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Serendipity: Think Like a Geek to Foster Financial Sustainability

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By Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist

Living by a budget can help give you peace of mind and prevent crises from pushing goals out of reach.

When your computer goes blank, geeks become gods, and when a financial meltdown becomes an iceberg, financial nerds are necessary. At the moment, most of us crave financial sustainability. But what is it? It's a plan that allows households peace of mind — some sense of ongoing security in a hyper-chaotic financial world.



Karen Telleen-Lawton

We've grown accustomed to considering environmental sustainability. In the natural world, a few drought years or an occasional flood year can be accommodated. Trees may be stressed by drought; a few may succumb to beetles. Annual flowers will be fewer in number, but their seeds will nestle safely in the ground, awaiting the next wet winter. In a flood year, some young sprouts growing in the flood plain may die, and insects may be washed away. But recovery — reaching the goal of producing the next generation — is achieved because the native plants and animals have evolved with their habitat to withstand a wide variety of circumstances.

In parallel with environmental sustainability, financial sustainability is one in which a few small crises — or a substantial one — don't push our goals permanently out of reach. Every household wants to survive, but it requires assembling a budget — and sticking with it. At times such as ours, a budget is soothingly boring.

Financial sustainability requires a spending plan consistent with a lower standard of living than you think you deserve or can afford. It isn't stretched around a mortgage so large that you end up sleepless in your dream house. A financially sustainable plan is one that budgets for insurance, medical expenses, education, retirement, and for the occasional and inevitable downturn before it eyes expensive vacations or even eating out. Financial sustainability sometimes requires determining whether our needs are actually wants.

As an engineering major who married another engineer, I suppose we were destined — or doomed — to live by a budget. We considered it a hobby to track how we spent money. Then again, perhaps we were influenced by [Howard Ruff](#), whose *How to Prosper in the Coming Bad Years* (1979) modulated our otherwise optimistic attitudes.

When the messiness of life overtook our pristine plans, the budget often saved us from panicking. Sometimes it kept us from purchasing things our peers were buying but that didn't seem prudent for us. Sometimes it allowed us to stretch on a home purchase because we knew which budget items we could control. It didn't keep us from some stupid mistakes, but the budget provided a vision when we erred.

In Santa Barbara as around the nation, family savings and retirement plans have been decimated. If this has happened to you, budgeting tools will still help. Panic is not among those tools. In the clear light of the morning, take a hard look at your expenses and design a subsistence budget. Hold fast to insurance and car (and home) maintenance while seeking help to renegotiate fixed expenses. Look for ways to pare down expenses. Think like a geek.

Santa Barbarans can seek help in the community's temples, churches and mosque, as well as the community kitchens, Transition House and Legal Aid

clinics, for starters. Even if you don't have family or close friends you can rely on, you're not alone. Seeking help will give you peace of mind, and that's sustainable.

Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: the Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.canyonvoices.com.

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