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ACT 185 UPDATE – SPECIFIC QUESTIONS ON PROPERTY TAX
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On April 20, 2020, the Association published guidance in Q & A format regarding the changes to the property tax collection process brought about by 2019 Wisconsin Act 185 ("Act 185"). Since that time, the Association and its general counsel, von Briesen & Roper, s.c., have engaged in extensive discussions with our county treasurers to identify, review and discuss several outstanding issues associated with the new law that were not completely addressed in the previous guidance. We offer the guidance below based upon the analysis conducted by the Wisconsin County Treasurers' Association and reviewed by our general counsel.

As indicated in previous guidance, the issues associated with Act 185 implementation are complex and different counties may choose to proceed down different paths. It is imperative that counties work closely with their treasurer, corporation counsel, administration and their municipal partners in implementing Act 185.

Q: What is the step-by-step process to implement a waiver of interest and penalties on tax installment payments due after April 1, 2020?

A: *<u>Step One</u>: County adopts resolution to allow installment payments to be deferred interest/penalty free until October 1, 2020. This automatically alters the August settlement from full settlement to a settlement of only those taxes paid on or before July 31, 2020, unless the county chooses to fully settle on August 20 as set forth in Wis. Stat. § 74.29.*

<u>Step Two</u>: Municipality adopts a similar (mirrored) resolution. This provides that all remaining installment payments are now interest free until October 1, 2020.

- *A county may have one, none or some municipalities that adopt such a resolution.*

<u>Step Three</u>: If Step One and Step Two occur then:

- *Interest and penalty calculation begins as of October 1, 2020, at a rate of 1% per month by statute (penalty) and potentially up to 0.5% (penalty) if the county has previously adopted the appropriate penalty ordinance.*

<u>Step Four</u>: Any parcel for which taxes remain unpaid at the close of business on August 31 is included in the tax certificate issued under Wis. Stat. § 74.57. <u>Act 185 did not alter the tax certificate process or qualifications.</u> Counties are encouraged to consider providing notice to property owners of the tax certificate process, and to otherwise review the timelines associated with the tax certificate process, to avoid confusion when the certificate issues and notice is provided to the property owners. The Association and Treasurers' Association are working on the content of the notice and plan to distribute further information in this regard shortly.

Q: What about delinquent installments that were due before April 1 or are otherwise due before a county and municipality adopt the required resolutions?

A: *If the property is already delinquent in installments due prior to April 1, Act 185 has no impact. Act 185's authorization to waive interest and penalties only applies to installments due after April 1 for both real and personal property installment payments. Act 185 does not provide retroactive relief related to an installment due date and both the county and municipal resolutions must be in place before the installment due date for the property taxpayer to qualify for the waiver.*

By way of example, several municipalities have an installment due date of May 31, 2020, which is fast approaching. If the county adopts the authorizing resolution on May 28, but the municipality does not adopt the corresponding resolution until June 5, any payments not made by May 31 are considered delinquent and the property taxpayer will be charged interest and penalty (as applicable) retroactive to February 1, 2020.

To avoid these timing issues, we strongly encourage counties and municipalities to coordinate their resolution adoption timetables such that the resolutions are both adopted long before the due date for the next installment payment.

Q: What happens if a municipality or group of municipalities in a county all adopt a resolution authorizing the Act 185 waiver, but the county fails to adopt a resolution?

A: *Nothing – the statutory process for assessment of interest and penalties, collection and settlement will be the same in 2020 as it was in 2019. A county authorizing resolution is required and serves as an absolute prerequisite to the waiver being granted. Neither a county treasurer nor any other county officer is able to authorize the waiver – it must be authorized through county board resolution.*

Q: If a property taxpayer receives a waiver to October 1, to make payment but fails to make the October 1 payment when due, are interest and penalties calculated from February 1?

A: *No. Assuming both county and municipality have authorized the waiver and the waiver is granted, property taxpayers in that municipality have until October 1 to pay any installment due after the date of the resolutions. Act 185 specifically provides: "Interest and penalties shall accrue from October 1, 2020, for any property taxes payable in 2020 that are delinquent after October 1, 2020." The interest and penalties calculation will never reach back to February 1 for qualifying installment payments that become delinquent after October 1.*

By way of example, suppose Calumet County adopts the appropriate authorizing resolution on May 11 and the Village of Harrison (January and July installment (standard) municipality) adopts the similar resolution on May 12. Property taxpayer Crash Davis has paid the January 31 installment of $500 by January 31, but chooses not to pay the $500 installment due on July 31. Crash can pay Calumet County $500 as payment in full as long as the County receives the money by October 1. If Crash does not pay in full by October 1, the amount Crash owes as of October 2 is $507.50 (1% statutory interest of $5 *plus the 0.5% County penalty of $2.50). The amounts owed by Crash do not include interest and penalties retroactive to February 1.*

If, however, Crash did not make the required January installment payment and thereafter makes no further payments until October 1, Crash owes interest and penalties on the full amount retroactive to February 1 (nine months). In other words, the current process of calculating interest and penalties is unchanged because Crash missed a required installment before April 1 or the effective date of the authorizing resolutions.

It should also be noted that Act 185 did not alter the statutory grace period associated with the receipt of tax payments – the grace period remains in effect for payments now due on October 1.

Q: What is the process for municipalities that have adopted a multiple (three or more) installment system?

A: *As indicated above, the county in which the municipality is located must first enact a resolution authorizing a municipality to adopt a similar waiver resolution. If both resolutions are effective before the due date of an installment, any payments received by the municipality from April 1 to July 31 are interest and penalty free. Likewise, delinquent installment payments received by the county on August 1 and after will be interest and penalty free until October 1, at which point interest and penalties assessed.*

It is important to note that the collection process in multiple installment municipalities is not changed under Act 185. Until July 31, the municipality collects installment payments. Consistent with current practice, installments remaining delinquent after August 1 (including grace period), are turned over to the county for collection without regard to the original due date for the installments.

By way of example, suppose Calumet County adopts the appropriate authorizing resolution on May 11 and the City of Appleton (4 installment payments) adopts the similar resolution on May 12. Property taxpayer Crash Davis chooses not to pay the $500 tax bill on his property due on May 31 and the $500 tax bill due on his property on July 31. Crash can pay Calumet County $1,000 as payment in full as long as the County receives the money by October 1. If Crash does not pay in full by October 1, the amount Crash owes as of October 2 is $1,015 (1% statutory interest of $10 plus the 0.5% County penalty of $5). The amounts owed by Crash do not include interest and penalties retroactive to February 1.

It is clear that the software programs supporting these calculations will need to be modified. It is the Association's understanding that the providers are aware of the need for changes and have indicated a desire and willingness to support the changes. If your county encounters software issues that cannot be resolved by your provider, please contact the Association or the Treasurers' Association.

Q: What happens with installment payments that are already delinquent prior to April 1 or the effective date of the county and municipal resolutions?

A: *The delinquencies remain. Act 185 did not erase existing delinquencies. Several counties have inquired about the ability to apply the Act 185 enabling resolutions retroactively to installments that were due after April 1 but before the effective date of the resolutions. Counties are encouraged to consult with corporation counsel and their municipal counterparts before giving a resolution retroactive effect as there are legal and practical consequences.*

Q: If the settlement process changes because a county adopts the Act 185 authorizing resolution, doesn't this create a cash flow issue for the county and potentially other taxing jurisdictions?

A: *Yes. With the adoption of the authorizing resolution, a county is not required to settle in full on August 20. Instead, the county settles with the underlying taxing jurisdiction only with those tax proceeds that have been collected on or before July 31. The full settlement is not required to occur until September 20.*

Even though a county receives a one-month reprieve from the full settlement obligation, there is still an 11-day gap between the date of full settlement and the tax due date. This is likely to create a short-term cash flow issue for the county. Likewise, several of the underlying taxing jurisdictions (primarily school districts) count on the August 20 full settlement for their own budgetary and cash flow purposes. Given these challenges, counties are strongly encouraged to work with their taxing jurisdictions to understand the respective cash flow challenges and determine how to conduct the settlement process. There is nothing in Act 185 prohibiting full settlement on August 20 even if a county adopts the authorizing resolution, but as noted above, this may simply exacerbate the existing cash flow issue for the county.

The Association is actively discussing these challenges with finance professionals and the state. Further information surrounding potential solutions to the problems will be coming.

Q: Where can I find additional information regarding Act 185 and the changes in the property tax collection process?

A: *The Treasurers' Association has compiled information previously discussed and distributed to its members. To access the information, please contact the Treasurers' Association's President, Val Etzel, at (262) 741-4321 or Legislative Chair, Mike Schlaak at (920) 849-1457.*

The Association has previously published guidance on Act 185 that can be accessed on the Association's COVID-19 website at covid19.wicounties.org. Please also feel free to call Kyle Christianson or Chelsea Fibert at the Association for further assistance at (608) 663-7188. Finally, you may also contact Attorney Andy Phillips, the Association's general counsel, by email at aphillips@vonbriesen.com.