Deconstructing the General Plan of Rehabilitation

John W. Lee
William & Mary Law School, jwleex@wm.edu

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DECONSTRUCTING THE GENERAL PLAN OF REHABILITATION DOCTRINE

By John W. Lee III

This article maintains that the only sound basis for the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine is the rule of tax parity or horizontal equity, viz., equivalent treatment between a taxpayer who purchases a business asset and one who constructs it herself. Thus, a taxpayer who rehabilitates a run-down building should be treated the same as a taxpayer who purchases a renovated similar building. Applying this analysis this article discusses (1) the inapplicability of the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine to assets other than the particular asset being improved; (2) unavailability of depreciation or too slow depreciation as a basis for currently deducting remediation costs to avoid the distortion of income that would arise from no or too slow depreciation, so that a current deduction should be allowed, notwithstanding a concurrent general plan of rehabilitation under the “reverse” rule of tax parity; (3) such distortion of income reasoning does not apply where remediation is anticipated at time of purchase since the acquisition cost doctrine would then apply (under a rule of tax parity reasoning although not so articulated in the case law), even in the absence of a general plan of rehabilitation; (4) a minimum distortion of income analysis of repair versus improvement expenditures; (5) where cyclical repairs occur more frequently than the recovery period of the repaired asset, the cost of the repairs should be treated as a freestanding intangible and depreciated over the recurrence period or currently deductible if sufficiently insubstantial or short or variable term, or no or only slow depreciation would be available if capitalized; and (6) where those repairs occur in a cycle substantially identical to the recovery period of the repaired asset, their cost should be capitalized and depreciated over that recovery period to avoid distortion of income.

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I. Introduction

Cases, rulings, commentary, and news reports1 evidence that revenue agents frequently rely in audits on the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine, which provides that expenses incurred as part of a plan of general rehabilitation must be capitalized even though the same expenses incurred separately would be deductible as ordinary and necessary.2 Such reliance appears due to the possibility of applying (1) the “resorative principle” of Plainfield Union,3 which permits current deduction under section 162 of the costs of repairs that merely restore property to its condition before the event necessitating the repair (or perhaps before the taxpayer’s discovery of the potential effects of such event); and (2) lumping together a number of expenditures without having to analyze whether capitalization under section 263 or a current deduction of each expenditure under section 162 would produce less distortion of the taxpayer’s income.

Part IV.C of this article shows that the emerging general standard after INDOPCO, Inc. v. Commissioner,4 for current deduction of an expenditure with future benefits, the case with most repair/improvement expenditures, is a balancing test: Whether the taxpayer’s "administrative and recordkeeping costs associated with capitalization" outweigh "the potential distortion of income" from currently deducting those future benefits.5 "Rough justice"6 rules for current deduction of future benefits expenditures, explicitly or implicitly based on such a balancing standard, include whether (1) the future benefit from the expenditures does not last for more than 12 months, (2) the expenditure is relatively small or the future benefit is "incidental" to the current benefit, (3) the expenditures are regularly recurring, (4) future benefits are short-term or variable, or (5) the burdens of capitalization outweigh in general the revenue benefits to the Treasury from capitalization of the expenditure; for example, where the cost once capitalized may not be depreciated or depreciated only over a period longer than the expected future benefit (slow or no depreciation).7 If one or more of these rules apply to the expenditures by the taxpayer, their current deduction constitutes a method of tax accounting meeting the clear reflection of income mandate of section 446(a).8 The existing repair versus improvement rules in general...

9See note 6 infra. Some repair decisions seem to treat lack of permanence [which implies a recurring expenditure] as an independent factor. American Benberg Corp. v. Commissioner, 10 T.C. Memo. 1997-457, aff’d 177 F.2d 200 (6th Cir. 1948). Conversely, a very large and infrequent expenditure incurred in constructing a sea wall and raising drilling platforms to preserve existing offshore oil drilling operations was capitalized and depreciated over the 30-year recurrence cycle in TAM 9424002, 94 TNT 118-12.


The repair “increase in value” factor roughly corresponds with future benefit, although an expenditure may increase the property in value without increasing its useful life. Early on the courts pointed out that most repairs result in an increase in value. Black Hardware Co. v. Commissioner, 16 B.T.A. 55, 553-541 (B.T.A. 1929) (“it seems unreasonable that a building so located as to be free from the menace of storms and floods is not more valuable than the same building, or the same kind of building, not so favorably situated.”), aff’d 39 F.2d 460 (5th Cir. 1939), cert. denied 282 U.S. 841 (1939). However, the Tax Court has said that while it “is true that most cases which have held expenditures to be deductible repairs have relied upon the fact that the work did not result in an increase in the valuation or prolongation of useful life, . . . this does not mean that unless there is an increase in value or useful life the expenditure cannot be a capital expense.” Seas Shipping Co., Inc. v. Commissioner, 24 T.C.M. (CCH) 1222 (1965).

The “restoration” principle, see notes 83-97 infra and accompanying text, does not fit into a future benefits, rough justice exceptions model.

10See notes 127-148 infra and accompanying text.
they will treat cyclical expenditures in accordance with the above rough justice rules.

Part III of this article maintains that the only sound basis for the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine is the “rule of parity,” viz., equivalent treatment between a taxpayer who purchases a business asset and one who constructs it herself.17 Thus, if a taxpayer purchasing an asset may not treat a particular expenditure (such as a repair-like expenditure) separately from the purchased asset, a taxpayer constructing an identical asset herself may not treat such an expenditure separately either. The best illustration is that a taxpayer who rehabilitates a rundown building should be treated the same as a taxpayer who purchases a renovated similar building.

Part IV discusses (1) the inapplicability of the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine to assets other than the particular asset being improved, now accepted by the Service;18 (2) unavailability of depreciation or too slow depreciation as a basis for currently deducting remediation costs to avoid the distortion of income that would arise from no or too slow depreciation, so that a current deduction should be allowed, notwithstanding a concurrent general plan of rehabilitation under the “reverse” rule of tax parity; (3) inapplicability of such distortion of income reasoning where remediation is anticipated at time of purchase since the acquisition cost doctrine would then apply (under a rule of tax parity reasoning although not so articulated in the case law), even in the absence of a general plan of rehabilitation; (4) a minimum distortion of income analysis of repair versus improvement expenditures; (5) when cyclical repairs occur more frequently than the recovery period of the repaired asset, how the cost of the repairs should be treated as a freestanding intangible and depreciated over the recurrence period or currently deductible if sufficiently insubstantial or short or variable term, or no or only slow depreciation would be available if capitalized; and (6) where the repairs occur in a cycle substantially identical to the recovery period of the repaired asset, how their cost should be capitalized and depreciated over the recovery period to avoid distortion of income.

Any proposed repair versus improvement capitalization regulations should present the policy basis for the general plan of rehabilitation (buttressed in the above rough justice rules) separately from the purchased asset, a taxpayer constructing an identical asset herself may not treat such an expenditure separately either. The best illustration is that a taxpayer who rehabilitates a rundown building should be treated the same as a taxpayer who purchases a renovated similar building.

II. Conventional Wisdom

The “general plan of rehabilitation,” a judicial doctrine originating in the Tax Court, traditionally holds that “[e]xpenditures incurred as part of a plan of general rehabilitation must be capitalized even though the same expenses if incurred separately would be deductible as ordinary and necessary.”22 The doctrine focuses on the results of the work performed and the substance of the overall transaction, rather than on the steps taken in the process. It uses four factors: (1) whether there has been an increase in the fair market value of the property; and (2) the purpose; (3) nature; and (4) extent of the work.24 In short, if repairs that standing alone could qualify for a current deduction constitute, when viewed together, an integrated plan to increase the useful life or value of an asset or adapt it to another use, they are capitalized to the tax cost or basis of that asset.25 Some early authorities rest the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine on a principle of no fragmentation of expenditures.

The Code . . . does not does not envision the fragmentation of an over-all project for deduction for capitalization purposes. . . . The construction of a new building encompasses numerous steps, many of which, when viewed alone, might in the everyday, commonly accepted sense, be con-

17See notes 38-43 infra and accompanying text.
19See notes 100-13 infra and accompanying text.
2067 Fed. Reg. at 3462-64 (frequent citations); Lee, et al., Rough Justice I, supra note 5 at 664 ("This article recommends that at the least the Service and Treasury issue 'interpretative' regulations, providing substantive guidance as to capitalization along the above 'rough justice' lines, with numerous examples drawn from the judicial and Service rulings. . . . Professor Lawrence Lokken describes this approach as 'rough cut' or common-law regulations.").

21Nordest Corp. v. Commissioner, 108 T.C. 265, 280, 285, Doc 97-11771 (81 pages), 97 TNT 82-8 (1997). The genesis of the doctrine is Covell v. Commissioner, 18 B.T.A. 997 (1930); United States v. Wehrli, 400 F.2d 686, 689 (10th Cir. 1968), is the most frequently cited authority in this area.
sidered repair items. But, taken as a whole, the cost of construction is capitalized.26

Over time and with no recognition by the general plan of rehabilitation authorities, this no fragmentation notion came to be conceptually undercut by allowance under section 167 of “component depreciation,” which in fact does break down or fragment for depreciation purposes components of real estate construction or purchased used real estate improvements if supported by appraisals of the components.27 (Although component depreciation is prohibited by section 168 as to real estate improvements, with lengthening of the recovery period and elimination of accelerated depreciation as to nonresidential real estate improvements, that prohibition no longer seems that appropriate.)28 Furthermore, the reasonable allowance for depreciation of short-lived components equivalent to repairs should be a current deduction.29 Moreover, the Tax Court on occasion has separated ordinary from capital expenditures using a Cohan equitable approximation while at the same time rejecting the Commissioner’s broad-brush application of the general rule of rehabilitation.30

In Cowell,31 the progenitor of the doctrine, the Board of Tax Appeals (predecessor to the Tax Court) rested on the impracticality of separating ordinary from capital expenditures in a large-scale rehabilitation,32 which, however, component depreciation demonstrates is not the case. The Tax Court in Bloomfield Steamship Co. v.
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Commissioner linked the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine with the regulatory proviso that deductible repairs be incidental.

“Incidental” imports that the repairs be necessary to some other action.... Deductible repair expenses are those incidental to maintaining business property, incidental to the keeping of the property in “an ordinarily efficient operating condition.” Repairs incidental to capital expenditures for remodeling or renovation of the property are not deductible.

“Incidental” here is more a conclusion than a rationale. Ironically, the easiest to administer rule for repairs has been recognized for at least three decades as a “repair allowance percentage,” under the “asset depreciation range” regulations, for example, percentage of unadjusted basis, which arguably could and should be adopted in any proposed repair versus improvement regulations. (Then, after these proposals have undergone public scrutiny and the competition of ideas in the legislative marketplace, Congress could codify the regulations as it often has in the past, for example, family partnership and Clifford trust regulations, later the section 305 disproportionate stock distributions regulations, and in the closest analogy the post-facto statutory authorization for the “asset depreciation range” regulations.)

III. Rule of Tax Parity

The only defensible rationale for the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine is the “rule of parity,” under which the tax treatment of a facility by a taxpayer who constructs or reconstructs her own business facilities and by one who hires an independent contractor (or purchases the facility turnkey from an unrelated party at fair market value) should be substantially the same. The rule of parity rests on the fundamental tax policy of horizontal equity under which similarly situated taxpayers should be taxed the same in similar transactions.

Mr. Commissioner’s insight in Commissioner v. Idaho Power Co. that a taxpayer self-constructing a plant ought not be tax advantaged over a taxpayer purchasing a plant or hiring an independent contractor to perform the construction work is bottomed on the rule of tax parity. In that case Justice Blackmun (who not coincidentally was the author of INDOPCO) re-

33 T.C. 75, 84 (1959), aff’d per curiam 285 F.2d 431 (5th Cir. 1961).


35 Bloomfield Steamship, note 33 supra.


37 See withdrawal Treas. reg. section 1.167-11(d)(2). Professor Bittker argued that Treasury did not have the authority (before statutory authorization) to make such “extraordinary departures [ranges of class lives and ‘repair deduction allowance’ as to rehabilitation and improvement expenditures] from widely accepted principles regarding the division between current expenditures and capital items.” Boris I. Bittker, “Treasury Authority to Issue the Proposed ‘Asset Depreciation Range System’ Regulations,” 49 Taxes 265, 266-67 (1971). GCM 39,802 (Nov. 1, 1989) and GCM 58,788 (Aug. 26, 1981) reveal that the asset depreciation range regulation’s rules were not exactly scientifically constructed. See generally Lee, et al., Rough Justice I, supra note 5 at 673 n. 150 and 690 n. 235.


39 Bloomfield Steamship, note 33 supra.


41 See Commissioner v. Idaho Power Co., 418 U.S. 1, 14 (1974) (capitalization of construction-related depreciation by a taxpayer doing its own construction work is necessary to maintain tax equality with a taxpayer whose construction work is done by an independent contractor, since depreciation on the contractor’s equipment would be an element of her charges, which would have to be capitalized by the taxpayer for whom the work was done). The Sixth Circuit similarly reasoned “that pre-opening expenses must be treated as capital to maintain parity with a taxpayer whose cost of purchasing an existing business is clearly capital.” Johnsen v. Commissioner, 794 F.2d 1157, 1161 (6th Cir. 1986).


43 Green, Blackmun’s Tax Jurisprudence, note 41 supra at 109, 111-13, 124-39 (describing Justice Blackmun’s background as a tax practitioner, affinity for tax decisions on the Court while other Justices regarded tax cases as “dogs,” and his capitalization cases).
quired capitalization to the basis or cost of a self-constructed electricity generating plant of the amount of otherwise allowable tax depreciation on the vehicles the utility company used to transport the construction workers to the very remote job site to maintain tax parity between self-construction and purchasing an improvement. The notion is that since a hypothetical contractor would have included those costs in her contract price thus affecting the taxpayer’s tax cost in the plant, a self-constructing taxpayer likewise must include that depreciation in her basis in the plant.48

Two oft-cited general plan of rehabilitation authorities in effect bottom the doctrine on tax parity reasoning. Jones v. Commissioner49 applied the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine to the restoration of a historical building in New Orleans’ French Quarter that was in complete disrepair.50 Jones reasoned that the city permitted the taxpayer to demolish the property as requested,46 he would have constructed an entirely new building, the expense of which would not have been deductible.51 More explicitly, Stoeltzing v. Commissioner52 concluded that the taxpayer “bought an old building and made a new and different building, commercially useful, out of it.”53

In addition to the foregoing, we are persuaded by the position of the Tax Court that it is “more realistic to treat the project as a whole.” If the expenditure for each item of repair were considered individually, without relation to other items, it may be correct to classify some of them as deductible expenses. But the Tax Court stated, “we see no justification for making such a separate treatment of the items on the record before us.” The principle is made clear in Jones v. Commissioner of Internal Revenue, 5 Cir., 1957, 242 F.2d 616, 619, quoting 4 Mertens, Federal Taxation, section 25.41, wherein it was said: “The difficulty inherent in determining the character of a particular expenditure is illustrated by the fact that a particular item, standing alone or made as periodic repairs, might be deductible as an ordinary and necessary business expense, but if made as a part of an entire capital investment in the improved property, may be treated as a capital expenditure.” If Stoeltzing had erected a completely new building, items of work which the contractor might have undertaken to prepare the building for occupancy such as carting away refuse or painting or even washing windows, could hardly be separated from the whole cost and deducted as expenses. Since the Tax Court found in substance that Stoeltzing renovated an untenable building, we can perceive no effective distinction between the circumstances of the cited case and those of the case at bar.54

Jones and Stoeltzing thus in effect rested on a “rule of tax parity” or horizontal equity between self-construction and purchase of a new facility. Under this rule of tax parity, for instance, while replacing small items alone, such as shingles on a roof or a door, would be currently deductible, their cost should be capitalized when part of an owner’s rehabilitation of a structure.55 For if these costs were incurred by a contractor in a turnkey project, she would include these items in her sales price. The costs would then be part of the purchaser’s overall cost in the construction project and be depreciated as part of the improvement under the composite method.

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46Note that section 198, permitting deduction of otherwise capitalizable environmental remediation costs as to pre-existing contamination in “brownfield” sites (once limited to “targeted” low-income urban and rural areas, but now extending to any “qualified contaminated site”), carves out depreciable assets and costs capitalized under Idaho Power or section 263A. See generally John W. Lee and W. Eugene Scago, “Policy Entrepreneurship, Public Choice, and Symbolic Reform Analysis of Section 198, The Brownfields Tax Incentive; Carrot or Stick or Just Never Mind?” 26 Win. & Mary Envtl. L. & Pol’y Rev. 613 (2002).

47224 F.2d 616 (5th Cir. 1957).

48Id. at 617.

49In this case, the taxpayer did not want to make the repairs. He wished instead to demolish the structure and rebuild on it. The city, however, refused to allow the taxpayer to demolish the property because it was considered a historical building. See id. at 617.

50See id. at 620.

51266 F.2d 374 (3rd Cir. 1959).

52Id. at 375, 377 (taxpayer purchased a “untenable” building in “bad state of repair” and “made a new and different building, commercially useful, out of it”). Moss v. Commissioner, note 18 supra at 839, agreed with the taxpayer that “every case in which the rehabilitation doctrine has been applied to date has involved substantial capital improvements and repairs to the same specific asset, usually a structure in a state of disrepair.” Ingram Indus., Inc. v. Commissioner, T.C. Memo. 2000-323, Doc 2000-26952 (33 original pages), 2000 TNT 203-6, thought it significant that the engine rebuilding at issue was performed at a time when the engine was completely serviceable. For criticism of this notion see notes 181-85 infra and accompanying text.

53Stoeltzing, note 48 supra at 377 (emphasis supplied). This no fragmentation premise is contrary to component depreciation. See note 27 supra and accompanying text.

54Badger Pipe Line Co. v. Commissioner, T.C. Memo. 1997-457 (“replacement of a small number of slate tiles in a roof . . . constitutes) repairs, while . . . a replacement of the roof or a major portion thereof . . . [is] capital in nature); Crowell, note 22 supra at 1001 (“To fix a door or patch plaster might very well be treated as an expense when it is an incidental minor item arising in the use of the property in carrying on business, and yet, as here, be properly capitalized when involved in a greater plan of rehabilitation, enlargement and improvement of the entire property”). Campbell v. Commissioner, T.C. Summary Opinion 2002-117, Doc 2002-20576 (5 original pages), 2002 TNT 174-10, however, ruled that removing the existing top layers of a roof in a rental house and recovering it with fiberglass sheets and hot asphalt at a cost of $8,000 constituted a deductible repair, reasoning that there was “no replacement or substitution of the roof.” My brother the roofer would disagree, but then he doesn’t do hot tar roofs, only shingle roofs. The costs of removal should have been deductible, but the costs of recovering should have been capitalized. See reasoning in note 82 infra.
Reaching a strikingly similar conclusion to the Stoeblizing general plan of rehabilitation example of preparing a building for occupancy by “carting away refuse,” the Tax Court in Shainberg v. Commissioner capitalized expenses of cleaning up for the grand opening of a shopping center, implicitly based on the acquisition cost doctrine. The origin-of-the-claim or acquisition cost doctrine capitalizes, and adds to the basis of the asset acquired, recurring short-lived costs (which frequently otherwise would be deductible) incurred in connection with the acquisition of an asset used in the taxpayer’s business. This usage occurs although identical costs incurred after and not anticipated at the time of acquisition are currently deducted, usually as maintenance costs. The farm preparatory cost doctrine, Tax Court Judge Raum used an example strikingly similar to the classic replacement of a few shingles or a door illustration of the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine:

[T]he cost of painting a building...generally is considered a deductible business expense. Yet the cost of putting the final coat of paint on a building in the course of construction is plainly a capital expenditure. Both involve painting and may be identical in physical character; however, one is incurred in ordinary maintenance while the other is one of the components of cost in acquiring a complete capital asset.

The general plan of rehabilitation doctrine, the origin of the claim doctrine, and the acquisition cost doctrine are all bottomed on the notion that the costs of acquiring (or the functional equivalent in a substantial rehabilitation) a capital asset must be capitalized to avoid distortion of income. If a portion of that cost, such as legal and audit, office expense, truck expense and utilities) between the rental property and the sale properties in proportion to the direct costs of each. Reasoning that salaries paid officers for services in managing the construction of new buildings, sales taxes on construction materials, accounting service fees for construction activities and insurance during construction are capital expenditures in connection with the acquisition of a capital asset, the court held that how much of each of the listed items was attributable to constructing the rental property was a question of fact, and therefore upheld the Commissioner’s allocation in the absence of a better allocation by the corporation. GCM 38,788 (Aug. 26, 1981). Accordingly cited by Idaho Power, 40 supra at 13, for the proposition that “when wages are paid in connection with the construction or acquisition of a capital asset, they must be capitalized and are then entitled to be amortized over the life of the capital asset so acquired.” Accord Lyshuk v. Commissioner, 116 T.C. 374, 390, 391, 394 (2001).

Footnote 55 continued in next column.)
IV. Critique of Broad Application

Given that the function of capitalization is to produce minimum distortion of the taxpayer’s income,60 on the surface a rule that requires capitalization of otherwise currently deductible items appears counterintuitive.60 As Glenn Carrington, a leading expert on capitalization, pointed out while still in Chief Counsel’s office: “[t]he plan of rehabilitation doctrine is secondary to failure under one of the four prongs of the [traditional repair versus replacement] test. ‘Rehabilitation alone in my view does not make you capitalize the costs; you must fail under one of these four prongs.’ . . . The key is the general test, and whether individual repair expenditures would come together to represent a capital investment is a ‘facts and circumstances’ situation. . . .”

Given that the function of capitalization is to produce minimum distortion of the taxpayer’s income, a rule that requires capitalization of otherwise currently deductible items appears counterintuitive.

The taxpayer in Moss cogently argued on appeal that the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine’s conceptual basis is the analogy “to the treatment of repair-like expenditures incurred in the construction of a new asset. . . . When both substantial capital improvements and repairs are made to a particular asset at the same time, the distinction between the capital improvements and repairs disappears because all the expenditures . . .

Before the shift in the burden of proof to the government where the taxpayer maintains adequate records,62 some argued that the rehabilitation doctrine unfairly increased the taxpayer’s burden,63 since she must first negate the general plan of rehabilitation, and then go on to prove the item constitutes a repair under the traditional three- or four-factor analysis.64 This was thought to decrease the Service’s incentive to settle cases with taxpayers, increasing litigation.65

A. Limitation to Repairs to Same Asset

More significantly, the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine too often serves as a “license to lump unrelated items into one predominately capital item.”66 It thus obscures clear analysis, leading to income-distorting overcapitalization.67 Instances of this tendency are the Tax Court opinion in Moss v. Commissioner,68 reversed by the Ninth Circuit, and the examining agent’s arguments reversed in TAM 199952075.69 The Tax Court in Moss applied the doctrine to painting and wallpapering of guest rooms in a motel that were incidental to replacement of furnishings and fixtures and upgrading and remodeling of common areas and restaurants which the taxpayer had capitalized. The examining agent in the TAM similarly applied the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine to toxic waste remediation that was incident to the clearly capital construction of new facilities at a contaminated site.

60IRC section 7491, enacted as part of the Internal Revenue Service Restructuring and Reform Act of 1998.
62See id.
63See id.
64See Bayles and Rich, note 23 supra at 280, n.55.
65See id. “[T]he fact finder’s function could result in the sacrifice of many legitimate deductions merely to promote mechanical facility of decision.” Id. at 287.
66T.C. Memo. 1986-128, rev’d 831 F.2d 833, 839 (9th Cir. 1987).
combine to change the asset’s use, increase its value, or prolong its life.”\textsuperscript{70} The Ninth Circuit agreed that this theory was consistent with the case law, but declined to adopt the taxpayer’s bright-line test of whether there were structural improvements, finding instead the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine inapplicable because the property (a motel) was tenantable, albeit “tired,” and the doctrine “to date has involved substantial capital improvements and repairs to the same specific asset, usually a structure in a state of disrepair.”\textsuperscript{71} The \textit{Moss} limitation of the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine to repairs made to the same specific asset that is otherwise being improved is likely to be its most enduring contribution as evidenced by TAM 199952075\textsuperscript{72} and Revenue Ruling 2001-4\textsuperscript{73} discussed below.

In TAM 199952075 the taxpayer had purchased a manufactured gas plant that had been in operation for a number of years during which toxic waste byproducts were often disposed of on the plant site in unlined pits. After continuing to operate the plant for two years the taxpayer switched over to supplying natural gas and several years later decommisioned the existing buildings (which it had been using for storage and other functions) due to age and condition. Some time thereafter EPA examined the site finding no immediate threat to the environment, but put it on the CERCLA Superfund list due to circumstantial evidence, for example, past industry practices of dumping toxic waste in unlined pits. Five years after abandoning the manufacture of natural gas, the taxpayer in commencing plans to build a new operations facility on the site undertook an environmental study that disclosed widespread prior contamination. While building its new facility, the taxpayer performed extensive environmental cleanup operations on the site, the costs of which it deducted.

The examining agent recommended capitalization of such cleanup costs on the grounds that (1) they were incurred to adapt the site to a new or different use, or alternatively (2) they constituted part of the costs of constructing the taxpayer’s new operations facility, and in any event (3) they had to be capitalized under the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine.\textsuperscript{74} The National Office ruled that the clean-up costs attributable to contamination occurring during the taxpayer’s use of the site did not adapt the site to a new or different use but merely restored it to the condition that existed when the taxpayer acquired the property\textsuperscript{75} and for the same reason did not constitute land preparation costs (which improve and add value to land).\textsuperscript{76} The TAM also declined to apply the general plan of rehabilitation to the clean-up costs because like \textit{Moss}, and unlike \textit{Norwest Corp.}, they related to a different asset (the land) than that which was being improved (the new facility).\textsuperscript{77} Similarly, Revenue Ruling 2001-4, in restating the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine noted that it was inapplicable “where the plan did not include substantial capital improvements and repairs to the same asset.”\textsuperscript{78}

In addition to \textit{Moss}, TAM 199952075 cited Revenue Ruling 70-392,\textsuperscript{79} which held that the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine did not apply to a utility’s labor and transportation costs for relocating existing capital assets even though these costs were incurred in conjunction with the installation of new assets intended to increase the utility’s distribution voltage. That ruling concluded that the moving of the assets did not add to the value or prolong the life of the relocated assets and appears to have reversed TAM 6905269380A.\textsuperscript{80} This reasoning suggests that \textit{True v. United States}\textsuperscript{81} probably incorrectly applied the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine to the costs of moving gas processing machinery (which allowed it to be used longer since the old field was pumped out). An even simpler current deduction for removal costs is warranted when the old capital asset is removed and discarded and a new capital asset takes its place.

\textsuperscript{70}\textit{Moss v. Commissioner}, note 18 supra at 839. Limitation of the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine to structures in total disrepair has been accepted by some Tax Court authorities. See \textit{Scheuer v. Commissioner}, T.C. Memo. 1996-336, Doc 96-21076 (20 pages), 96 TNT 145-8. Such a tack is consistent with the rule of parity for the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine discussed above in Part II. The express holding to the contrary by \textit{Norwest Corp.}, note 22 supra at 280, however, might result in the doctrine developing likewise, at least in the Tax Court. See \textit{Vanalco, Inc.}, note 1 supra (the Ninth Circuit in affirming the Tax Court on this issue did not discuss the general plan of rehabilitation yet it did as to another issue). But see \textit{Clancy}, note 60 supra at 571 (dicta in \textit{Norwest}).

\textsuperscript{71}\textit{Moss}, note 18 supra at 839-40. In \textit{Ingram Indus.}, note 49 supra, the taxpayer’s towboats were “in operating condition and are operating when they are brought in to have the maintenance performed, and all of the significant components and systems that comprise the tow boats (including their engines) are in good working order immediately prior to the performance of the maintenance . . . and still operable.” Accordingly, the Tax Court allowed a current deduction for the costs of cleaning and inspecting the engines every three to four years “to determine which of their parts are within acceptable operating tolerances and can be reused and which (if any) of these parts need to be reconditioned back to acceptable operating tolerances or replaced with appropriate replacements.” While the result in \textit{Ingram} may well have been correct, the “still operating” reasoning is inconsistent with a minimum distortion of income analysis. See notes 181-85 infra and accompanying text.

\textsuperscript{72}Note 69 supra.

\textsuperscript{73}Note 1 supra.

\textsuperscript{74}TAM 199952025, note 69 supra at para. 21. This approach is reminiscent of TAM 9315004 (capitalization of PCP toxic waste remediation costs based on four factors) overruled by Rev. Rul. 94-38, 1994-1 C.B. 35, Doc 94-5264, 94 TNT 107-12.

\textsuperscript{75}TAM 199952025, note 69 supra at para. 26.

\textsuperscript{76}Id. para. 27.

\textsuperscript{77}Id. para. 29.

\textsuperscript{78}Rev. Rul. 2001-4, note 1 supra at 298.

\textsuperscript{79}1970-2 C.B. 33.

\textsuperscript{80}(May 26, 1969).

\textsuperscript{81}984 F.2d 1197 (10th Cir. 1990).
asset is installed in its place, for example, removal of telephone poles.82

B. Restoration Principle and Toxic Waste Remediation

TAM 199952075 ruled that the clean-up costs allocable to contamination that occurred during the taxpayer’s ownership and operation of the site were currently deductible under Revenue Ruling 94-3883 because under Plainfield Union84 they merely restored the site to the condition that existed when the taxpayer acquired the property.85 In sharp contrast, however, the TAM required capitalization of the remediation of contamination present when the taxpayer acquired the site because “the cleanup of pre-existing contamination does more than restore the Site to the condition that existed at the time Taxpayer purchased it. Rather, these costs constitute an improvement or betterment to the Site compared to its condition when acquired.”86 This approach is too facile, as shown in section IV below.

Revenue Ruling 94-38 had “scatter cast” a handful of rationales to bolster the Service’s allowance of a current deduction for soil remediation costs.87 It reasoned in part that the appropriate test for determining whether expenditures increase the value of the damaged property and thus must be capitalized is comparison under Plainfield Union of “the status of the asset after the expenditure with the status of that asset before the condition arose that necessitated the expenditure (that is, before the land was contaminated by X’s hazardous waste).”88 Most believe that the Plainfield Union restoration principle is the real basis for the ruling; the value of the contaminated land after remediation is not increased as compared with its value before contamination.89 This article asserts that the restoration principle actually is the less sound basis.

The classic Illinois Merchants Trust Co. v. Commissioner90 defined a “repair” as “to restore to sound state or to mend.” The Tax Court then began to analyze whether the expenditure increased the useful life of the property or made it more valuable than it had been before the event necessitating the expenditure,91 culminating in the restoration principle of the landmark Tax Court decision in Plainfield Union Water Co. v. Commissioner.92 There the taxpayer was a public water company seeking to deduct the costs of replacing the lining in a water main after a switch from neutral well water to acidic river water caused tuberculation of the pipes, reducing their carrying capacity. The government asserted that the value of the piping to the taxpayer was materially increased by the expenditure. The Tax Court replied that “any properly performed repair adds value as compared with the situation existing immediately prior to that repair. The proper test is whether the expenditure materially enhances the value, use, life expectancy, strength, or capacity as compared with the status of the asset prior to the condition necessitating the expenditure.”93

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82Rev. Rul. 2000-7, 2000-1 C.B. 712, Doc 2000-3874 (5 original pages), 2000 TNT 27-22 (costs incurred in retirement and removal of a depreciable asset occurring in connection with the installation or production of a replacement asset are not required to be capitalized under section 263(a) or 263A as part of the cost of the replacement asset). Sheppard, INDOPCO Grocery List, note 1 supra at 320 (“The strained rationale of this ruling is that the removal of the old pole did not relate to assets having a useful life in the company’s business that extended substantially beyond the tax year in which they were incurred, and was performed to retire the old poles, not to install the new poles. That is, the IRS ignored the pole replacement context of the removal.”). Under the rule of reverse tax parity the costs of removing the old pole should be currently deductible on the theory that an outsider could not charge for the removal of the old pole in that the costs would not be present in installation of a new pole where no old pole had to be replaced. See notes 150-51 infra and accompanying text.

83See generally articles cited in notes 24 and 25 supra.

84Plainfield Union Water Co. v. Commissioner, note 3 supra.

85TAM 199952075, note 69 supra at paras. 22, 26.

86Id. at para. 32; accord. LTR 200108029, Doc 2001-5469 (10 original pages), 2001 TNT 38-23.

87The ruling contained both a Plainfield Union restoration principle and no amortization mandates no capitalization rationales. The widespread criticism on environmental policy grounds of the toxic waste remediation TAM 9315004, see, e.g., Juliann Avakian-Martin, “Does the IRS Need to Clean Up Its Ruling on Cleanup Costs?” Tax Notes, May 10, 1993, p. 728, probably underlay the Service’s decision to grant a current deduction. I remain convinced that the TAM’s amortization over some period was preferable to the revenue ruling’s current deduction. While I have reason to believe that one of my capitalization articles played a role in that TAM, see Hearings on Miscellaneous Revenue Issues before the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Select Revenue Measures (Part 2), 103d Cong., 1st Sess 1702 (1993) (Prepared statement of John W. Lee), I long advocated the golden mean that TAM adopted and believe myself not biased despite my “vested interest,” as Mike Thompson, then Tax Legislative Counsel for the Treasury Department, put it in a conversation with me about the TAM and its reversal by Rev. Rul. 94-38.


89In addition to TAM 199952075, TAM 9541005, 95 TNT 201-14, withdrawn for other reasons TAM 9627002, Doc 96-19322 (8 pages), 96 TNT 132-16, read Rev. Rul. 94-38 as based on the restoration principle of Plainfield-Union.

90B.T.A. 103, 106 (1926); see also Regenstein v. Edwards, 121 F. Supp. 952, 954 (M.D. Ga. 1954) (the cost of installing temporary steps, steel columns, and steel crossbeams were deductible repair expenses necessary to return the property to its original condition).

91Midland Empire Packing Co. v. Commissioner, 14 T.C. 635, 639, 641 (1950) (oilproofing meat packing basement after seepage from nearby oil wells so federal meat inspectors would not shut down packing plant).

92Note 3 supra.

93Id. at 338. Note that some see this doctrine as contrasting starkly with the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine. See Hopun, note 9 supra at 688-89.
The Service initially resisted the Plainfield Union restoration principle[88] but then reluctantly accepted it,[89] although first attempting to limit the rule to relatively sudden, unexpected, or unusual external factors[90] and then conversely to where the property has progressively deteriorated.[91] Revenue Rulings 94-38 and 2001-4 are the Service’s latest concessions.

C. Minimum Distortion of Income

The emerging, better principled view is that while future benefits are a strong indicator of a capital expenditure as INDOPOCO pointed out,[88] this indicator can be rebutted where the burdens to the taxpayer (and possibly to the government in contesting the taxpayer’s deduction of the expenditures in question) of such capitalization with slow or no depreciation outweigh the revenue benefits to the government of more exact matching from capitalization.[92] Notwithstanding the restoration principle, most repairs do yield future benefits, else why would the taxpayer make them? Many of the traditional repair rules can be justified under one or another of the “rough justice” balancing exceptions to future benefit capitalization, for example, (a) not more than 12-month benefit overlapping two tax years[100] (b) small or “incidental” in amount,[101] (c) short-term or vari-
able benefit,\textsuperscript{102} or (d) regularly recurring.\textsuperscript{103} Even where these exceptions are not available, several au-

will clearly reflect income. Although the exercise of this au-
thority has generally been aimed at proscribing methods that fail to clearly reflect income, there is little doubt that it is broad enough to permit the recognition of additional methods that allow a clear reflection of income, even though such methods may appear to be a variance with a narrow interpretation of specific language of the Code.

\textsuperscript{102}Southland Royalty, note 99 supra at 616-18; Iowa-Des Moines Nat’l Bank v. Commissioner, 592 F.2d 433, 436 (8th Cir. 1979) (“Any credit information is short-lived and subject to sudden change. Thus, credit information must be current to be valuable and the taxpayers soon had a history of who did or did not pay the credit card charges. This new information on a fixed and non-increasing basis in the routine operation of chased with the payments in dispute here. The fact that there may be some ensuing benefit and future effect from the expenditure beyond the taxable year when paid is not controlling, Commissioner v. Lincoln Savings & Loan Assn., 403 U.S. 345 (1971). Where the prospective benefit is very slight, capitalization is not easily supported.”). See generally Lee, Capitalization Rules, note 36 supra at 680; Lee, et al., Rough Justice II, note 5 supra at 1527-28. The repair/improvement formulation is whether the expenditure makes the asset longer-lived. Plainfield Union, note 3 supra.

\textsuperscript{103}U.S. Freightways, note 5 supra at 1145 (“Because they recurrevery year, there is less distorting effect on income from future tax years benefit over time. In every year, that is, while Freightways will be able to reap the tax advantage of deduction for some part of the following twelve months, it will have ‘lost’ the deductions for the months covered by the prior year’s licenses, for which it has already received the benefit. In a hypothetical last year of Freightways’ corporate life, it would finally be entitled to only a prorated deduction for licenses (if any) that are acquired during that year, partially evening out the score with the first year of deductions.”); Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc. v. Commissioner, 685 F.2d 212, 215 (7th Cir. 1982) (“[A]llocating these expenditures among the different books is not always necessary to produce the temporal matching of income and expenditures that the Code desiderates, because the taxable income of the author or publisher who has a book in a free-standing intangible asset (that is, whose output (increasing or decreasing) will be at least approximately the same whether his costs are expensed or capitalized. Not the same on any given book — on each book expenses and receipts will be systematically mismatched — but the same on average. Under these conditions the benefits of capitalization are unlikely to exceed the accounting and other administrative costs entailed in capitalization.”) (\textit{dictum}); Advance Notice, note 5 supra at 3462 (proposed regulations expected to provide “a ‘regular and recurring rule,’ under which transaction costs incurred in transactions that occur on a regular and recurring basis in the routine operation of a taxpayer’s trade or business are not required to be capitalized”); Lee, Capitalization Rules, note 36 supra at 680; Lee, et al., Rough Justice II, note 5 supra at 1529-31, 1539-43; Lupisher, Decision in Wells Fargo, note 55 supra at 1303 (“In light of the decisions in Wells Fargo and PNC, [Pamela] Olson believes that the reach of INDOFCO has been limited when the issue concerns expenses that were regular and recurring and incurred by a company in the ordinary course of conducting its business. ‘The goal in this area should be a clearer reflection of income and administrative ease,’ she said.”). For application of this factor in the repair versus improvement context, see P. Dougherty Co. v. Commissioner, 159 F.2d 269, 272 (4th Cir. 1946) (“The work on a roof was generally aimed at proscribing methods that fail to clearly reflect income, there is little doubt that it is broad enough to permit the recognition of additional methods that allow a clear reflection of income, even though such methods may appear to be a variance with a narrow interpretation of specific language of the Code.”).

authorities hold that if depreciation is not available, capitalization is not appropriate since capitalization without depreciation would distort the taxpayer’s income.\textsuperscript{104} Even where depreciation is available, if the recovery period is much longer than the future benefit of the expenditure, distortion of income would also result. If so, a current deduction or amortization over an arbitrary period produces less distortion of income, that is, “minimum distortion of income,” than the ideal slow or no depreciation would cause.\textsuperscript{105} This “second best” approach is demanded by clear reflection of income as a rule of equity or “rough justice.”\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{104}Southland Royalty, note 99 supra at 618; Colorado Springs Nat’l Bank v. United States, 505 F.2d 1185, 1190 (10th Cir. 1974) (“The start-up expenditures here challenged did not create a property interest. They produced nothing corporeal or salable. They are recurring. At the most they introduced a more efficient method of conducting an old business. The government suggests no way in which they could be amortized. The government’s theoretical approach ignores the practicalities of the situation, and permits a distortion of taxpayer’s financial situation. If an expenditure, concededly of temporal value, may be neither expensed nor amortized, the adoption of technological advances is discouraged.”); Lee, et al., Rough Justice II, note 5 supra at 1549. In the repair versus improvement context Rev. Rul. 94-38 reasoned alternatively that where amortization is not available, capitalization is not appropriate. See notes 108-112 infra and accompanying text.

\textsuperscript{105}Wolfson Land & Cattle Co. v. Commissioner, note 61 supra at 27 (“To permit a current deduction of such a large expenditure with a beneficial effect lasting on the average of 10 years would surely distort that year’s income. Yet to deny even an amortization deduction for an expenditure with a specific demonstrable beneficial life on the grounds that its deductibility is contaminated by its relationship to an asset of indefinite life, i.e., the land, would similarly require an uneven reporting of income. Since a basic premise of the income tax laws is to relate expenses to the income which they helped earn, a reasonable solution to our conundrum is to hold that the expenses in issue should be written off over their useful life. In short we would subscribe independent status to those expenditures on the basis that they create a free-standing intangible asset with an amortizable 10-year life.”); Lee, Capitalization Rules, note 36 supra at 680. This approach was in effect followed in the repair versus improvement context in TAM 9315004, see note 109 infra.

\textsuperscript{106}The core idea of rough justice is the use of simple administrative rules that work well enough on average in lieu of either detailed rules pursuing theoretical purity or case law uncertainty. Its principal virtue is the reduction of administrative costs to the taxpayer, to the Service, or to both while yielding minimum distortion of income. Aside from reducing compliance and enforcement costs, rough justice connotes an approximation of the just result. In some cases, rough justice is a “second best” surrogate or proxy tax; however, it generally seeks to effect better rather than unjust

\textsuperscript{Footnote 103 continued in next column.}
D. Nondepreciable Remediation Costs

Applying a restoration principle analysis logically to the facts in Revenue Ruling 94-38, there was no increase in the value of the contaminated property compared before the contamination of the ground water with the value after the construction of the ground water pumping station either, yet the ruling required capitalization of the costs of such pumping station because they created a capital asset that could be depreciated. Accordingly, I believe that Revenue Ruling 94-38’s more significant statement is that where amortization is not available (since the costs of soil remediation would be added to the nondepreciable land), capitalization is not appropriate either presumable because capitalization without depreciation would distort the taxpayer’s income more than a current deduction would. For when a taxpayer’s only options are a current deduction or capitalization without amortization for expenditures with temporally limited benefits, a current deduction generally creates less income distortion than capitalization without depreciation.

The goal is a tax accounting rule resulting in minimum distortion of income.

To determine whether the taxpayer’s method of tax accounting of tax accounting clearly reflects her income, the starting point is that capitalization, depreciation, and clear reflection of income are “inextricably intertwined.” Income distortion, therefore, occurs when capitalized costs cannot be amortized to roughly match the expense with the associated income. Income distortion also occurs when the costs are deducted immediately but provide benefits substantially beyond the current period. Given the choice between these two income distorting methods, a current deduction is better because it produces less income distortion by at least matching some of the expense with the revenue produced in the current period — permanent capitalization never matches any part of the expense with revenue.

Under this absence of depreciation rationale there is a difference between the pumping station costs and the soil remediation or reclamation costs in Revenue Ruling 94-38. The former, but not the latter, relate to a depreciable asset. Similarly under an absence of

Footnote 111 continued in next column.

results — fair on average for a class of taxpayers but not necessarily just as to each affected taxpayer. Rough justice also may be viewed as equity versus rule (equity versus law in the Anglo-American lexicon) or as substance versus form — an age-old battle between the spirit and the letter of the law. Under this view, rough justice envisions equity overcoming the rule of law. Lee, et al., Rough Justice I, note 5 supra at 712-13, 718-21, Lee, Start-Up Costs, note 27 supra at 5-6 and n.8. For a detailed discussion of “rough justice” both in the context of ease of administration and of the jurisprudential literature, from which the preceding is derived, see Lee, et al., Rough Justice I, note 5 supra at 712-39.

Note 74 supra.

The Service’s historical tendency has been to find some depreciable asset (e.g., a building, permit, license, or personal property such as natural gas piping) with which to associate the costs at issue, capitalize them to such asset and then permit depreciation. Lee, et al., Rough Justice II, note 5 supra at 1550-52. Treating the costs as a freestanding amortizable deferred charge would be preferable.

In the prior TAM, TAM 9315004, in effect reversed by Rev. Rul. 94-38, the costs were capitalized to the chief operating asset of the taxpayer. Juliann Avakian-Martin, “INDOP-CO Guidance Likely to Cover Advertising, Repairs, Training,” Tax Notes, Aug. 3, 1992, p. 545 (Carrington “let it slip that in that TAM, the cleanup costs were amortized to the piping system. That fact was blacked out when the TAM was released.”); Carrington, “Capitalization After INDOP-CO,” 2 N.Y.U. Inst. On Fed. Tax. chapter. 25, at 25-29 (1995) (taxpayer in TAM 9315004 operated a natural gas pipeline). Rev. Rul. 94-38, note 74 supra (reversing a TAM requiring the capitalization of soil remediation costs in part on the rationale that “since the land is not subject to an allowance for depreciation, amortization, or depletion, the amounts expended to restore the land to its original condition are not subject to capitalization”).

Cincinnati, note 8 supra at 572 (“The burden on plaintiff, if the minimum rule is not to be followed for income tax purposes, would be heavy; at the same time, the clearer reflection of income would be exceedingly slight if there were any at all.”); Iowa-Des Moines Nat’l Bank, note 102 supra at 436 (“Where the prospective benefit is very slight, capitalization is not easily supported.”); Encyclopaedia Britannica, note 103 supra at 213-17 (Posner, J.) (“the benefits of capitalization are unlikely to exceed the accounting and other administrative costs entailed in capitalization.”); Southland Royalty, note 99 supra at 618 (“In those circumstances, it is not compulsory to amortize such a recurring item over a fixed time interval. Neither is it appropriate to require capitalization without amortization; such a requirement would clearly distort Southland’s income.”); Lee, et al., Rough Justice II, note 5 supra at 1549-53. Similar reasoning led courts to adopt the since discredited separate salvageable asset rule that permitted an immediate deduction when no separate, transferable asset was created by an expenditure. E.g., Colorado Springs Nat’l Bank, note 104 supra at 1192. By adopting this rule, courts could avoid the harsh result of capitalizing nonamortizable expansion costs by claiming that no identifiable asset was present. See Lee, Start-Up Costs, note 27 supra at 51-57; Lee, Capitalization Rules, note 36 supra at 677.


Cincinnati, note 8 supra at 569 (quoting Fort Howard Paper Co. v. Commissioner, 49 T.C. 275, 283-84 (1967) (Tannenwald, J.)).

depreciation analysis, remediation of both pre-existing contamination of unimproved real estate and of similar contamination attributable to the taxpayer’s use would not create a depreciable cost. In many cases, however, the costs of cleaning up pre-existing contamination should be capitalized as a deferred purchase price for reasons other than the inapplicability of any “restoration” principle.

E. Capitalization of Anticipated Remediation

Are costs of remediating toxic waste contamination existing in a site when acquired by a taxpayer automatically currently deductible since amortization would not be available if these costs were capitalized? TAM 9541005 reveals a valid rationale under which some such nondepreciable costs may nevertheless have to be capitalized. It held that hazardous waste remediation costs were not deductible under section 162 by a taxpayer who acquired the land in a contaminated state.

One leg of TAM 9541005 presaged TAM 199952025 and United Dairy Farmers, Inc., v. United States by limiting the Plainfield Union or “restoration principle” of Revenue Ruling 94-28 to where “the taxpayer acquire[s] the property in a clean condition, contaminat[es] the property in the course of its everyday business operations, and incur[s] costs to restore the property to its condition at the time the taxpayer acquired the property.” But TAM 9541005 alluded to a sounder basis for requiring a taxpayer to capitalize hazardous waste remediation costs when the taxpayer knowingly purchases property in a contaminated state by citing Mt. Morris Drive-In Theatre v. Commissioner.

The latter in effect holds that a cost incurred after acquisition, but anticipated at such time, must be capitalized as an acquisition cost under the rationale that until the anticipated cost is incurred the taxpayer’s investment is not complete. Mt. Morris Drive-In used language reminiscent of the Arrowsmith doctrine — “If petitioner had included in its original construction plans an expenditure for a proper drainage system no one could doubt that such an expenditure would have been capital in nature.”

Where a taxpayer expects to incur further expense to remediate a defect known at the time of acquisition, she rationally discounts her original purchase price for the anticipated costs. Thus, later payment of these costs constitutes payment of deferred acquisition costs. Accordingly, if the taxpayer in TAM 199952025 were aware of the pre-existing contamination and discounted its purchase price for anticipated remediation costs, such costs would constitute capitalizable acquisition costs. If, however, the taxpayer was not aware of the extent of the pre-existing contamination and therefore did not so reduce its purchase price, the remediation costs should not be capitalizable as [delayed] acquisition costs.

If the unanticipated costs were added to the basis of the land they would be nondepreciable and hence their capitalization would distort the tax-

110Note supra, revoked and superseded by TAM 9627002, note supra.
111See 143 Cong. Rec. S 860 (Senate Jan. 30, 1997 Daily Ed.) (Remarks of Sen. D’Amato, R-N.Y.) (“Under current law, the IRS has determined that costs incurred to clean up land and ground water are deductible as business expenses, as long as the costs are incurred by the same taxpayer that contaminated the land, and that taxpayer plans to use the land after the cleanup for the same purposes used prior to the cleanup. That means that new owners who wish to use land suspected of environmental contamination for a new purpose, would be precluded from deducting the costs of cleanup in the year incurred. They would only be allowed to capitalize the costs and depreciate them over time.”).
112T.C. 272, 274 (1955) (“[I]t was obvious at the time when the drive-in theatre was constructed, that a drainage system was required to properly dispose of the natural precipitation normally to be expected, and that until this was accomplished, petitioner’s capital investment was incomplete. In addition, it should be emphasized that here there was no mere restoration or rearrangement of the original capital asset, but there was the acquisition and construction of a capital asset which petitioner had not previously had, namely, a new drainage system.”), aff’ d per curiam 238 F.2d 85 (6th Cir. 1956); TAM 9541005, note supra (perceptively raising Mt. Morris Drive-In as an example of origin of claim doctrine); see generally Lee, Start-Up Costs, note supra at 30 n.121.

120 Cf., Bayles and Rich, note 23 supra at 284 (“Acquisition of a building and its immediate, substantial renovation is difficult to view as anything other than a single competed transaction.”); accord Harder v. Commissioner, T.C. Memo. 2001-7, Doc 2001-1789 (47 original pages), 2001 TNT 12-19 (“The fact that petitioners had the rug appraised and repaired in the year of purchase suggests that those repairs were part of their capital investment in the rug.”).
121 Arrowsmith v. Commissioner, 344 U.S. 6, 8 (1952). See Lee and Murphy, supra note 54 at 499-509 (origin-of-the-claim doctrine, classic tax benefit doctrine, and Arrowsmith-Shelly Oil consider two transactions together to prevent distortion of income); Timothy A. Rodgers, Note: “The Transaction Approach to the Origin of the Claim Doctrine: A Proposed Cure for Chronic Inconsistency,” 55 Brooklyn L. Rev. 905, 938 (1989) (“Arrowsmith ‘open transaction’ doctrine — an expense assumes the tax character of the original transaction from which it arises — is directly analogous to the origin of the claim doctrine.”) (citing Lee and Murphy).
122Mt. Morris Drive-In, note 119 supra at 274 (“In the instant case it was obvious at the time when the drive-in theatre was constructed, that a drainage system would be required to properly dispose of the natural precipitation normally to be expected, and that until this was accomplished, petitioner’s capital investment was incomplete.”). The Court in Arrowsmith stated that “It is not even denied that had this judgment been paid after liquidation, but during the year 1940, the losses would have been properly treated as capital ones. For payment during 1940 would simply have reduced the amount of capital gains taxpayers received during that year.” Arrowsmith, note 121 supra at 8.
124The contrary holding in United Dairy Farmers is criti-

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125 Thus unanticipated clean-up costs should be currently deductible.

1. Restoration principle and contamination discovered after purchase. The same differentiation between known and unknown pre-existing contamination could be reached under one reading of the restoration principle. In Norwest Corp. v. Commissioner the Tax Court reasoned that absent the general plan of rehabilitation the costs of asbestos remediation would be deductible under the Plainfield Union restoration principle. Proponents of a current deduction of the costs of remediating asbestos for instance maintain that instead of the remediated property being valued for purposes of the Plainfield Union test as of just before the condition occurred (original installation of the asbestos insulation), it should be valued as of just before the taxpayer came to know that the hazardous condition would necessitate repair or remediation.127

One commentator suggests that the preferable alternative is to use the date after the problem was discovered as the “before” time because it more accurately reflects the economic reality of the taxpayer’s decision to incur the cost: (1) the choice is forward-looking; (2) the property no longer performs as intended; (3) the cost creates more accurate results and simpler administration; and (4) the matching of income with the expenditure is better.128 He notes that by applying Plainfield Union using the understanding of asbestos hazards as the “before” point a current deduction of asbestos encapsulation and monitoring costs should still be allowed.129

125In LTR 200108029, note 86 supra, the taxpayer requested a ruling that its costs for environmental remediation of contamination existing at the time of purchase be capitalized (apparently because it was to receive insurance proceeds for such costs). The ruling held that the costs should be capitalized because the taxpayer acquired the land in a contaminated state. “Therefore, the expenditures for the remediation operations increased the value of the land, by improving the land from a contaminated stated to a remediated state.” Id. at para. 32. The taxpayer was unaware of the contamination at purchase. Id. at paras. 4, 9, and 10. Hence, taxpayer would not have discounted its purchase price for the contamination discovered five and six years after its purchase. Since no depreciation would have been allowed for remediation costs capitalized to the land and Mt. Morris Drive-In would not apply, a current deduction should be allowed. See notes 119-22 supra and accompanying text.


129See id. at 798-99.

130See id. at 817 (citing to Professor Calvin Johnson, this commentator argues that removal costs should be capitalized, but that encapsulation and monitoring costs can be currently deducted).

The parties in Norwest Corp. not surprisingly disagreed as to the point at time at which “before” was determined under the Plainfield Union restoration principle. The taxpayer argued that “before” meant just before the point of discovery of the hazard from the asbestos insulation.130 The Commissioner maintained that it meant before the installation of the asbestos so that the Plainfield Union doctrine did not apply. She reasoned that since the asbestos was present from the moment when the building was first placed in service,131 there was no time at which the building existed before the condition occurred with which to contrast the value of the building after the condition appeared.132 The Tax Court in Norwest Corp. implicitly rejected the Commissioner’s argument. Noting that the parties had stipulated that asbestos removal [and reinstallation] did not increase the useful tax life of the building, the court agreed with the taxpayer that such removal did increase the building’s value “compared to its value when it was known to contain a hazard.”133 (Asbestos substitutes generally are less efficient insulators.)134 Norwest Corp. thus rebuffed the Commissioner’s contention “that the expenditures for asbestos removal materially increased the value of the building so as to require them to be capitalized.”135 Implicitly the issue, therefore, was whether “before” in the Plainfield Union test meant before the discovery of the hazard, or before the date of the asbestos installment.136 The court must have concluded the former, to say that asbestos removal itself did not increase the value of the building sufficiently as to require its cost to be capitalized.137 In a 1993 House Ways and Means subcommittee hearing, some witnesses maintained that since environmental remediation added no value, its costs should be deductible as a repair.138 This would lead to the conclusion that asbestos removal does not materially
increase the property’s value from its value before discovery of the contamination or its effects.\textsuperscript{139} Similarly where a taxpayer purchases property not knowing of contamination and subsequently uncovers it, remediation restores the property to its value before discovery. In the real world today buyers do usually undertake toxic waste surveys before purchasing property, but there are indications in TAM 199952075 that the taxpayer was not aware of the extent of contamination before disturbing the soil and undertaking a toxic waste survey for new construction. In LTR 200108029\textsuperscript{140} the taxpayer was clearly unaware of the pre-existing contamination. Even if the taxpayer were aware of the contamination but did not anticipate at purchase remediating it, for example, anticipating continued use for the same purpose, a current deduction should be allowed when the taxpayer changes its plans triggering a remediation requirement because depreciation would be unavailable if the cost were capitalized and the cost would not constitute a deferred acquisition cost.\textsuperscript{141} The district court in United Dairy Farmers, Inc. v. United States,\textsuperscript{142} incorrectly, however, denied such a current deduction, holding that the restoration rule was inapplicable where the taxpayer acquired convenience stores not knowing of the underground contamination from previously removed gasoline pumps. It held the restoration principle of Revenue Ruling 94-28 did not apply because the property (a convenience store with paved-over, abandoned gasoline storage tanks) was contaminated when acquired.\textsuperscript{143} Furthermore, the district court reasoned that the taxpayer overpaid for the properties because the market values were really lower due to the contamination; hence had the prices of the properties been adjusted to reflect the contamination on the properties, its remediation expenditures would have increased the values of the properties, and, therefore those costs would have to have been capitalized. The Court sees no reason for the taxpayer’s subjective belief as to the value of the property to control the determination of whether its remediation costs are deductible or whether they must be capitalized. Indeed, there are good policy reasons that it should not. Such a rule would discourage taxpayers from proceeding with appropriate diligence in making such an acquisition, sure in the knowledge that whatever costs they incurred to salvage their investment would be deductible immediately. This does not seem to be a wise course to follow.\textsuperscript{144} This approach is inconsistent with the Tax Court opinion in Norwest Corp., where the “before” component of the “restoration” test was before the taxpayer became aware of the effects of the contamination.\textsuperscript{145}

Norwest Corp. won the Plainfield-Union battle over asbestos clean-up costs, but lost the capitalization war.

In affirming the district court, the Sixth Circuit agreed that the restoration principle was inapplicable to defects present when the taxpayer purchased the property and pointed out that clean-up costs of $260,000 as to properties purchased for $760,000 were not “incidental” expenditures.\textsuperscript{146} It went on to “harmonize” Dominion Resources (discussed below),\textsuperscript{147} Plainfield Union, and Revenue Ruling 94-38. As noted by the government in its brief on appeal, when taken together, Dominion Resources, Plainfield Union, and Revenue Ruling 94-38 can be harmonized in a coherent framework. That is, three elements must be satisfied for a valid deduction under section 162 for environmental cleanup costs: first, the taxpayer contaminated the property in its ordinary course of business; second, the taxpayer cleaned up the contamination to restore the property to its pre-contamination state; third, the cleanup did not allow the taxpayer to put the property to a new use. In Dominion Resources, the taxpayer did not satisfy the third element, because the cleanup allowed the taxpayer to put the property to new use as a real estate development. Dominion Res., 219 F.3d at 370. In this case, failure to satisfy the first element is sufficient for rejecting UDF’s soil remediation claim.\textsuperscript{148}

F. Rule of Reverse Tax Parity

Norwest Corp. concluded that the asbestos removal was sufficiently intertwined by logistical and economic concerns with the clearly capital remodeling of the taxpayer’s bank building to come under the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine. Thus Norwest Corp. won the Plainfield Union battle over asbestos clean-up costs, but lost the capitalization war. On the basis of doctrine and even more policy, I believe that the Tax Court in Norwest Corp. incorrectly applied the Wehrli\textsuperscript{149} general plan of rehabilitation tax doctrine to asbestos removal costs. The asbestos remediation itself added

\textsuperscript{139}See Mazo, note 134 supra at 370.
\textsuperscript{140}Note 86 supra. The apparent source of the contamination was the unsuccessful attempt by an employee of the prior owner to distill the toxic substance and then freezing barrels containing the substance and dumping the ice mass at the top of the barrels on the ground. The taxpayer was unaware of any of this at time of purchase.
\textsuperscript{141}The deduction might be more appropriate under section 165 than section 162. See Coolidge, note 127 supra at 802-11.
\textsuperscript{142}Note 118 supra.
\textsuperscript{143}Id. at 942.
\textsuperscript{144}Id.
\textsuperscript{145}See notes 128-39 supra and accompanying text.
\textsuperscript{146}United Dairy Farmers, note 118 supra.
\textsuperscript{147}See notes 154-61 infra and accompanying text.
\textsuperscript{148}Id. at 519.
\textsuperscript{149}United States v. Wehrli, note 22 supra at 689, is the most often cited modern authority adopting the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine.
no value, according to the Tax Court, while the overall remodeling presumably added close to its cost in value at least to the taxpayer. It is thus debatable whether the doctrine as traditionally construed should have applied in Norwest Corp.\textsuperscript{156} A more fundamental objection to Norwest Corp. is that the reverse rule of tax parity should permit an ordinary deduction for asbestos remediation incurred in connection with remodeling. The rule of parity should apply in reverse so that a taxpayer self-constructing an item would not be tax disadvantaged as compared with a taxpayer purchasing the item.\textsuperscript{151} Assume that a taxpayer purchases a advantaged as compared with a taxpayer purchasing constructing an item would not be tax disad-

should apply in reverse so that a taxpayer self-

in connection with remodeling. The rule of parity a taxpayer self-remediating asbestos insulation should not have to capitalize her cost under the general plan of tax parity.\textsuperscript{161} A taxpayer altering the character of the property should be treated the same as a taxpayer purchasing property for a new use. Accordingly, under the rule of reverse tax parity, if such a purchaser would not economically bear the cost of the seller’s remediation and hence would not in effect include the costs in her basis, then a taxpayer performing the remediation and hence would not in effect include the costs in her basis, then a taxpayer performing the remediation

the alteration of character notion also rests on the rule of tax parity.\textsuperscript{163} A taxpayer altering the character of the property should be treated the same as a taxpayer purchasing property for a new use. Accordingly, under the rule of reverse tax parity, if such a purchaser would not economically bear the cost of the seller’s remediation and hence would not in effect include the costs in her basis, then a taxpayer performing the remediation

should not be required to capitalize those costs and should be permitted to currently deduct them. If, however, the purchaser discounted its price for the remediation, she would be required to capitalize them as a deferred purchase price.

G. Norwest Corp. and Economic Inefficiency

The holding in Norwest Corp. as to capitalization of asbestos remediation under the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine results in economic inefficiency. The Tax Court noted that combining the asbestos remediation with remodeling was less expensive than carrying out each separately.\textsuperscript{162} After Norwest Corp. with its implication that asbestos remediation performed not in connection with remodeling would be currently deductible, tax advisers may be expected to recommend that asbestos remediation be so performed before remodeling. As long as the two activities are not

\textsuperscript{151} See text accompanying note 24 supra.

\textsuperscript{152} United Telecommunications, Inc. v. Commissioner, 65 T.C. 278, 290 at 295 (1975) (Wilbur, J., concurring). Cf. Iowa-Des Moines Nat’l Bank v. Commissioner, note 102 supra at 435-36 (costs of purchased credit reports could be currently deducted because “had taxpayers directly acquired credit information, capitalization of the expense, including employee wages, would not have been required.”).

\textsuperscript{153} Michelle Kamen Friedman and Avi D. Liveson, “Tax Treatment of Environmental Clean Up Costs,” 26 J. Real Estate Tax’n 20, n.8 (1999).


\textsuperscript{155} Norwest Corp., 219 F.3rd at 371.
linked under the step transaction doctrine, the asbestos remediation would be currently deductible under the intimations in Norwest Corp. rather than being depreciable over almost 40 years. The tax savings surely would much more than offset any increased pre-tax costs of separately remediating and remodeling. The tax and not economic consequences thus will drive the structuring of the asbestos remediation.

Assume, as Norwest Corp. holds, that a taxpayer in Scenario A remodeling a building and hence hastening asbestos remediation must capitalize the asbestos remediation costs and then depreciate them straight-line over almost 40 years, but can take a current deduction if the asbestos remediation is taken apart from a remodeling. (The apparent difference is the, in my opinion, "erroneous" application of the "general plan of rehabilitation" doctrine because otherwise, according to Norwest Corp., no value or increase in useful life is added by "restoration" to an asbestos-free state.) Taxpayers will instead simply structure the transaction differently.

In Scenario B the bank holding company instead of remodeling removes asbestos from the bank building, reinsulates, and sells it to another. At that point the asbestos remediation will either be currently deductible or possibly reduce the gain or increase the loss on the sale by the bank holding company of the asbestos-free building. (I understand anecdotally that any financial institution involved in the purchase would require asbestos remediation.) Then the taxpayer can lease, buy, or build another bank building at current reproduction fair market value rates. (This hypothetical ignores any transaction costs in obtaining another branch bank permit.) The taxpayer could then have an ordinary loss for the asbestos remediation under the restoration principle and a new fair market value basis in the replacement modern bank building.

In scenario C the taxpayer forgoes remodeling the bank building and instead rewraps or encapsulates the asbestos insulation as needed in the future (and never more than 25 percent at a time). While this approach perhaps best fits the clear reflection of income mandate, it probably is the more contrary to environmental policies, social policies (a remodeled bank building hiring local workers might help to stabilize a neighborhood), and probably even sound business policies.

V. Cyclical Maintenance Costs

Still another problem arises with some frequency as to the general plan of rehabilitation. Assume a taxpayer cyclically repairs or rehabilitates depreciable property on a cycle shorter than the recovery period under section 168 for that property. The expenditure could be treated alternatively as (a) a current expenditure; (b) an addition to the basis of the longer-lived depreciable property and depreciated over that longer recovery period; or (c) as separate from the longer depreciable property and depreciated over the recovery period.

A. Current Deduction

The Commissioner inequitably sought in Ingram Industries v. Commissioner to capitalize costs recurring every 3½ years over a 10-year recovery period under section 168. Without discussing the general plan of the taxpayer’s property nor substantially prolonged its useful life. . . . [t]he taxpayer’s encapsulation expenditures did not increase the value or prolong the useful life of the taxpayers property beyond what it was before the asbestos became damaged. The application of a canvas or plastic wrapping over damaged pipe insulation reduced, but did not eliminate, the threat of exposure to airborne asbestos fibers. Moreover, because of the continued presence of asbestos, the expenditure did not enable the taxpayer to operate on a changed, more efficient, or larger scale. Accordingly, the taxpayer’s encapsulation expenditures did not materially enhance the value of the taxpayer’s property, substantially prolong its life, or adapt such property to a new or different use. Moreover, the effects of the encapsulation on taxpayer’s property are temporary.

Cf. Olivera Perkins, “8th District Hopful’s Focus on Improving Schools,” The Plain Dealer B-6 (Apr. 5, 1998); “Pres. Clinton Delivers Remarks on the Environment in Kalamazoo, Mi,” 1996 Presidential Campaign Press Materials (Aug. 28, 1996) (“The most important thing that I am working on with the mayors of America today is cleaning up these brownfields so we can create jobs in the city. Again, I tell you, good environmental policy is good for the economy. It creates jobs. It creates a future for America and we have to be prepared to do it.”).
rehabilitation doctrine, the court in *Ingram Industries* in determining whether cyclical maintenance costs (engine “inspection,” replacing 21 percent of the parts, recurring every 3½ years) “materially added to the value of the property,” the towboat, thought it “significant that petitioners [that is, taxpayers] perform the procedures at a time when the engines are completely serviceable and the purpose of performing the procedures is to keep the towboat engines in good operating condition. This is in contrast to the cases relied on by respondent [the Government] where the property was not serviceable and had to be replaced or completely rebuilt or overhauled.” As shown below, materiality of the expenditure and regularly recurring are proper rough justice, minimum distortion of income factors, while operable at the time of the expenditure is not. *Ingram Industries* unfortunately failed to clearly articulate the clear-reflection-of-income policy underly ing capitalization.\(^{172}\)

*Ingram Industries* may have reached the correct result for reasons other than the still operable test that are not inconsistent with minimum distortion of income. The “repair” cycle there was 3½ years rather than 10 years and the Tax Court held that the “repair” cost of inspecting the towboat engine, which amounted to 17 percent of the cost of a reconditioned unit, was insubstantial (”incidental”) compared to the cost of a new or rebuilt engine.\(^{173}\) (See *Ingram Industries* did not consider in this context the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine.)\(^{174}\) Current deduction of future benefit costs does not distort the taxpayer’s income where those costs are insubstantial or steady-state recurring.\(^{175}\) The Seventh Circuit recently reaffirmed the concept that the regularity of expenses with future benefit supports their current deduction.\(^{176}\)

In TAM 9618004\(^{177}\) the Commissioner allowed a current deduction for repairs done on a one- to two-year cycle and costing between $25,000 and $80,000. In contrast, this TAM capitalized the costs of “major engine inspections” of aircraft engines (also called off-wing inspections since the engines are removed for inspection) recurring every three to five years and costing between $90,000 and $120,000 because they were “not merely incidental and . . . have the effect of adding materially to the then value of the engine while at the same time prolonging the engine’s useful life. Furthermore, these expenditures generate significant future benefits to Taxpayer, not the least of which is the fact that without them, the FAA would not permit Taxpayer to continue to operate its aircraft. Finally, in the case of engines owned by Taxpayer, the major inspection costs restore exhaustion for which an allowance has been made.”\(^{178}\) While *Ingram Industries’* four-year cycle might be considered closer to the two-year cycle than the five-year cycle in *Wolfsen Land & Cattle*\(^{179}\) discussed in Section V.C. below, it is the same as the four-year cycle for major engine inspections that the TAM capitalized.

Revenue Ruling 2001-4, the Service’s restatement of the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine, restates the still-operable rule in holding the doctrine inapplicable where “the plan primarily involved repair and maintenance items or the work was performed merely to keep the property in ordinarily efficient operating condition.”\(^{180}\) This extension of *Ingram Industries* in Revenue Ruling 2001-4 to an eight-year cycle roughly equivalent to the recovery period under section 168\(^{181}\) clearly exposes, however, the weakness in the reasoning in *Ingram Industries* — that the asset was not yet inoperable. Revenue Ruling 2001-4 permitted current deduction of a $2 million “heavy maintenance visit” (consisting of disassembling the aircraft down to the frame and then lubricating, inspecting, and replacing minor parts and repainting and repairing the removed

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\(^{170}\)See notes 101 and 103 supra; Lee, Start-Up Costs, note 27 supra at 15-20; Lee, Capitalization Rules, note 36 supra at 679-80; Lee, et al., Rough Justice II, note 5 supra at 1523-48.

\(^{171}\)U.S. Freightways Corp., note 5 supra.

\(^{172}\)While 96-13304 (14 pages), 96 TNT 89-13.

\(^{173}\)Id.; see generally Lee, Walberg, and Whitesell, Cyclical Aircraft Maintenance Costs, note 39 supra at 163-4, 202-03, and 210-12.

\(^{174}\)Wolfsen Land & Cattle, note 61 supra at 18 (called for treatment of recurring costs of maintaining irrigation system as freestanding amortizable intangibles with “appropriate useful lives, i.e., 5 years for field checks, 10 years for ditches, and 30 years for large levees and canals,” corresponding with the dredging cycle necessary to avoid complete dysfunction. Id. at 8).

\(^{175}\)Note 1 supra at 298.

\(^{176}\)Section 168(e)(3)(C).
components, but not materially upgrading or adding to the airframe or any substantial structural part) yielding future benefits for eight years as in the ruling surely distorts the taxpayer’s income. In Revenue Ruling 2001-4 the cost, while perhaps not substantial in comparison to the original cost of the aircraft, 13.3 percent of the original cost 15 years earlier, was so large per se ($2 million) that it hardly appears insubstantial.

Revenue Ruling 2001-4 contained two other fact patterns: (2) in addition to the heavy maintenance visit, all of the skin panels on the fuselage were replaced, which materially added to the value of the aircraft (in addition new cabin fire and smoke detection and suppression system, ground proximity warning, and air phone system were installed), and (3) similarly many structural, exterior, and interior modifications were made, for example, new belly skin panels, metal supports under the lavatories and galleys, new wiring systems in the wings, replacing frame rivets, upgrading cockpit avionics and equipment, replacing all seats, windows, and carpeting, and installing new cabin fire and smoke detection and suppression system, ground proximity warning, and air phone system; all of this materially increased the value of the airframe and substantially prolonged its life. The ruling concluded that the replacement of skin panels and installation of new systems in (2) had to be capitalized, but the costs of the heavy maintenance visit were still currently deductible because all of the expenditures did not rehabilitate the entire aircraft “restoring it to a ‘like new’ condition.” In the third scenario, “the effect of all the work performed on aircraft 3, including the inspection, repair, and maintenance items, is to materially increase the value of the airframe and substantially prolong its useful life.” Thus the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine applied. Clearly the rule of tax parity would require capitalization of all of the expenditures as to the third aircraft and under Moss the doctrine would not apply (as to the replacement of the skin panels and installation of new systems). However, the amount of the expenditure and long intervals between the repair cycles suggest that the expenditures still should be capitalized.

I understand informally that few heavy maintenance visit repairs fall into the first category. Nevertheless, a refund suit filed by FedEx disclosed that after the ruling the Service conceded the deductibility of the airframe heavy maintenance visits, but still disallowed current deduction of off-wing engine inspections. As a practical matter, the Service has advised area counsel to guide examiners to focus only on the third or later heavy maintenance visit as to a particular aircraft.

B. Depreciation Over Longer Recovery Period

The Service in TAM 9618004 capitalized the shorter-term recurring maintenance costs (four-year cycle) that extended the life of aircraft engines and aluminum reduction cells, respectively, over the longer 7½-year recovery period under section 168 for the rehabilitated asset, producing in my opinion distortion of income. Such depreciation over a longer period than the benefit of the expenditure distorts the taxpayer’s income. Treating the cost as a freestanding asset depreciable over four years in the case of the aircraft engine maintenance in TAM 9618004, or three to four years in the case of engine inspections in Ingram Indus., discussed above, on a straight-line basis under section 167 minimizes the income distortion that occurs by (a) deprecating the maintenance as a reconditioned...
C. Depreciation as a Freestanding Intangible

In *Wolfsen Land & Cattle v. Commissioner*, the taxpayer incurring substantial costs in dredging irrigation ditches every 10 years when it became dysfunctional in lieu of performing annual maintenance. The parties presented the court with two income-distorting options: either allow a current deduction of the substantial costs or capitalize the costs to the nondepreciable basis of the land with an indefinite useful life. *Wolfsen Land & Cattle* properly viewed both of the opposing choices — currently deducting (in the 10th year) or capitalizing the costs to the irrigation system, which was nondepreciable since it was of indefinite life — as distorting the taxpayer’s income.

[W]e are faced with something of a conundrum, how do we treat a maintenance-type expense substantial in amount, which only restores its subject to its original operating condition, yet need be repeated only on the average of every 10 years and is performed on a subject of indefinite life.

To permit a current deduction of such a large expenditure with a beneficial effect lasting on the average of 10 years would surely distort that year’s income. Yet to deny even an amortization deduction for an expenditure with a specific demonstrable beneficial life on the grounds that its deductibility is contaminated by its relationship to an asset of indefinite life, i.e., the land, would similarly require an uneven reporting of income.

The Tax Court resolved this conundrum and effected clear reflection of income by giving “independent status to those expenditures on the basis that they create a free-standing intangible asset with an amortizable 10-year life.” (Similarly gates in the irrigation system that were replaced every 5 years were held depreciable over a 5-year period.) True, in *Wolfsen Land & Cattle* the “repaired” asset was almost dysfunctional while in *Ingram Industries* it was not; however, had the taxpayer in *Wolfsen Land & Cattle* carried out the re-dredging in the ninth year when the irrigation ditch was not yet dysfunctional, the *Ingram Industries* test would have been met, but under *Wolfsen Land & Cattle* distortion of income still would have resulted from currently deducting a expenditure with a nine-year future benefit. An even more striking example is TAM 9424002200 where offshore pumping stations were originally 30 meters above sea level and after subsidence of three meters (first detected in 1977, confirmed in 1984) were raised 6 meters at a cost of $471 million (completed in 1987). If the subsidence had been corrected (back to 30 meters) while the pumping stations were still operable (say in 1977 or when subsidence was only 2 meters), under *Ingram Indus.* the huge expenditure would be currently deductible. The substantial tax savings from a current deduction could

190Section 168(c).
191Note 18 supra at 839-40.
192Sections 168(c) and (d)(1) and (4)(A); Lee, Capitalization Rules, note 36 supra at 677-78.

193H.R. Rep. No. 96-1278, 96th Cong., 2d Sess. 11 (1980), S. Rep. No. 99-513, 99th Cong., 2d Sess. 141 and n. 38 (1986); H. R. Rep. No. 103-66, 103d Cong., 1st Sess. 760-61 (1993) (discussions as to costs of self-created intangible assets being deductible under current law implicitly relying on separate asset prerequisite to capitalization). The Fourth Circuit described the Commissioner’s position in one of the bank credit card expansion costs taxpayer victories decided under that rubric as “an attempted overreaching by the tax collector. If he failed, he had less basis for protest than if he had confined his demands to those which were properly Caesar’s”).

194Lee, Start-Up Costs, note 27 supra at 9-10; Lee, et al., Rough Justice I, note 5 supra at 638-42 and n. 18 (Service authorities reluctantly adopted separate asset doctrine). This subsequent legislative history should not broaden deductibility of business expansion costs under section 162, see note 193 supra, despite the arguments of many. E.g., “Comments of Tax Executives Institute, Inc. on Notice 96-7 Request for Comments on Further Capitalization Guidance Submitted to the Internal Revenue Service March 20, 1996,” Doc 96-9048 (23 pages), 96 TNT 60-19, paras. 39, 42.

195NCNB I, note 100 supra at 959-60.
196Note 61 supra at 8.
offset the additional economic costs of repeating the raising earlier this time and the next time.

In Vanalco, Inc. v. Commissioner\(^{202}\) the government and the taxpayer “stipulated” that cell linings of aluminum reduction cells have an average useful life of three years. The Tax Court held that the cost of removing and replacing the exhausted cell lining was around $23,000, or about 22 percent of the cost of the rehabilitated reduction cell. “Thus, the cell lining has a life that is independent of the cell unit as a whole.”\(^{202}\) The Tax Court found “that replacing the cell linings cannot be classified as an incidental repair, and the cost must therefore be capitalized.”\(^{202}\) Presumably the Service and the Tax Court allowed recovery of the annual costs of replacing cell linings (which were quite substantial in the aggregate)\(^{204}\) over that three-year period. The technical problem is that section 198 does not work that way; it prohibits composite depreciation and apparently even if the cell lining were treated as a separate asset would place it into the catch-all seven-year recovery period category.\(^{205}\) The more conceptually accurate approach would be to treat the cell-lining replacement cost as a freestanding amortizable intangible, depreciable straight-line over a three-year period.

The common sense freestanding depreciable intangible solution is equally applicable to cyclical engine maintenance and the re-bricking of the aluminum reduction cell costs. Unfortunately, the Service to date generally has refused to adopt the depreciation of a freestanding intangible asset approach to recurring costs.\(^{206}\) Consequently, it often strains to find an appropriate depreciable asset that could have the recurring costs tied to it. For example, in the case of employee training costs, the Service initially permitted depreciation of capitalized new nuclear power plant employee training costs over the life of the building in which the workforce was employed.\(^{207}\) Contemporaneously, the Service capitalized training costs as start-up costs of a new plant in an existing lumber business as a depreciable intangible asset — “an operational fiberboard plant.”\(^{208}\) Subsequently, during the period the Service followed the separate asset doctrine, it allowed a current deduction for the costs of training a workforce in connection with the establishment of a new manufacturing facility by a taxpayer with similar existing operational plants in other locations.\(^{209}\) Later, the Service amortized employee training costs over the life of a plant’s 40-year Nuclear Regulatory Commission license.\(^{210}\) The PCP remediation cost TAM similarly capitalized the soil remediation costs to the taxpayer’s natural gas piping, its chief operating asset.\(^{211}\) This awkward progression strongly indicates that the Service should recognize generally the approach of capitalizing costs as freestanding assets depreciated over their own useful lives,\(^{212}\) rather than fudging in litigation by stipulating to the recurrence cycle as the useful life of the replacement without regard to section 168. (How is this “stipulation” approach applicable to other taxpayers?) Otherwise as in Moss it runs the risk that a court may find a current deduction less income distorting than overly long depreciation.\(^{213}\) This may have underlain in part the result in Ingram Indus. In Revenue Ruling 2001-4 the Service itself appears to have given up the fight and allowed a current deduction of substantial costs benefitting an eight-year period.\(^{214}\) Administratively, Examination is going even further and simply allowing the costs of the first two heavy maintenance visits to be currently deductible.\(^{215}\)

VI. Conclusion

The article reveals that all of the recent authorities considering cyclical expenses or toxic substance remediation, to which the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine has been applied at least sporadically,\(^{216}\) are at least partially incorrect in reasoning or result, creating distortion of the taxpayer’s income. For instance, the Tax Court in Ingram Indus. conceptualized expenditures recurring every 3 years as maintaining a 40-year asset by maintenance at 3-year intervals. The toxic materials remediation cases are equally irreconcilable and wrong (for different reasons). Northwest Corp. appears to have applied the Plainfield Union restoration principle by comparing the value of the remediated property after clean-up with the value before the toxicity was discovered (but incorrectly applied the general plan of rehabilitation by violating the reverse rule of parity basis for the latter doctrine). In contrast United Dairy Farmers did not so apply the res-

\(^{201}\) See TAM 8303012 (Oct. 7, 1982), modifying TAM 8204061 (Oct. 8, 1981).

\(^{202}\) See TAM 9430003, 94 TNT 149-31 (Apr. 22, 1994).

\(^{203}\) See note 111 supra.

\(^{204}\) See note 111 supra.

\(^{205}\) See TAM 85099440A (Sept. 9, 1975).

\(^{206}\) See TAM 750421070A (Apr. 28, 1975); cf. GCM 37,500 (Apr. 5, 1978) (suggesting, but not ruling, that pre-opening costs like training should be capitalized and amortized over the life of the facility).

\(^{207}\) See TAM 7504281070A (Apr. 28, 1975); cf. GCM 37,500 (Apr. 5, 1978) (suggesting, but not ruling, that pre-opening costs like training should be capitalized and amortized over the life of the facility).
toration principle, overlooking the acquisition cost doctrine, which would turn on whether the remediation was anticipated at the time of purchase.

The fundamental error in all cases was reliance on tests, or better talismans, all originating before the development of determining capitalization versus a current deduction on the basis of which would produce less or no distortion of income. Had the courts and the Service considered these capitalization versus expensing/repair versus improvement cases in light of minimum distortion of income (for example, substantial future benefits mandates capitalization unless the benefit is relatively short term or depreciation is unavailable or the recovery period extends over a period substantially longer than the period benefited) and realized that the general plan of rehabilitation doctrine is but a manifestation of the policy that neither a taxpayer purchasing nor a taxpayer creating or enhancing her asset should be tax advantaged or disadvantaged compared to the other, this Serbonian Bog of conflicting, erroneous authorities would not have been created. The guidance as to repair costs now under consideration offers a perfect opportunity to drain this Serbonian Bog and not fix it in concrete.

217Courts use “talisman” as metaphor for a “magical power” that wards off the scrutiny of the trier of fact, blinding her to other relevant factors and, thus, dictates the tax consequences of the transaction. *In re Lane*, 742 F.2d 1311, 1315 (11th Cir. 1984); *United States v. Winters*, 174 F.3d 478, 482 (5th Cir. 1999); *Smith v. Commissioner*, 65 F.2d 37 (5th Cir. 1995). See generally *Commissioner v. Duberstein*, 363 U.S. 278, 284-85 (1960).