

MoneyWise

GETTING AHEAD | GOING AWAY | DOLLARS | TECHLIFE | FAST LANE

Spa opens at airport

Options for shopping and relaxing at Charlotte/Douglas keep going upscale.

GOING AWAY, 2D

Flu planning goes to work

Law firms, HR advisers tell Charlotte employers to make plans in case of a mass outbreak.

GETTING AHEAD, 3D

Million-dollar idea

Think there's no room online for little guys to make a buck? Columnist John McBride introduces Alex Tew. **TECHLIFE, 6D**



Baldwin



Wee

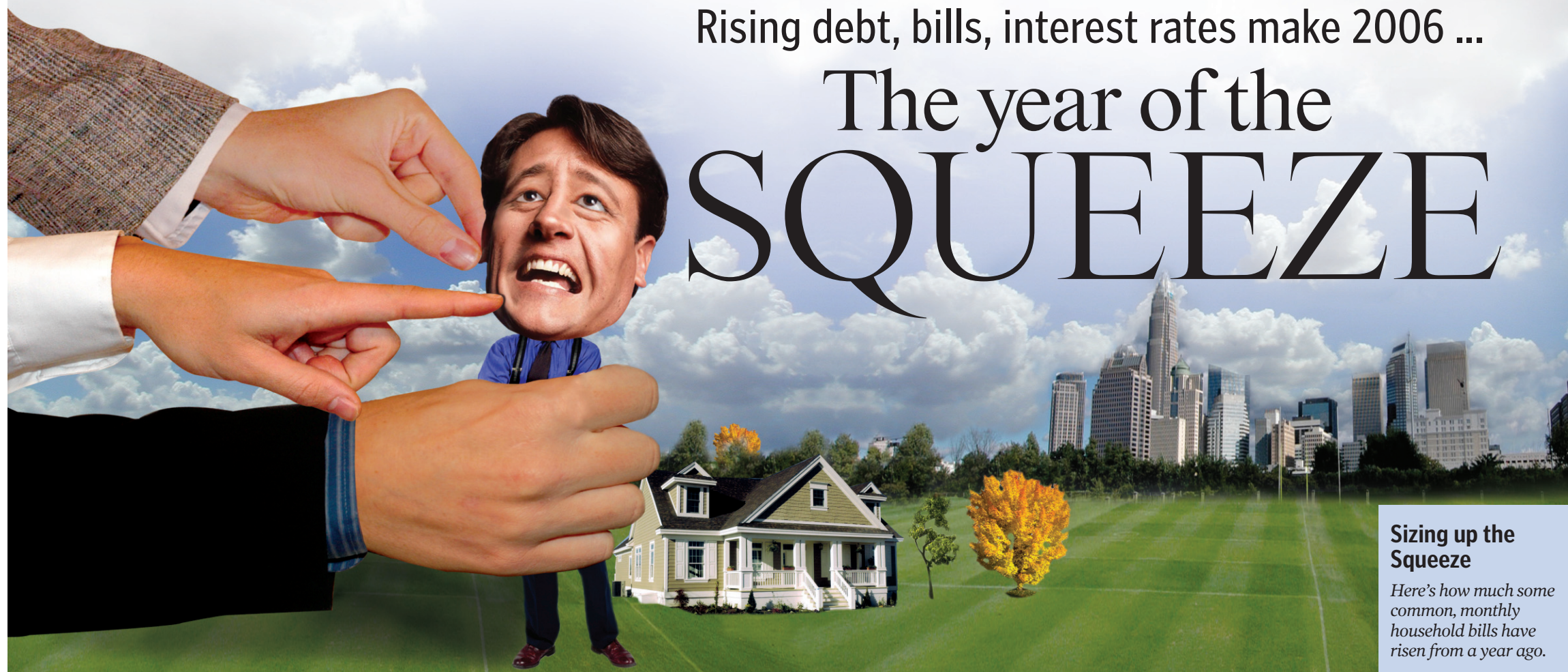
New Charlotte.com features

Today, read Gillian May-Lian Wee's column on young professionals discovering Charlotte. Monday, read Amy Baldwin's blog on personal finance for 20- and 30-somethings.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 15, 2006

Rising debt, bills, interest rates make 2006 ...

The year of the SQUEEZE



Sizing up the Squeeze

Here's how much some common, monthly household bills have risen from a year ago.

Natural gas: \$73

Gasoline: \$33

Mortgage: \$175

Family health insurance: \$7.47

N.C. cable TV tax: 92 cents

Wine: \$3.40

Where applicable, figures are based on averages for Charlotte. Natural gas: for same usage as last January. Mortgage: three-year adjustable-rate mortgage adjusting this month to 7.11 percent on \$176,000 house. Insurance: employee contribution for employer-provided coverage. Wine: one bottle a week.

— SOURCES: BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS, PIEDMONT NATURAL GAS, CAROLINAS AAA, GOODMORTGAGE.COM, CAROLINAHOME.COM, OBSERVER RESEARCH

Consumers, take heart – financial remedies can lessen pressure

BY AMY BALDWIN
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Does it feel like your paycheck is getting squeezed? You bet it is.

We're all shelling out more for bills large and small, from stamps and cable TV taxes to heat, health insurance and home mortgages. And gas prices are so depressing.

"It just seems like everything is getting more expensive," lamented Chris Ledford, 28, of Charlotte. With student loans, \$13,000 in credit card debt and his first child due in March, his financial pressures are mounting.

To pay growing bills for the past few years, we've tapped savings and rising home values and

whipped out the plastic. But generating cash to cover price hikes is getting tougher. Interest rates are rising. Real estate values seem unlikely to keep soaring. Stock returns have been so-so.

Is this the year rising prices and stagnant wages reach critical mass and throttle our spending?

"If you don't get wage increases, then people are definitely going to feel the squeeze," said Mike Wald, a Bureau of Labor Statistics economist. "That's the last safety valve to help people with higher prices."

Ledford, who works in data processing for Com-gard Marketing, a division of Hearst Publishing, tried tapping that safety valve. In April, he asked for a raise, a first for him.

The answer was no.

Ledford knows what he has to do next: Go over the household budget and look for places, possibly

SEE TURNLINE | 4D



Ledford

Found Money

Ways to stick extra cash in your wallet.

■ Cash in matured savings bonds. The value of savings bonds that have matured but remain unredeemed exceeds \$13.5 billion, according to the Treasury Department. To find out more about your bonds, including whether they are still earning interest, go to www.savingsbonds.gov.

■ Shop around for services. Has your bank added new fees? Check out competitors' deals and see if your bank will match – or change banks. Have you checked your car insurance premiums against the competition? Maybe you can get a better rate somewhere else. And when is the last time you comparison-shopped for groceries?

■ Ask yourself: Am I getting my money's worth? If you're the only one in your family who goes to the gym, maybe you can scale back from family to individual membership. Do you need a cell phone and a land line? Is there a less-expensive option for your cable TV or satellite service?

STAFF PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LUKE TRAUTWEIN – ltrautwein@charlotteobserver.com

THAT'S RICH A LOOK AT HOW THE OTHER HALF SPLURGES



COURTESY OF JAMES J. BISSELL

Resort package designed to meet need for speed, luxury

Ballantyne Resort is inviting guests to experience life in the fast lane with its new Speed and Luxury Package.

Speed comes in a 2006 Maserati Quattroporte, in which guests will be chauffeured around throughout their stay. (The base price on those wheels is \$105,000 and the average sticker price runs between \$120,000 and \$130,000, said Bob Wyont, a salesman at Foreign Cars Italia in Charlotte.)

Luxury means accommodations in the Presidential Suite and a four-course dinner cooked in your suite by one of the resort's chefs. Other luxuries: a round of golf and one-hour spa treatment per guest. The finishing touch is breakfast in bed the following morning.

"This is a great example of ways we are trying to differentiate ourselves as the only resort

in Charlotte," said Christina Argeris, a Starwood Preferred Guest account manager for Ballantyne Resort.

But quick, grab your credit card, because Speed and Luxury don't come cheap. The price for one night is \$3,000.

Ballantyne Resort is partnering with Foreign Cars Italia to offer the Speed and Luxury Package.

For more information, call (704) 248-4000 or go to www.luxurycollection.com/Ballantyne. If you hurry, you can be the first to try out the package, which the hotel began promoting only this year. So far there have been no bookings, Argeris said.

— AMY BALDWIN

Contact MoneyWise with your ideas for upmarket features: (704) 358-5166; obsbiz@charlotteobserver.com

PRICES ARE FLAT OR FALLING

High-foreclosure areas are a barrier to reselling homes

Problem is common in neighborhoods priced for first-time buyers

BY BINYAMIN APPELBAUM
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Planning to buy a home? Here's a new twist on location, location, location.

In neighborhoods with large numbers of foreclosures, it can

be hard to resell your home for a profit, according to an Observer analysis.

Average sales prices have barely budged since 1999 in Mecklenburg County neighborhoods with high foreclosure rates, the Observer found. The average increase in the price per square foot was 0.07 percent, compared to 10 percent for all neighborhoods.

Since 2003, four in five foreclosures occurred in neighborhoods with average prices be-

low \$150,000. Many of these are new subdivisions of "starter homes," priced for first-time buyers. Local real estate experts caution these homes can be risky investments.

"We have two real estate markets in Charlotte," said longtime real estate agent Bobby Spivey. While prices in higher-income neighborhoods are rising, he said, prices in lower-income neighborhoods are flat or dropping.

SEE TURNLINE | 5D



DIEDRA LAIRD – dlaird@charlotteobserver.com

The Stewarts Crossing neighborhood in east Charlotte is one of the worst for foreclosures.

VANGUARD'S BRENNAN

CEO shares his tips on money

Jack Brennan, chairman and CEO of The Vanguard Group – the nation's No. 2 mutual fund company behind Fidelity Investments – visited Charlotte last week. He offered up an interview.

OUT OF THE RED



Amy Baldwin

20-somethings in college and a 16-year-old – I wanted to get his advice for younger investors. Check out

SEE BRENNAN | 5D



LAYNE BAILEY – FILE PHOTO

Jack Brennan, chief of The Vanguard Group, met with 1,800 Charlotte call-center employees last week.

Editor's Note

Beginning today, MoneyWise will appear in the Sunday paper, featuring more local coverage of consumer and personal finance issues. Mutual fund and stock listings run Tuesday through Saturday.

On Mondays, Business news will be on 2A, including Doug Smith's new Question of the Week column, on emerging local trends; Jeff Elder's Inside This Week, on business happenings around town, and business news from around the nation and the world. — PATRICK SCOTT, BUSINESS EDITOR; pscott@charlotteobserver.com; (704) 358-5176.