounts to see how I did in terms of making the good numbers larger and the bad ones smaller. I know that I found lots of ways to save money and cut costs in 2012, and I'll list my favorites here, but for most middle class folks, there are financial threats brewing for 2013 and the need to economize will continue unabated.

The good news is that the broader economy is healing and the housing market continues to rebound with all the good things that implies for employment and consumer demand. And South Carolina's Lowcountry boasts below-average unemployment rates that have continued to fall.

As of late last week, however, the possibility of a Maine-to-Texas port strike was looming at year's end, and nation was racing Thelma-and-Louise style toward the fiscal cliff with Congress at the steering wheel.

Now, there's about a 99 percent chance that the outcome of the arguments in Washington about extending income tax rates won't affect your household finances because all sides have agreed to further extend tax cuts for all but the wealthiest taxpayers.

But the scheduled expiration of the temporary payroll tax cut would dent the paychecks of everyone with a job, and the expiration of extended unemployment benefits would hit many people without a job.

Fiscal cliff aside, costs continue to rise for utilities, insurance and food, and the average family is earning less and less due to stagnant wages and the creep of inflation, even though inflation has been modest.

Which brings us back to the need to cut and save, cut and save. It's hard to see how the economy will strongly rebound as long as consumers stay in a cut-and-save mode, but that's where so many remain.

Here's a recap of some of the ways my family saved money in 2012; my personal Top 10 list. I hope you find some of these tips useful, and encourage you to share your money-saving ideas with me.

Savings in unlikely places: I saved 20 percent on gasoline, more than \$500 for the year for my family, by using discounted gas cards purchased at Harris Teeter and Publix grocery stores. I bought discounted movie tickets from AAA, and downloaded free music from the public library.

Cutting monthly costs: Monthly bills for phones, cable and Internet can take a big bite out of household budgets. Paring down to the minimum phone plans my family appears to need saved about \$400.

Using savings wisely: When one of my credit cards offered a temporary 5 percent rebate on utility bills, I charged roughly a year's worth of electricity, then dipped into savings to pay the resulting credit card bill in full. I was going to have to pay the electric bills either way, and how else can you get a safe, guaranteed 5 percent return on your money?

Mortgage refinancing: If you have good credit and you have a mortgage, record-low interest rates mean big savings. I never thought I would see loan rates this low, and, after 2013, doubt I'll ever see them again.

Coupons and bulk buys: Nothing fancy here. Clipping grocery coupons from the newspaper circulars and stocking up when things are on sale is a big money saver. Go ahead, give me a funny look when I buy a dozen boxes of my favorite cereal during a half-price sale, but I just saved \$25.

Free money? OK: When a grocery store where I shop offered \$20 for each prescription transferred to their pharmacy, I transferred mine there. When a bank offered \$50 for opening a no-fee account for my child, I opened one. When a bookstore where my wife shops offered \$85 in gift cards for \$75, we bought them. Those sorts of deals, money back on things I was going to buy anyway, quickly added up to hundreds of dollars.

Credit-card sign-up incentives: Credit cards are financial poison if you pay interest charges. But if you don't, the incentives for signing up for a card can be huge. In one case, I received four round-trip plane tickets in exchange for an annual fee of less than \$100.

Energy efficiency: Watching out for wasteful power use and spending some money on inexpensive energy-saving items like caulk, insulation, programmable thermostats and efficient light bulbs has helped slash my household power consumption. With electricity rates rising all the time, the savings grow each year.

Buying and selling used stuff: Also in the small-things-add-up category, there are lots of good ways to sell or trade used books, video games, home electronics, sporting equipment and more. I'm amazed at what people throw away.

Mr. Fix-it: Years ago, I would not have dared to try and repair my washing machine or clothes dryer. This year, I did both. Websites such as repairclinic.com can help avoid costly service calls because they can help diagnose a problem with an appliance, show you a video with step-by-step instructions on how to fix it, and of course they will sell you the part you need. That saved me several hundred dollars in 2012 and 2011.

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Highlights: [repairclinic](http://repairclinic.com)