

WAC 458-29A-500 Leasehold excise tax—Liability. (1) **Introduction.** The event triggering a leasehold excise tax liability is the use by a private person or entity of publicly owned, tax-exempt property or property of a community center which is exempt from property tax.

Where a lessee is also a tax-exempt government entity, the tax will apply against a private sublessee, even though no contractual arrangement exists between the sublessee and the lessor.

(2) **Lessor's responsibility to collect and remit tax.** The lessor is responsible for collecting and remitting the leasehold excise tax from its private lessees. If the lessor collects the leasehold excise tax but fails to remit it to the department, the lessor is liable for the tax.

(a) Where the lessor has attempted to collect the tax, but has received neither contract rent nor leasehold excise tax from the lessee, the department will proceed directly against the lessee for payment of the tax and the lessee shall be solely liable for the tax, provided, the lessor notifies the department in writing when the lessor is unable to collect rent and/or taxes, and the amount of the leasehold excise tax arrearage is \$1000 or greater. If the lessor fails to notify the department, the department may, in its discretion, look to the lessor for payment of the tax.

(b) If, upon examining all of the facts and circumstances, the department determines that the lessor in good faith believed the lessee to be exempt from all or part of the leasehold excise tax, the department will look to the lessor for assistance in collection of the tax due, but will not hold the lessor personally liable for payment of such tax. To satisfy the requirement of "good faith" the lessor must have acted with reasonable diligence and prudence to determine whether the leasehold excise tax was due from the lessee.

(3) The following examples, while not exhaustive, illustrate some of the circumstances in which a lessor may or may not be held liable for the leasehold excise tax. These examples should be used only as a general guide. The status of each situation must be determined after a review of all of the facts and circumstances.

(a) Doug has been newly hired in the accounting department at City Port and is assigned the responsibility for its rental accounts. He is unaware of the leasehold excise tax laws and fails to bill new tenants for the leasehold excise tax. In this situation, City Port does not avoid possible liability for the tax. Accounting errors and lack of knowledge regarding City Port's responsibility to collect and remit the leasehold excise tax do not qualify as reasonable diligence and prudence.

(b) Sybil rents an apartment in a building owned by State University but she is not a student of the University and the building is not used for student housing. She pays \$900 per month in rent. The terms of the lease require her to give at least thirty days' notice of intent to vacate. In the month of March, she fails to pay her rent, and State University serves her with a notice to pay or quit the premises. On April 1, she sends a check to State University for \$2016 (two months' rent, plus leasehold excise tax). The bank does not honor the check, and Sybil abandons the premises in mid-April without notice. When State University discovers that she has left, it timely notifies the department of the unpaid rent and leasehold excise tax. State University has acted with reasonable prudence and diligence and will not be held liable for the unpaid leasehold excise tax. In serving Sybil with a notice to pay or quit when she first defaulted, State Universi-

ty attempted to mitigate the amount of rent and taxes which were unpaid, and it complied with all other requirements regarding its duty to report the arrearages to the department.

(c) Sonata City owns several houses on property which may be used in the future for office buildings, a fire station, or perhaps a park, depending on its future needs. The city leases the houses on six-month terms, mainly to students who attend the local college. Over the past four years that the city has rented the properties, it has not collected leasehold excise tax from the tenants, because city officials believed the property to be exempt since they planned someday to use the property for a public purpose. Following an audit, it is determined that there is no definite plan for destruction of the houses nor any funds allocated for construction of public buildings on the site. Further, the houses were not rented on a month-to-month basis. Therefore, leasehold excise tax is due. Most of the prior tenants have left the area, and there is no convenient way for the city to collect the unpaid leasehold tax. Sonata City is liable for the tax because although its managers did not believe the tax was due, the lack of knowledge regarding the city's responsibility to collect and remit the leasehold excise tax does not qualify as reasonable diligence and prudence. Sonata City had a duty to make a good faith effort to determine its obligations under the applicable leasehold excise tax statutes and rules.

[Statutory Authority: RCW 82.29A.140. WSR 10-18-034, § 458-29A-500, filed 8/25/10, effective 9/25/10; WSR 99-20-053, § 458-29A-500, filed 10/1/99, effective 11/1/99.]