

Dollars and Senses

By Reg P. Wydeven
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One of my favorite 'Seinfeld' episodes was when Jerry had to pretend he needed glasses. He wore spectacles with Coke-bottle lenses and he couldn't see a thing. When a friend stopped at a store to pick up some gum, Jerry fumbled in his wallet for a dollar bill. Because he couldn't see, Jerry mistakenly handed him a \$100 bill.

Instead of returning a pack of gum, Jerry's friend came back with an entire case and stated, "Am I crazy, or is that a lot of gum?" An outraged Jerry replied, "It's a lot of gum!"

While it's a hilarious scene in a sitcom, it wouldn't be funny in real life. That's why in 2002, the American Council for the Blind sued the U.S. Treasury Department, claiming that the uniform design of U.S. paper money discriminates against the blind and violates the Rehabilitation Act, a federal law that prohibits discriminating against the disabled.

In a landmark 2-1 decision, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit agreed with the Council. In its ruling, the Court held that "Upon casual inspection, anyone with good vision can readily discern the value of U.S. currency; yet even the most searching tactile examination will reveal no difference between a \$100 bill and a \$1 bill."

The government argued that the blind could use credit cards or rely on portable currency readers or the assistance of strangers. It also claimed that changing the currency would be expensive and negatively impact third parties, such as the vending machine industry.

The U.S. is one of the few remaining major countries that does not vary the size or design of its paper currency to distinguish between denominations. For example, the Euro has a small piece of foil on bills that varies in size based on denomination. Canadian dollars are embossed with dots, while the texture of Swedish money can be altered, depending on denomination.

Unless the Treasury Department elects to appeal the ruling to the U.S. Supreme Court, it will be forced to develop proposed changes to our currency. Experts estimate that it will cost about \$50 million to develop these changes.

That's a lot of gum.