



## **Making the case for a coordinated municipal response to online merchants collecting local sales tax in Alaska**

Alaska Municipal League – September 25, 2019

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**Why now?:** The U.S. Supreme Court in June 2018 changed the rules for collecting sales tax on online orders. It removed a long-standing limitation that had blocked states from requiring all online sellers to comply with their sales tax laws. This, in effect, creates a level playing field for local businesses. The Supreme Court decision was clear: It said allowing states to apply their tax laws to online sellers the same as local merchants is a matter of fairness. The court said past practice enabled online sellers to avoid collecting sales taxes “has come to serve as a judicially created tax shelter for businesses that decide to limit their physical presence and still sell their goods and services to a state’s consumers.”

Across the nation, states are working to comply with the Supreme Court decision, namely by ensuring the streamlined, single-level administration of sales tax collection. While this is straightforward in states with a sales, there are five states that don’t have a broad-based sales tax, and Alaska the only one that has local governments who do. Alaska’s cities and boroughs are at an administrative and enforcement disadvantage. Remote sellers have been clear that until this is addressed, they will not collect the sales taxes required by individual local governments. To the extent that there have been isolated cases of collections, some of those businesses get it wrong, misapplying taxes and exemptions and shortchanging municipalities or overcharging residents. (Note: Amazon’s current remittance is not based on remote sales, or the *Wayfair* case)

**What the Alaska Municipal League is trying to do:** The 165-member Alaska Municipal League, a nonprofit statewide organization, has spent the last year researching options for member local governments, and worked with many members to respond to this opportunity. Together, AML and members have developed an intergovernmental agreement, bylaws for a commission, and a remote sales tax code that local governments with sales tax codes will adopt. AML is developing the structure for centralized sales tax administration for remote merchants (out-of-state online sellers) to register and report their tax collections for distribution to the participating cities and boroughs.

The intergovernmental agreement, or compact, is voluntary, but those local governments that do not sign on are less likely to see remote sellers comply with their individual tax codes. The code that should be adopted by each member is generally consistent with most local governments, with provisions for parity and working toward compliance over time. The important thing to know is that each local government maintains its own tax rate and exemptions. The commission that is established will be delegated taxing authority. The board of directors of the commission will be voted on by members and have responsibility for the governance. The commission will contract with AML to administer the centralized administration, with collection, remittance and reporting that meets the need of each local government. This centralized administrator will include software that maintains a tax variability matrix, able to account for differences between members, and a sales tax boundary map so that remote sellers can comply with municipal boundaries.

**A Timeline:** There is a governance committee comprised of local government finance officers, attorneys and managers, who have drafted all relevant documents. These will need to be reviewed and adopted by any local government that wishes to participate. Adoption means delegating authority to a municipal

official to sign the intergovernmental agreement on behalf of the city or borough, and delegating taxing authority to the Commission. Adoption also means agreeing to the common tax code for remote sales. AML will contract with a software developer and build up a sales tax staff to administer the program.

We envision the governance being established in late November, perhaps at the annual AML conference, with full implementation in January 2020. Adoption will take time for many local governments, and members should deliberate as needed to come to resolution of adoption. The process accommodates joining at any point.

### **What are the benefits of taxing online sales the same as local sales**

The biggest benefit is fairness:

- Fairness in funding public services in the community – the reason each municipality has a sales tax code is to be able to provide essential services for residents.
- Fairness for local merchants – the current system creates an incentive for residents to shop online, which creates additional burdens to brick and mortar stores.
- Fairness so that residents who shop online are charged the correct amount of tax – maintaining the uniqueness of each jurisdiction is important, and remote sellers can't comply with individual government codes without centralization.

“There is little logic in asking consumers who prefer to shop at local businesses to pay more toward funding public services than consumers who shop via their laptops or smartphones,” the independent Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy wrote of tax-free online shopping in a March 2018 report. “Local economies are harmed by this arrangement,” the report said, noting the competitive disadvantage it creates for “businesses that hire local residents, pay local property taxes, and otherwise contribute to the local economy.”

### **The numbers**

Nationwide, e-commerce sales totaled more than \$500 billion in 2018, and the number is growing. Online sales totaled about 14 percent of total U.S. retail sales of \$3.6 trillion last year, according to Commerce Department estimates. The U.S. Government Accountability Office estimates that states lost about \$13 billion from the inability to fully collect taxes on online sales in 2017. The Alaska Municipal League estimates more than \$20 million in annual sales tax receipts could be at stake for those cities and boroughs with a sales tax.

### **National trends**

A growing number of states have amended or are drafting changes to their tax codes to ensure they fairly and fully collect taxes from remote merchants selling goods online, the same as they do with local merchants. More than 20 states have adopted the Streamlined Sales and Use Tax Agreement, a common set of administrative rules and tax definitions to streamline enforcement nationwide.

### **The risks of doing nothing**

The risks are more problems: Confusion for local consumers from erroneously collected sales taxes, further unfair competition that erodes local businesses, and lost municipal revenue as online shopping continues to grow. That is lost revenue Alaska communities cannot afford. At the same time, without centralized administration, the majority of remote sellers will not comply with local tax codes.