

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 6552

As of January 26, 2010

Title: An act relating to excise taxation of certain products and services provided or furnished electronically.

Brief Description: Concerning excise taxation of certain products and services provided or furnished electronically.

Sponsors: Senator Tom; by request of Department of Revenue.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Ways & Means: 1/25/10.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS

Staff: Dean Carlson (786-7305)

Background: Retail sales and use taxes are imposed by the state, most cities, and all counties. Retail sales taxes are imposed on retail sales of most articles of tangible personal property and digital products and some services. Generally, a retail sale is the sale of property, products, or services to the final consumer or end-user. Sales for resale or for incorporation into other property, goods, or services to be sold are not considered retail sales. If retail sales taxes were not collected when the property, services, or digital products were acquired by the user and retail sales taxes would have otherwise applied, then use taxes apply to the value of most tangible personal property and digital products and some services used in this state.

In 2009 the Legislature adopted comprehensive legislation (ESHB 2075) addressing the sales and use taxation and business and occupation (B&O) taxation of digital products, ranging from downloaded music to streamed video. Specifically, the bill: (1) defines digital products as digital goods and digital automated services transferred electronically; (2) provides certain exemptions for businesses and end-users; (3) requires sellers of digital products to electronically file their tax returns; and (4) provides amnesty to those who did not collect or pay sales or use tax on digital products that were taxed before July 26, 2009 (the effective date of the ESHB 2075). Digital automated services (DAS) are services transferred electronically that use one or more software applications. Examples include: search engine services, online gaming subscription services allowing game playing with other remote

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players, and online digital photography editing services. Services that are primarily the result of human effort performed in response to a customer request are not considered DAS.

Prior to the adoption of ESHB 2075, the Department of Revenue (DOR) considered downloaded digital goods (books, movies, music, etc.) as tangible personal property that were subject to sales or use tax. Furthermore, at the time ESHB 2075 was adopted, prewritten computer software was already included within the definition of tangible personal property and therefore subject to sales and use tax. ESHB 2075 applies sales or use tax to all digital products and prewritten computer software, regardless of how the digital products or software are accessed (downloaded, streamed, remotely accessed, etc.).

Because ESHB 2075 is complicated legislation, DOR decided to implement ESHB 2075 in a phased process allowing the DOR to obtain substantial stakeholder input as it developed rules to implement the bill. Through this process, a number of ambiguities and unintended consequences have been discovered.

Summary of Bill: Ambiguities are clarified and corrects are made regarding unintended consequences related to the passage of Engrossed Substitute House Bill 2075.

The definition of retail sale is clarified to specifically include remotely accessing prewritten computer software to perform data processing. Data processing includes check processing, image processing, form processing, survey processing, payroll processing, claim processing, and similar activities.

A person is not considered a final consumer, and therefore not subject to sales or use tax, if the person purchases a digital product, code, or prewritten computer software for the purpose of incorporating the product, code, or software into a new product, code, or software for sale. This would have no impact for sales and use taxes because an exemption already exists for this type of transaction; however, sales now subject to the (B&O) retailing rate would be subject to the wholesaling rate.

The definition of digital automated service is modified to specifically exclude: live presentations, digital goods, the storage of digital products and software, and data processing services. (Data processing services are distinct from accessing prewritten computer software to perform data processing, described earlier.)

Photographs sent electronically by a photographer to the end-user are specifically included within the definition of digital good.

Royalty B&O tax is clarified to include licensing of digital products to persons who are not the end-users of the products.

Clarification is made that the provision of subscription television services and subscription radio services are subject to the general service B&O tax rate.

For purposes of municipal B&O taxes, the sale of digital products is deemed to occur at the location where delivery occurs which aligns with state and local sales tax sourcing provisions.

To simplify administration, the sales and use tax exemption for standard digital information is broadened to include all digital goods used for business purposes.

The nexus safe harbor provision in ESHB 2075 is clarified to include computer software. Therefore, the storage of computer software on servers located in Washington State would not establish nexus for the purpose requiring a business to pay state taxes.

The amnesty provision in ESHB 2075 is amended by providing amnesty for sales taxable labor and services rendered with respect to installing, repairing, altering, or improving of digital goods prior to the effective date of ESHB 2075 (June 26, 2009), and requiring taxpayers seeking a refund or credit for overpaid B&O taxes to have first paid all sales tax.

Most provisions apply retroactively as well as prospectively.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Committee/Commission/Task Force Created: No.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect on July 1, 2010.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: DOR has been working closely with stakeholders to properly implement changes. The bill makes changes that reflect the intent of the original legislation. This bill corrects many of the unintended consequences of last year's bill. We really appreciated the stakeholder input. We worked with over 900 stakeholders on the bill. We support this bill. We worked closely with DOR on these issues over the interim. We appreciate them reaching out and making sure everyone understands their responsibilities. We would like to see that digital images be treated as digital goods in all cases. We support previous statements. We often complain about the retroactive nature of the bill, but in this case it is a good part of the bill.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Drew Shirk, Dylan Waits, DOR; Lew McMurrin, Washington Technology Industry Association; Amber Carter, Association of Washington Business.