

SB 2405, SD1

LINDA LINGLE
GOVERNOR

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SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS

TESTIMONY REGARDING SB 2405 SD 1 RELATING TO TAXATION

TESTIFIER: KURT KAWAFUCHI, DIRECTOR OF TAXATION (OR DESIGNEE)

DATE: FEBRUARY 24, 2010

TIME: 10AM

ROOM: 211

The intent of this bill is to conform Hawaii law to the requirements of the Streamlined Sales and Use Tax Agreement ("SSUTA"). The Streamlined Sales and Use Tax Agreement is a method developed by the states and businesses primarily to have internet and catalogue sellers voluntarily collect the sales and use tax from consumers on behalf of the States for those sellers who did not have nexus with the state. Currently, people who buy from catalogues and the internet are supposed to pay use tax on their purchases, however in practice, few do.¹ This bill would provide a *voluntary* mechanism for internet and catalog sellers to collect this tax from the consumers and pass it on to the Department.

The Department of Taxation ("Department") **opposes** this bill.

I. CONCERN OVER THIS LEGISLATION IN A SLOWING ECONOMY

Initially, the Department points out that it is a well-settled principle of economics that when an economy is slowing, increasing taxes is strongly discouraged because people are already struggling to make ends meet financially. During economic slowing, economics suggests that money should remain with the people and in the economy in order to boost economic performance. The Department cautions further consideration of this legislation during a slowing economy based upon these economic concepts.

II. CONCERNS REGARDING IMPLEMENTATION OF SSUTA IN HAWAII.

1. **Adds Complexity.** Because Hawaii has a general excise tax imposed on the seller rather than a sales tax, which is imposed on the buyer, the provisions of the SSUTA do

¹ However, businesses generally comply with the use tax more than individuals.

not fit neatly into Hawaii's general excise tax regime. Therefore, the SSUTA provisions need to be modified to take Hawaii's different tax structure into account.

In addition, to comply with the SSUTA's requirement that the State and each local taxing jurisdiction have only one rate, except in certain circumstances not applicable in Hawaii, the different tax rates applicable under Hawaii general excise tax law need to be removed from the general excise tax chapter and shifted into another taxing chapter. The creation of three new chapters also adds complexity to Hawaii's tax law and may prove to be another source of confusion to taxpayers.

In addition, whether the approach taken in the bill would be considered a "replacement tax" is an issue. It is also unclear at this time whether replacement taxes are permitted under the SSUTA.

2. **Provides Amnesty.** The SSUTA requires the State to provide amnesty to out-of-state sellers that may or may not have nexus with the State. The State will be giving up its right to pursue these sellers for general excise tax on their operations in the State.
3. **Vendor Compensation.** The SSUTA requires the State to compensate out-of-state vendors who voluntarily participate in the SSUTA for collecting the Hawaii tax. However, in-state businesses that are obligated to pay the Hawaii tax are not compensated for collecting and paying the tax.
4. **Voluntary.** Currently, participation by sellers pursuant to the SSUTA is voluntary. While hundreds of companies have agreed to participate, Amazon.com and eBay have indicated that they will not participate at this time. Therefore, it is unclear how much potential revenue will be generated for Hawaii by participating in SSUTA. Federal legislation could also change this.
5. **"Home Rule" Concerns.** Participation in SSUTA requires the State to annually certify to the national governing board that the state's laws are in compliance with SSUTA. Therefore, **any tax law changes in the future must meet the requirements of SSUTA** in order for the State to continue to comply with SSUTA. Therefore, **the State is limiting its ability to adopt legislation in favor of decisions made by a national governing board regarding a state's tax law.**

In addition, now that the City and County of Honolulu has enacted the county surcharge, the City and County of Honolulu must be bound to follow the SSUTA with respect to the surcharge.

6. **Unbudgeted Appropriations.** The Department will need an appropriation to implement the SSUTA compliance, which, among other things, requires the development of a database of zip codes and tax rates. The complexity associated with updating the Department's current tax collection systems and the required labor and incidental costs require further analysis. **The resource cost has not been factored into the budget and**

will provide additional stress on budgeting and the financial plan this legislative session.

7. **Further Study.** The Department believes that further study is warranted on this issue. The general excise tax is a major revenue source for the State and any substantial revisions, such as those contained in this bill, should only be enacted after a thorough and thoughtful analysis can be done. In addition, time would also enable the Department to learn from other states' experiences with the SSUTA. Other states did not actually begin implementing SSUTA until late 2005. As of 2009, nineteen states² have become full members of SSUTA and begun implementing SSUTA. If the State waits, it could learn from the problems the other states' experience. Some states remain cautiously guarded about implementing the SSUTA. Again, further study of these paramount issues is advised.
8. **Wait for Congress to Act.** In the Department's revenue projection of this measure, it is doubtful that this measure will yield any meaningful revenue without Congressional authority allowing states to require collection of GET and use taxes incurred in other states. As stated above, SSUTA participation is voluntary. No business is actually required to comply, meaning that the status quo after passage is highly likely—especially in the current economy. This bill would be more effective waiting for Congress to act.

III. ADDITIONAL CONCERNS.

This Bill Should Have a Delayed Effective Date—This measure must be amended to provided for a delayed effective date to allow these changes to be fully integrated into the computer systems of the Department. A longer delayed effective date would give time for practitioners and businesses to adjust to these changes. When the corporate statutes were substantially revised, the effective date was delayed one year to allow professional associations, businesses, and practitioners sufficient time to analyze the changes in the law, prepare conferences, or other industry analysis. Given the challenges the Department would face integrating such large, wholesale changes into its operations, longer than two years may be more realistic of a time frame. The delayed effective date would also provide time to obtain approval from the National SSTP Governing Board to assure that Hawaii's amendments conform to the SSUTA. This is very important since Hawaii's general excise tax is not a sales tax.

Frequent Changes to the SSUTA Will Require Legislative Action. The legislature needs to be aware that the SSUTA is not a static document. It has undergone substantial and frequent changes since it was adopted on November 12, 2002. It has been amended

² The full member states are Arkansas, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Vermont, Washington, West Virginia, Wyoming.

14 times.³ It has been amended 10 times since the SSUTA became effective on October 3, 2005. Each change requires member States to amend its law in order to remain in conformity with the SSUTA. The debate at the Governing Board meetings currently includes allowing intra-state origin based taxes, the extension of associate member status beyond the original deadline, and very relevant to this bill, the issue of using "replacement taxes" by States to circumvent the provisions of the SSUTA, such as New Jersey's fur tax.⁴

IV. REVENUE IMPACT & START UP COSTS

Joining the SSUTA would entail start-up costs of several million dollars in the first year and annual ongoing costs.

In a study produced for the State's Auditor in April 2006, Dr. William Fox estimated that joining the SSUTA would provide Hawaii with less than \$10 million in additional GET revenues annually. He reaffirmed his estimate in 2007. **The Department projects that joining SSUTA would yield little revenue unless Congress enacts legislation allowing states to assess GET and use tax notwithstanding the *Quill* Supreme Court case.** If Congress passes such action, this measure could result in additional GET revenues of approximately \$25-\$30 million annually.

The exemption for blind, deaf, and disabled taxpayers would cost about \$500,000 annually.

³ November 19, 2003, November 16, 2004, April 16, 2005, October 1, 2005, January 13, 2006, April 18, 2006, August 30, 2006, December 14, 2006, June 23, 2007, September 20, 2007, December 12, 2007, April 2, 2008, June 18, 2008, and September 5, 2008.

⁴ As of January 1, 2009, New Jersey repealed its fur tax, delaying resolution of the replacement tax issue.



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February 23, 2010

The Honorable Donna Mercado Kim, Chair
Senate Committee on Ways and Means
State Capitol, Room 211
Honolulu, Hawaii 96813

RE: S.B. 2405, S.D. 1, Relating To Taxation

DECISION MAKING: Wednesday, February 24, 2010 at 10:05 a.m.

Aloha Chair Kim, Vice Chair Tsutsui and Members of the Committee:

I am Craig Hirai, a member of the Subcommittee on Taxation and Finance, submitting comments on behalf of the Hawai'i Association of REALTORS® ("HAR"), the voice of real estate in Hawai'i, and its 8,800 members in Hawai'i. HAR supports S.B. 2405, S.D. 1, which adopts amendments to Hawaii tax laws to implement the Streamlined Sales and Use Tax Agreement.

The Report of the 2001-2003 Tax Review Commission states that Hawaii would potentially achieve not only the benefit of better definitions, uniformity, and certainty, but also increase tax compliance by interstate vendors (primarily mail order and e-commerce merchants) who agree to pay state taxes under the Streamlined Sales Tax Project. The Report goes on to state that because of Hawaii's uniquely broad based General Excise and Use Tax system, by joining the Streamlined Sales Tax Project, Hawaii may be able to better maintain the viability of its broad revenue base.

The Report of the 2005-2007 Tax Review Commission, however, states that while the Commission believes that the goal of coordinating the collection of taxes on interstate sales, such as via the internet, is desirable, and that Hawaii should remain involved in discussions on the Streamlined Sales Tax Project, the Commission did not think that Hawaii should make a formal commitment yet.

HAR believes that the procedures set forth in Section 32 of S.B. 2405, S.D.1, should help alleviate some of the concerns of the 2005-2007 Tax Review Commission, and that S.B. 2405, S.D.1, should eventually level the playing field for local merchants who must deal with the high cost of doing business in Hawaii and still compete with mail order and e-commerce merchants from outside of the State.

HAR looks forward to working with our state lawmakers in building better communities by supporting quality growth, seeking sustainable economies and housing opportunities, embracing the cultural and environmental qualities we cherish, and protecting the rights of property owners.

Mahalo for the opportunity to submit comments.





HAWAII GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES ASSOCIATION
AFSCME Local 152, AFL-CIO

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**The Twenty-Fifth Legislature, State of Hawaii
Hawaii State Senate
Committee on Ways and Means**

**Testimony by
Hawaii Government Employees Association
February 24, 2010**

**S.B. 2405, S.D. 1 – RELATING TO
TAXATION**

The Hawaii Government Employees Association supports the purpose and intent of S.B. 2405, S.D. 1, which makes specific changes to Hawaii's tax law that will enable the State to tax Internet-based transactions through its participation in the national Streamlined Sales and Use Tax Agreement (SSUTA). Participation in the SSUTA requires Hawaii to change its tax law to be in conformity with the agreement. If enough states agree to a uniform framework, taxing Internet transactions could overcome constitutional barriers against infringements on interstate commerce.

There are several compelling reasons for taxing Internet-based transactions. Retail trade has been transformed by the Internet. As the popularity of "e-commerce" grows, fairness dictates that Internet-based transactions should be treated in the same manner as other retail transactions. Retail transactions that are taxable by "bricks and mortar" retailers should also be taxable when sold through the Internet.

People in Hawaii and across the country are going online to buy a variety of goods (clothes, furniture, computers and electronics) in an effort to save money. While buying such goods may cost less than in a retail store, the purchases are costly to states and local government that miss the streamlined sales tax revenue.

Hawaii has already lost millions of dollars in Internet-based sales, and the losses will likely increase as the importance of the Internet continues to grow. Therefore, we support S.B. 2405, S.D. 1 that makes the necessary changes to the tax code to comply with the SSUTA. The ongoing loss of millions in tax revenue from e-commerce is a problem that will get worse over time unless we take appropriate action. The revenues gained through the Internet sales may be used to fund public education and other important state priorities.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of this important measure.

Respectfully submitted,

Nora A. Nomura
Deputy Executive Director

The Twenty-Fifth Legislature
Regular Session of 2010

THE SENATE

Committee on Ways and Means
Senator Donna Mercado Kim, Chair
Senator Shan S. Tsutsui, Vice Chair

State Capitol, Conference Room 211
Tuesday, February 23, 2010; 10:05 a.m.

**STATEMENT OF THE ILWU LOCAL 142 ON S.B. 2405, SD1
RELATING TO TAXATION**

The ILWU Local 142 supports S.B. 2405, SD1, which adopts amendments to Hawaii tax laws to implement the streamlined sales and use tax agreement. The law will become effective when the State becomes a party to the Streamlined Sales and Use Tax Agreement.

This legislation will enable the State of Hawaii to participate in the Streamlined Sales and Use Tax Agreement with other states and eventually allow the State to tax retail sales via the Internet. While such sales may be attractive to Hawaii consumers trying to save money by buying through the Internet, they effectively put local retailers, who must pay state taxes, at a competitive disadvantage. The Streamlined Sales and Use Tax Agreement, when implemented, will require all businesses selling goods to Hawaii consumers to pay the same tax.

At a time when the State is faced with a huge budget deficit, measures such as these are forward-thinking and looking at ways to maximize revenue generation in good times and bad.

The ILWU urges passage of S.B. 2405, SD1. Thank you for considering our testimony.



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Wednesday, February 24, 2010

To: Committee on Ways & Means
Senator Donna Mercado Kim, Chair
Senator Shan S. Tsutsui, Vice Chair

By: Richard C. Botti, President

Re: SB 2405 SD1 RELATING TO TAXATION

Chairs & Committee Members:

We support SB 2405 SD1

The Legislature has had the so called Streamlined sales and use tax issue on the table of many years. While most Hawaii consumers do not realize that they owe the State a four per cent tax on their out-of-state purchases via catalog, direct mail, or the internet, it is virtually impossible for the department of taxation to calculate and collect what individual taxpayers owe on those out of state purchases. Yet, things have been changing because of the impact that has been made during the past several years with more states adopting this method of creating awareness. Many more firms are now collecting the tax and paying Hawaii. It is time we took the final step by passing SB 2405, SD1 to directly address the leaks in our tax system.

We don't see a downside with this measure. It is the line of least resistance for the State to generate revenues it is legally entitled to.



Senator Donna Mercado Kim, Chair
Senator Shan Tsutsui, Vice Chair
Committee on Ways and Means
State Capitol, Honolulu, Hawaii 96813

HEARING Wednesday, February 24, 2010
 10:05 am
 Conference Room 211

RE: SB2405, SD1, Relating to Taxation

Chair Kim, Vice Chair Tsutsui, and Members of the Committee:

Retail Merchants of Hawaii (RMH) is a not-for-profit trade organization representing about 200 members and over 2,000 storefronts, and is committed to supporting the retail industry and business in general in Hawaii.

RMH supports SB2405, SD1, which adopts amendments to Hawaii's tax laws to implement Streamlined Sales and Use Tax Agreement.

Through our affiliation with the National Retail Federation, the world's largest retail trade association, and a major participant in the Streamlined Sales Tax Project, RMH has watched the development and progress of this program over the past eight years and has supported Hawaii's initiatives to participate in the multi-state discussions. As electronic commerce increased dramatically in recent years, traditional brick and mortar retailers, which are required by law to collect taxes for government, have experienced an erosion of their sales base to remote sellers, which, under most circumstances, are not subject to tax mandates. The Streamlined Sales and Use Tax Project will level the playing field.

Retailers nationally are encouraged that current initiatives in Congress hold greater promise to ameliorate this unfair situation, and there is consensus that federal legislation will be enacted soon. SB2405 makes the necessary amendments to Hawaii tax laws to facilitate our compliance.

We respectfully request that you pass SB2405, SD1. Thank you for your consideration and for the opportunity to comment on this measure.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Carol Pregill'.

Carol Pregill, President

TAXBILLSERVICE

126 Queen Street, Suite 304

TAX FOUNDATION OF HAWAII

Honolulu, Hawaii 96813 Tel. 536-4587

SUBJECT: MISCELLANEOUS, Streamlined sales and use tax

BILL NUMBER: SB 2405, SD-1

INTRODUCED BY: Senate Committee on Economic Development & Technology

BRIEF SUMMARY: Adds a new chapter to the law to set out sections of HRS chapter 237 which establish transactions subject to the 0.5% general excise tax rate.

Adds a new chapter to the law to set out sections of HRS chapter 238 which establish transactions subject to the 0.5% use tax rate.

Adds a new chapter to the law to set out sections of HRS chapter 237 which establish transactions subject to the 0.15% general excise tax rate. The measure delineates provisions governing commissioned sellers of insurance to replace reference to agents, general agents, subagents, or solicitors with the term "insurance producers."

Adds several new sections to HRS chapter 237 to establish sourcing rules to determine when a product or service is taxed, including telecommunication services. The measure delineates provisions defining "direct mail" and how the sourcing of direct mail transactions will be ascertained.

Adds a new section to HRS chapter 237 to allow a seller to take a deduction from taxable sales for bad debts.

Adds several sections to HRS chapter 255D to establish provisions relating to the determination of the proper general excise or use tax rates between different tax jurisdictions, rounding on tax computations, amnesty for registered sellers who pay, collect, or remit general excise or use taxes in accordance with the terms of the streamlined sales and use tax agreement, tax rate changes by a county, certified service provider, confidentiality of records, liability for uncollected tax and rate changes, and customer refund procedures.

Amends HRS sections 237-8.6 and 238.2.6 to prohibit a county to conduct an independent audit of sellers registered under the streamlined sales and use tax agreement.

Amends HRS section 237-24.3 to redefine the term "prosthetic device."

Establishes a committee to oversee the department of taxation's implementation, administration, and compliance of the streamlined sales and use tax agreement. The committee shall be administratively attached to the department of taxation. Requires the committee to hold meetings to carry out this act and serve as the state's official delegation to the streamlined sales and use tax agreement governing board when establishing the state's criteria for compliance.

Permits the department of taxation to seek technical assistance with legal professionals that have a background and practice in taxation. Allows the department of taxation to secure services in an expeditious manner as soon as possible without regard to HRS chapter 103D. The legislative reference bureau shall assist the department of taxation or contractor in drafting any legislation.

This act shall take effect when the state becomes a party to the streamlined sales and use tax agreement; provided that: (1) the amendments made to HRS section 237-9 by this act shall not be repealed when that section is reenacted on June 30, 2014, pursuant to section 13(3) of Act 134, SLH 2009; (2) the amendments made to HRS section 237-24 by this act shall not be repealed when that section is reenacted on December 31, 2013, pursuant to section 4, Act 70, SLH 2009; and (3) the amendments made to HRS section 237-24.3 by this act shall not be repealed when that section is reenacted on December 31, 2010, pursuant to section 4, Act 239, SLH 2007, as amended by section 5, Act 196, SLH 2009.

EFFECTIVE DATE: Upon approval as noted in the measure

STAFF COMMENTS: The Streamlined Sales Tax Project's Model Agreement and Act is a project undertaken with other states that is intended to simplify sales and use tax administration as it relates to multiple sales and use tax rates, definitions, and taxing jurisdictions.

Goals of the project include the establishment of a single sales tax rate, uniform definitions of sales and use tax terms, requiring states to administer any sales and use taxes, and a central electronic registration system to allow a seller to register to collect and remit sales and use taxes for all states.

At the national level, there appears to be a number of difficulties in the negotiations and unanimous agreement is far from reality. Before jumping on the band wagon, lawmakers should exercise care as it should be remembered that Hawaii does not have a sales tax as found in other states. To the contrary, the general excise tax, while viewed as a sales tax, is a far cry from the retail sales tax structure found on the mainland.

The 2005 legislature had approved a measure to direct the department of taxation to identify issues that need to be resolved to effectuate the orderly enactment and operation of a streamlined sales and use tax based on the Streamlined Sales Tax Project's Model Agreement and Act. The act also repealed the streamlined sales and use tax advisory committee council which was to consult with the department of taxation on the implementation of the streamlined sales and use tax agreement in Hawaii. When this measure was sent to the governor, the governor vetoed it due to the repeal of the advisory council, unrealistic deadlines in the measure, and concerns of allowing a third party to access confidential tax return information. A special session of the legislature overrode the governor's veto and the measure passed as Act 3 of the Special Session of 2005.

Basically the measure attempts to turn Hawaii's gross receipts tax imposed for the privilege of doing business in Hawaii into a retail sales tax structure with respect to where the tax is imposed. Much of the bill is devoted to separating the wholesale imposition of the tax from the retail and then reworking where the tax is applied otherwise known as "sourcing." The general excise tax, as we know it today, would be radically changed to accommodate the format adopted by the Streamline Sales Tax Project (SSTP).

What is not evident in the measure is that by participating in the consortium known as the SSTP, Hawaii businesses will be required to collect the sales taxes of other states when purchases are made by residents

of that state. The cost of collecting, accounting, and remitting those taxes will add even more overhead costs to operating a business in Hawaii. So why is there such enthusiasm on the part of the legislature to participate in the SSTP? Lawmakers have been promised hundreds of millions of dollars that could be had if the state would just participate in the project. The suggestion came to the 2001-2003 Tax Review Commission on the recommendation of their consultant who was already an advocate of the project.

Of course, no thought was given to how this would affect Hawaii businesses and what additional costs there would be. Given the fact that Hawaii businesses will now have to operate in a different mode insofar as the general excise/SSTP sales tax, will lawmakers compensate businesses for undertaking the collection of other state's retail sales taxes? Indeed, the law being proposed in this measure is a hybrid of the current general excise tax law and a retail sales tax. It retains the two-tiered wholesale/retail system and keeps the tax imposed on services as well as on business-to-business transactions. So the measure attempts to have the best of both worlds - to force other states to collect our general excise tax while retaining the pyramiding features of the general excise tax. This is a major change in the state's largest source of general fund revenues. Care should be taken in making this transition as it could alter not only the past interpretation of the general excise tax, but it may also have a major impact on the revenue producing capacity of the tax.

One of the key issues still under discussion amongst the members who have already signed on is "where" does the sale occur. For a number of the larger states like California, Illinois, and Texas which have much at stake since they are states that manufacture goods shipped to other states, the sourcing rules they adopted use "origin" based rules, that is the tax that is imposed at the place from which the goods are shipped and not where the purchaser takes possession. The proposed bill here is ambiguous, at best, as in some cases being origin based as long as the purchaser takes possession of the goods at the place of the business but provides, on the other hand, for the taxation at the address to which the goods are delivered. It is this destination rule that causes the most problems for businesses as they must now deal with a plethora of rates depending on the number of states from which they receive orders for their goods.

While some states may elect destination, there is no doubt that the larger states will elect origin sourcing as they are probably net exporters of goods. That being the case, Hawaii residents will probably end up paying the Illinois or California sales tax on their purchases from out-of-state vendors and in the long run, the purported windfall will turn into a disaster for Hawaii. Under current law, the use tax would otherwise have been due on those sales and while it has been difficult to enforce and collect on individual sales, more of an effort should be placed on the collection of the use tax where Hawaii already has jurisdiction.

Again, a main area of concern is whether the states can afford the streamlined system itself. Given the promises that have been made and not delivered upon such as the software that is supposed to facilitate the collection and remittance of the various states' sales taxes, to the promise to pay the cost of funding the administrative structure of the governing board, it appears that all of these are promises with no intent to make it happen. As such, it is premature for Hawaii to jump on the throttling locomotive engine that appears to be headed for a brick wall. This proposal needs more discussion in the interim and further clarification as well as a discussion with taxpayers who must carry out the duty of the actual collection.

Curiously, this is what the 2005-2007 Tax Review Commission recommended, that until the member states of the SSTP Agreement come to a definitive conclusion, it is premature for Hawaii to jump on

board. With this latest development, it appears that Hawaii will be a net loser as its residents will end up paying other state's sales taxes.

While the proposed measure attempts to conform Hawaii's general excise and use tax laws to the streamlined sales and use tax agreement, due to its complexity and technical aspects, it is questionable whether members of the legislature are qualified to determine whether this measure will be sufficient to comply with the Streamlined Sales and Use Tax Agreement.

In 2006 a bill that would adopt the streamline sales tax agreement was introduced and nearly passed the legislature but for a small glitch in the closing moments of the session. This, despite the fact that the State Auditor had a consultant assess the revenue potential of participating in the project. Instead of the hundreds of millions of dollars the promoters of the project had promised, the consultant estimated that Hawaii would benefit at the very least by about \$10 million and at the most \$50 million.

At the same time, when the department of taxation was asked what it estimated it would cost the department to implement the project for Hawaii, the price tag was set at \$15 million. Thus, it came as no surprise that when the Tax Review Commission looked at the issue, the decision was a no brainer, Hawaii would stand to gain about \$10 million in revenue, but it would cost the state \$15 million to implement. And that doesn't include the cost to businesses in Hawaii that would be required to collect the sales taxes of other states.

So the Commission's advice to the legislature and administration was to wait. In its recommendation it was noted that "the largest states (by economic size) have failed to sign on to the project, jeopardizing the chances of becoming an effective vehicle for collecting the Use Tax. Until the Project shows greater promise of producing results, it is premature for Hawaii to incur the expense to join it."

In 1992, in *Quill Corp. v. North Dakota*, the U.S. Supreme Court reaffirmed that the power of states to impose taxes on interstate commerce is limited by their geographic border. Although some academics resent this "physical presence rule," it remains the law of the land and is essential to prevent revenue officials from wreaking havoc on national markets by reaching beyond their borders for tax revenues. Since no working alternative to the physical presence rule has been developed, abandoning it would result in states harming themselves by harming the whole.

The SSTP was formed in reaction to *Quill*, though not necessarily to create an alternative to the physical presence rule. The SSTP is a working group of revenue officials and experts with the stated purpose of bringing simplicity and uniformity to sales taxes in the United States. (The governance structure raises some questions of democratic accountability and whether SSTP receives or seeks genuine public input.) Member states must adopt reforms to align their tax code with the SSTP. The hope is that simple and uniform sales tax statutes will allow the collection of interstate sales taxes without placing burdens on interstate commerce.

Simplicity and uniformity are both important goals, but the SSTP has, at best, mixed success in achieving them. There are nearly 8,000 sales taxing jurisdictions in the United States, each with their own bases and rates, and the enormous complexity involved in tracking borders and changes is a huge stumbling block to state efforts to impose tax on online sales.

While the SSTP has made some progress on uniformity (they have succeeded, for instance, in a single

accepted definition of “candy”-something everyone defined differently before), the SSTP appears to be giving up the effort on simplicity. At their New Orleans meeting in July 2008, for instance, the SSTP panel was asked if any effort was being made to reduce the number of sales taxing jurisdictions, and/or to align them with 5-digit zip codes. “No and no,” was the short, but honest answer.

Rather than requiring that states simplify before reaching out beyond their borders to tax out-of-state companies, the SSTP seems content to let states continue the status quo. One panelist noted that far from requiring substantial reforms, “States still get to do 99.9% of what they want to do” under the SSTP agreement. This demonstrates either disingenuousness or how little the SSTP recognizes that many existing sales taxes are in need of substantial reform.

The SSTP already abandoned the notion of taxing like transactions alike when they adopted “destination sourcing” for online sales, but permitted states to adopt “origin sourcing” for intrastate sales. This in effect requires Internet companies to collect sales taxes based on where their customer is located, but allows brick-and-mortar stores to collect sales taxes based on where the store is located. In this way, the SSTP prevents a level playing field between Internet businesses and brick-and-mortar businesses.

Coupled with the SSTP’s non-worry about reducing the number of jurisdictions (they spoke optimistically of providing maps of sales tax jurisdictions, having rejected even aligning jurisdictions with 9-digit zip codes), full implementation of the SSTP, at this time, without serious reforms, could result in a serious and inequitable burden on e-commerce.

Another recent example involves clothing taxes. The SSTP requires that all states have a uniform definition of clothing, and tax all of it (or none of it) at the same rate. Minnesota did so, but then imposed a “separate” fur tax on fur sales. Rather than recognizing this as an end-run around tax uniformity, the SSTP upheld Minnesota’s action.

The SSTP is attempting to persuade Congress to permit SSTP member states to begin collecting sales taxes on online purchases, premised on the belief that the SSTP’s simplification and uniformity mission has been accomplished. **The SSTP has not accomplished its mission.** The SSTP should look again at serious simplification efforts before declaring themselves a success and seeking to expand state taxing power.

States should be willing to adopt uniform definitions worked out by the SSTP so as to reduce transaction costs between state statutes. However, the ability of any state to collect sales tax on online transactions is wholly dependent on the willingness of other states to simplify their laws and adopt uniform definitions as well. It is also dependent on the creation of a working alternative to the physical presence standard that provides certainty and prevents multiple taxation. Neither the wholesale adoption nationwide of uniform sales tax statutes, nor the development of a working alternative that provides the certainty needed for long-term investment, are likely in the foreseeable future.

For these reasons, lawmakers and other states should understand that SSTP membership does not lead to a sudden influx of free tax money. In any event, this money will come from Hawaii residents and should be looked at as a tax increase notwithstanding the existing liability under the use tax laws. The SSTP’s goals are good ones, but their success is mixed at best, and whatever effect it has will not be seen in the short-term.

Last year a similar measure was vetoed by the governor. In her veto message, she stated that the “bill is objectionable because it would abdicate the authority of the state to establish, administer, and change its general excise tax structure; grants amnesty to certain taxpayers, absolving them of the requirement to pay taxes due the state, and treats out-of-state vendors more favorably than in-state vendors.” She further stated that in order to comply with the Streamline Sales and Use Tax Model Agreement and Act (SSUTA), the state and each county would have to establish a single tax rate and once the state participates in the SSUTA, the state must certify to a national governing board that the state’s law complies with the SSUTA and may relinquish control over the state’s ability to determine its own tax revenue collections. The governor also had concerns about the provision of the SSUTA requiring the state to pay out-of-state vendors for collecting Hawaii taxes since the taxes the state would be receiving would be reduced by the collection fee paid to the out-of-state vendor, thereby giving out-of-state vendors an unfair advantage since local businesses are not compensated for collecting and paying required taxes.

The long and short of this measure is that it is nothing more than a tax increase that will probably end up benefitting other states if the majority of states adopt “origin” based sourcing and continuing a tradition of passing the cost to administer and complying with the proposal on to businesses in Hawaii, adding yet another nail in the coffin for businesses in Hawaii. It is certainly a reflection of the lack of understanding of Hawaii’s unique general excise tax and how generous it is in producing revenues for the state and is an effort driven by greed.

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