



January 11, 2018

Hon. Xavier Becerra
Attorney General
1300 I Street, 17th Floor
Sacramento, California 95814

Attention: Ms. Ashley Johansson
Initiative Coordinator

Dear Attorney General Becerra:

Pursuant to Elections Code Section 9005, we have reviewed the proposed constitutional initiative concerning local government taxes and fees (A.G. File No. 17-0051, Amendment No. 1).

BACKGROUND

Local Taxes and Fees. The largest local government tax is the property tax, followed by local sales taxes, utility taxes, hotel taxes, and other taxes. In addition to these taxes, local governments levy a variety of fees and other charges. Examples include parking meter fees, building permit fees, regulatory fees, and judicial fines and penalties.

Vote Threshold for Changing Local Taxes and Fees. In order to increase taxes, the State Constitution generally requires that local governments secure a two-thirds vote of their governing body—for example, a city council or county board of supervisors—as well as approval of the electorate in that local jurisdiction. “General taxes”—that is, taxes levied by cities and counties for any purpose—may be approved by a majority vote of the electorate. On the other hand, “special taxes”—that is, any taxes levied by schools or special districts or taxes levied by cities and counties for specified purposes—require a two-thirds vote of the electorate. Citizen initiatives that increase taxes must secure the same vote of the electorate—majority vote for general taxes and two-thirds vote for special taxes—as those placed on the ballot by local governing bodies.

Fee increases, on the other hand, generally may be approved by a majority vote of the local governing body and do not require voter approval. (Exceptions include certain property-related fees which require voter approval.) Citizen initiatives changing fees must be approved by a majority vote of the electorate.

PROPOSAL

This measure amends the State Constitution to change the rules for how local governments can impose taxes, fees, and other charges.

Taxes

Expands Definition of Tax. The measure amends the State Constitution to expand the definition of taxes to include some charges that local governments currently treat as nontax levies. As a result, the measure would increase the number of revenue proposals subject to the higher local vote requirements for taxes. Specifically, regulatory fees and fees charged for a government service or product would have to more closely approximate the payer's actual costs in order to remain fees. Certain charges retained by or payable to nongovernmental entities would also be considered taxes under the measure. In addition, certain charges imposed for a benefit or privilege granted the payer but not granted to those not charged would no longer be considered fees.

Increases Vote Thresholds for Some Local Taxes. The measure increases the vote thresholds for increasing some local taxes. Specifically, the measure requires that increases in local general taxes be approved by a two-thirds vote of the electorate whether sought by local governments or by citizen initiative. Any local government tax approved between January 1, 2018 and the effective date of this measure would be nullified unless it complies with the measure's new vote threshold and other rules described below.

Allowable Uses of Revenues Must Be Specified in Certain Cases. The measure requires local tax measures to include a statement of how the revenues can be spent. If the revenue is to be used for general purposes, the law must state that the revenue can be used for "unrestricted general revenue purposes." The measure also requires that a statement of allowable uses be included in the ballot question presented to voters. Any change to the statement of allowable uses of revenue would have to be passed by (1) a two-thirds vote of the local governing body and two-thirds vote of the electorate in the case of local government taxes or (2) a two-thirds vote of the electorate in the case of local citizen initiative taxes.

Local Government Fees

Increases Vote Thresholds for Certain Local Government Fees. The measure requires that increased fees and other charges be approved by either a two-thirds vote of a local governing body in the case of local government fees or a two-thirds vote of the electorate in the case of local citizen initiative fees. The measure also provides that fees and other charges levied by a local governing body may be overturned via referenda. (The measure would not change vote thresholds and rules for developer fees and property assessments imposed on parcels.)

FISCAL EFFECTS

Reduced Local Government Tax and Fee Revenue. By expanding the definition of taxes and increasing vote thresholds for certain taxes and fees, the measure makes it harder for local governments and initiative proponents to increase local revenues. The amount of reduced local government revenues would depend on various factors, including the extent to which local

governments would substitute developer fees and other majority-vote revenue sources for the revenue sources subject to a higher vote threshold under the measure. Roughly half of recently enacted sales, business, hotel, and utility general tax measures would have failed if the measure's increased vote threshold requirements were in effect, suggesting that the reduction in local tax revenue could be substantial.

Summary of Fiscal Effects

- Potentially substantial decrease in annual local revenues, depending upon future actions of local governing bodies, voters, and the courts.

Sincerely,

Mac Taylor
Legislative Analyst

Michael Cohen
Director of Finance