
Judiciary Committee

SSB 5031

Title: An act relating to actions for damage to real property resulting from construction, alteration, or repair on adjacent property.

Brief Description: Concerning actions for damage to real property resulting from construction, alteration, or repair on adjacent property.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Law & Justice (originally sponsored by Senator Padden).

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Provides that any action for damage to real property resulting from construction, alteration, or repair on adjacent property must be commenced within three years after the property owner first discovered or reasonably should have discovered the damage.

Hearing Date:

Staff: Cece Clynch (786-7195).

Background:

Statutes of Limitation.

The goal or policy behind statutes of limitation is to require claims to be brought when the evidence is still available and while witnesses can still recall the events. There are numerous statutes of limitations. Which applies depends upon the cause of action. For instance, with respect to damage to real property:

- Actions for waste and trespass on real property must be commenced within 3 years.
- Actions for relief for which there is not a specific statute of limitations provided must be commenced within 2 years. Courts have held that this two year limitations period applies to nuisance actions.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Generally, a limitations period begins to run when the cause of action "accrues," which is such time as all elements of the cause of action are susceptible of proof and the injured party has a right to apply to a court for relief. A cause of action may be subject to what is known as the "discovery rule." This rule provides that the limitations period does not begin to run until the plaintiff discovers, or in the exercise of reasonable diligence should have discovered, the facts that give rise to his or her cause of action.

In *Oja v. Washington Park Towers (Oja)*, 89 Wn. 2d 72, 569 P.2d 1141 (1977), the court adopted a different rule with respect to a cause of action for damage to real property arising out of construction on adjacent property, holding that such an action accrues when the adjacent construction is complete, or as soon thereafter as substantial injury is sustained. In that case, construction of a building on adjacent property involved pile driving, which took place in the Fall of 1966 and again from the Fall of 1967 until April of 1968. The building was completed in 1969, and the action by the adjacent property owner - for damages from pile driving - was not brought until March of 1971. A jury verdict was entered against the defendant property owner in which the jury attributed 70 percent of the damage to the pile driving which occurred in 1966 and 30 percent to that which occurred between November 1967 and April 1968.

On appeal, the defendant property owner maintained that the cause of action accrued when the first substantial damage was done in September of 1966, and that all or at least most of the claim for damages was barred. The Supreme Court determined, however, that the damages flowed from the pile driving as a whole and that the cause of action did not accrue until completion of the building in 1969. In so holding, the court said that the adjacent property owner "was entitled to wait until the completion of the construction project before filing a cause of action so that it might determine the full extent of the damages...A different rule would force a plaintiff to seek damages in installments in order to comply with the statute of limitations."

Statute of Repose for Improvements to Real Property.

Actions arising from the construction, alteration, or repair of improvements to real property, as well as actions arising out of a variety of related services such as design and engineering, are subject to the statute of repose. Claims accrue, and the applicable statute of limitations begins to run, only during the period within six years after substantial completion of construction, or during the period within six years after the termination of the services.

Summary of Bill:

Legislative intent is expressed to overrule the *Oja* case which held that claims for damage to real property resulting from construction activities on adjacent property do not accrue until the construction project on the adjacent property is complete.

An action for damage to real property resulting from construction, alteration, or repair on adjacent property must be commenced within three years after the property owner first discovered or reasonably should have discovered the damage. This limitations period applies regardless of whether negligence, strict liability, trespass, or any other cause of action is alleged.

It is further provided that nothing in this new section may be construed as extending the period for bringing a claim beyond the six year statute of repose for improvements to real property.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.