

FINAL BILL REPORT

SSB 6671

C 301 L 06

Synopsis as Enacted

Brief Description: Clarifying the application of taxes to the financial activities of professional employer organizations.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Ways & Means (originally sponsored by Senators Doumit, Delvin, Rasmussen and Parlette).

Senate Committee on Ways & Means
House Committee on Finance

Background: The business and occupation (B&O) tax is imposed on the gross receipts of business activities without any deduction for the costs of doing business. However, a business that acts as an agent for another business is not liable for B&O tax on amounts that merely "pass through" the agent as reimbursement for expenses incurred by the agent on behalf of the agent's client. For example, an attorney might pay court costs on behalf of a client. When the attorney is reimbursed for those costs by the client, the attorney is not liable for B&O tax on the reimbursements. The attorney is only liable for B&O tax on amounts charged as fees for the attorney's services.

Some businesses utilize the services of other firms to provide employee related services, such as human resource management, payroll and employee tax compliance, and employee fringe benefit packages. The firms providing these services charge their clients amounts which include both payments to the employees and fees charged for the employee related services. These firms have been paying B&O tax on the amounts received as fees for the employee services but not on the amounts received for payment to the employees as wages and benefits.

In December 2002, the Washington Supreme Court decided a case that clarified when payments can be treated as a "pass through" and when tax is applied to the entire amount. The decision involved taxes imposed by the City of Tacoma, but the logic of the court's opinion applies equally to state B&O taxes.

Summary: A professional employer organization is a firm providing employee related services to clients where the client's employer rights, duties, and obligations have been allocated between the client and the professional employer organization.

Professional employer organizations pay B&O tax at the 1.5 percent service rate. A deduction is provided from gross income for amounts representing the actual cost of wages and salaries, benefits, workers compensation, payroll taxes, withholding, and other assessments paid on behalf of the client. Cities must provide professional employer organizations the same tax treatment under their B&O taxes.

Professional employer organizations are not liable for sales and use taxes not properly collected on selling activities by their clients.

Clients, and not the professional employer organization, are eligible for various credits, exemptions, and other tax incentives. The client, and not the professional employer organization, is responsible for filing surveys related to tax incentives.

Votes on Final Passage:

Senate 47 1

House 97 1

Effective: July 1, 2006