

Wausau man pushes for hearing aid tax credit

By AMY OLSON
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Judy Reemtsma of Wausau needed hearing aids long before she had her hearing checked.

But when she finally gave in and got the devices, Reemtsma made two discoveries: Hearing aids can make a big difference — the television was actually too loud at first — and they cost a lot of money.

A group of hearing aid professionals, led by James Ogurek of Wausau, plans to deal with the cost by asking the federal government to offer tax credits for people who need the devices.

The International Hearing Society wants Congress to approve a \$500 tax credit for people ages 55 and older who buy hearing aids, said Ogurek,

owner of Beltone Hearing Solutions in Wausau. The average hearing aid costs \$2,000.

A similar bill introduced last year by Sen. Norm Coleman, R-Minn., and Reps. Carolyn McCarthy, D-N.Y. and Vern Ehlers, R-Mich., failed to gain traction. Ogurek said he thinks the new proposal has a better chance of passing with the new administration.

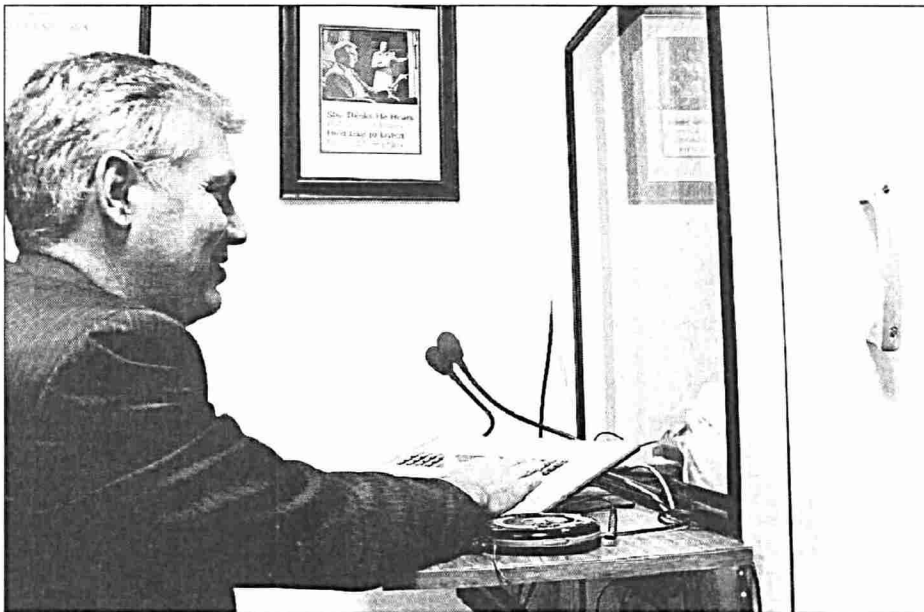
About 32 million people have hearing loss, according to the Better Hearing Institute, a nonprofit organization funded by an industry trade group and companies that manufacture hearing aid parts. About 9 million are baby boomers, but 11 million are younger than 45, Ogurek said.

“People on fixed

incomes who need these hearing aids” go without because of the cost, even though most with mild to moderate hearing loss could benefit from the devices, said Robert Treptow, an audiologist at Marshfield Clinic’s hearing clinics in Wausau and Weston. Technological advances have made hearing aids better and smaller, but they have boosted prices.

Reemtsma, owner of Color Vision Printing, said she gasped when she heard how much her hearing aids cost. She said she understands the need for a tax credit.

Ogurek said it could cost the federal government \$300 million to provide the tax credit. Given the economic downturn, it could be an uphill battle, he said.



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James Ogurek, owner of Beltone Hearing Solutions in Wausau, tests a patient’s hearing.

