

Legal Q&A

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Editor's note: This is an abridged version of a more comprehensive Q&A on Senate Bill 2. The unabridged version can be accessed here: https://www.tml.org/DocumentCenter/View/1485/sb-2-qa_update_jan-2020.

Senate Bill 2, also known as the Texas Property Tax Reform and Transparency Act of 2019, was passed by the Texas Legislature in 2019. At its most fundamental level, S.B. 2 reforms the system of property taxation in three primary ways: (1) lowering the tax rate a taxing unit can adopt without voter approval and requiring a mandatory election to go above the lowered rate; (2) making numerous changes to the procedure by which a city adopts a tax rate; and (3) making several changes to the property tax appraisal process.

What tax terminology was changed by S.B. 2?

Prior to S.B. 2, the term “effective tax rate” referred to the benchmark tax rate needed to raise the same amount of maintenance and operations property taxes on existing property as the previous year, after taking into account changes in appraised values. S.B. 2 changed the terms “effective tax rate” and “effective maintenance and operations tax rate” to “no-new-revenue tax rate” and “no-new-revenue maintenance and operations tax rate,” respectively.

Additionally, the term “rollback tax rate” was changed to “voter-approval tax rate.” More significant than the change in terminology is the modification to both the voter-approval rate formula (discussed in the next question), and the requirement that cities hold automatic elections to approve tax rates exceeding the voter-approval tax rate.

How does S.B. 2 modify the calculation of a city's rollback tax rate?

Under pre-S.B. 2 law, a city's rollback rate was the rate necessary to raise precisely eight percent more maintenance and operations tax revenue as the year before after taking into account appraisal fluctuations. The debt service component of the tax rate was then added to the product of the effective maintenance and operations rate and 1.08.

In addition to changing the terminology from “rollback rate” “to “voter-approval rate,” S.B. 2 lowers the multiplier used in the rate calculation from 8 percent to 3.5 percent for cities that aren't considered to be “special taxing units,” which is nearly every Texas city. To illustrate, the old calculation of a city's rollback rate was as follows:

Rollback Rate = (Effective Maintenance and Operations Rate x 1.08) + current debt service tax rate

Under S.B. 2, that calculation now looks like this:

Voter-Approval Rate = (No-New-Revenue Maintenance and Operations Rate x 1.035) + current debt service tax rate

TEX. TAX CODE § 26.04(c).

There are some other adjustments as well. Most notably, under the new formula a city adds its “unused increment rate” to the 3.5 percent limit on maintenance and operations increases. Unused increment is discussed in greater detail below.

Does S.B. 2 modify the procedure for approval of a tax rate that exceeds the voter-approval rate?

Yes. Previously, any rate adopted that exceeded the 8 percent rollback rate triggered the ability of citizens to petition to hold an election to “roll back” the tax rate to the rollback rate. Generally speaking, S.B. 2 requires a city to hold an automatic election (i.e., the bill eliminates the petition requirement) on the November uniform election date if it adopts a rate exceeding the 3.5 percent voter-approval rate. *See* TEX. TAX CODE § 26.07. That said, some cities under 30,000 population are not subject to the automatic election requirement associated with adopting a rate exceeding the new voter-approval rate.

What is the unused increment rate?

Included within the voter-approval rate calculation in S.B. 2 is a new term called the “unused increment rate.” The unused increment rate can be used to increase the voter-approval rate, depending upon the tax rates adopted by the city in the previous three years.

In essence, the “unused increment rate” is the three-year rolling sum of the difference between the adopted tax rate and voter-approval rate. Put differently, the city has the ability to “bank” any unused amounts below the voter-approval rate to use for up to three years. Conversely, if the city adopts the voter-approval rate all years between 2020 and 2022, the unused increment rate would be zero. Under no circumstance can the unused increment rate be less than zero. *See* TEX. TAX CODE § 26.013(b)(1).

The legislature’s stated goal in relation to the unused increment rate is to discourage taxing units from adopting a rate equal to the 3.5 percent voter-approval rate every year. Under the new framework, a city that experiences exceptional growth in sales tax revenues in a year, for instance, may be able to adopt a rate less than the 3.5 percent voter-approval rate and bank the difference for a future year when sales taxes perform worse than expected. On the other hand, many cities will be forced to go up to the 3.5 voter-approval rate every year just to keep up with rising costs. For those cities, the unused increment rate will be a non-factor.

S.B. 2 provides that, for each tax year before the 2020 tax year, the difference between the taxing unit's voter-approval tax rate and actual tax rate is considered to be zero. *Id.* § 26.013(c). This means that any difference between the 2019 rollback rate and adopted rate cannot be used to increase the unused increment rate in the three subsequent tax years.

What is the de minimis rate?

The de minimis rate is a new tax rate calculation added by S.B. 2 that is designed to give smaller taxing units, including cities, some relief from the 3.5 percent voter-approval tax rate.

The de minimis rate is defined as the sum of:

1. a taxing unit's no-new-revenue maintenance and operations rate;
2. the rate that, when applied to a taxing unit's current total value, will impose an amount of taxes equal to \$500,000; and
3. a taxing unit's current debt rate.

TEX. TAX CODE § 26.012(8-a).

In a nutshell, the de minimis rate was added to S.B. 2 to allow smaller cities some flexibility to adopt a tax rate that generates \$500,000 more in property tax revenue than the previous year. The thinking was that applying a 3.5 percent voter-approval rate in some very small communities would unnecessarily restrict revenue growth to sometimes just a nominal amount, and the application of the lowered voter-approval rate created an unfair result for small towns.

Are all cities required to calculate and use the de minimis rate?

No. The provisions of S.B. 2 relating to the de minimis rate apply only to a city with a population of less than 30,000. *See* TEX. TAX CODE §§ 26.063 and 26.075. A city with a population of less than 30,000 must calculate a de minimis rate. Cities with populations of 30,000 or more do not calculate the de minimis rate or receive any of the fiscal flexibility associated with the de minimis rate.

How does the de minimis rate work?

If the city with a population of less than 30,000 adopts a tax rate that exceeds the greater of the city's voter-approval tax rate or the de minimis tax rate, the city council must order an election to approve the adopted tax rate for the November uniform election date. TEX. TAX CODE § 26.07(b).

But what if a city with a population of less than 30,000 adopts a tax rate that exceeds the voter-approval rate but not the de minimis rate? It is possible, depending on the facts, that the voters would be required to petition for a tax approval election instead of the city being required to hold an automatic election.

A city's voters are required to submit a petition to hold a tax approval election if:

1. the city's de minimis rate exceeds the voter-approval rate; and
2. the city's adopted rate is: (a) equal to or lower than the de minimis rate; and (b) greater than the greater of the city's voter-approval tax rate (a 3.5 percent rate plus the unused increment rate) or the voter-approval tax rate calculated as if the city were a special taxing unit (an 8 percent rate).

Id. § 26.075.

If the adopted rate is less than either the voter-approval tax rate or voter-approval tax rate for a special taxing unit (an 8 percent rate), the city is not subject to the petition requirements. Essentially, one of these smaller cities that has a de minimis rate that exceeds the 3.5 percent voter-approval tax rate can adopt a rate all the way up to the de minimis rate without an automatic election in November. However, under the bill, an 8 percent voter-approval rate (similar to pre-S.B. 2 law) still applies to them in a limited way. If the city's adopted rate exceeds an 8 percent voter-approval rate (but is lower than the de minimis rate), the city is subject to a petition from the voters to conduct a voter-approval election.

Does a city get any relief from the lowered voter-approval rate during a disaster?

Yes, in two different ways. First, a city council may direct the designated officer or employee to calculate the voter-approval tax rate in the manner provided for a special taxing unit (8 percent) if any part of the city is located in an area declared a disaster area during the current tax year by the governor or by the president of the United States. TEX. TAX CODE § 26.04(c-1). The designated officer or employee shall continue calculating the voter-approval tax rate using 8 percent instead of 3.5 percent until the earlier of:

1. the second tax year in which the total taxable value of property in the city exceeds the total taxable value of property taxable by the city on January 1 of the tax year in which the disaster occurred; or
2. the third tax year after the tax year in which the disaster occurred.

Id.

The other S.B. 2 provision pertaining to disasters gives cities the ability to avoid an automatic tax rate approval election following certain disasters. When an increased expenditure of money by a city is necessary to respond to a disaster, including a tornado, hurricane, flood, wildfire, or other calamity, but not including a drought, that impacted the city and the governor has declared any part of the city as a disaster area, an election (petitioned or automatic) is not required to approve the tax rate adopted by the governing body for the year following the year in which the disaster occurs. *Id.* § 26.07(b).

When must the tax rate be adopted?

While the Tax Code still requires a city to adopt its tax rate before the later of September 30th or the 60th day after the certified appraisal roll is received by the city, S.B. 2 moves up the date on which a city must adopt a tax rate that exceeds the voter-approval tax rate. TEX. TAX CODE § 26.05(a). If a city adopts a rate exceeding the voter-approval tax rate, it must do so not later than the 71st day before the November uniform election date, which is the first Tuesday following the first Monday in November. *Id.*; *See also* TEX. ELEC. CODE § 41.001(a)(3).

Because S.B. 2 is designed to have cities' automatic tax rate approval elections held on the November uniform election date, the legislature deemed it necessary to require cities to adopt their tax rates earlier to provide ample time to order the election. Indeed, S.B. 2 requires the city council to order the tax rate approval election not later than the 71st day before the date of the election. TEX. TAX CODE § 26.07(c). The 71st day will change every year depending upon when the November election date occurs, but generally it will occur in mid-to-late August.

Using the 71st day before election day as the deadline to order the election in S.B. 2 appears to be a drafting mistake by the legislature. The Election Code provides that, for an election held on a uniform election date, the election shall be ordered not later than the 78th day before election day. TEX. ELEC. CODE § 3.005(c). Further, the Election Code provides that the 78-day deadline supersedes any law outside the Election Code to the extent of any conflict. *Id.* § 3.005(b). Because the 78th day deadline for ordering the election expressly prevails over the 71st day deadline in S.B. 2, a city must order its election by no later than the 78th day before the November uniform election date. Even though the election must be ordered by the 78th day before the election, theoretically a city could push off the adoption of a tax rate exceeding the voter-approval tax rate until the 71st day before the election as provided by S.B. 2.

Interestingly, this expedited tax rate adoption calendar applies to a city under 30,000 that adopts a tax rate that exceeds the voter-approval rate, even if the city's adopted rate does not exceed the de minimis tax rate. *See* TEX. TAX CODE § 26.05(a). If *any* city adopts a tax rate that exceeds the voter-approval rate, it must do so by the 71st day before the November uniform election date.

Because state law provides that a city may levy taxes only in accordance with the budget, a city must adopt its budget before it adopts its tax rate, regardless of the deadline to do so. *See* TEX. LOC. GOV'T CODE § 102.009(a). If a city adopts a tax rate in August that exceeds the voter-approval tax rate, it must adopt its budget before doing so.

What is the property tax database?

S.B. 2 requires the chief appraiser of each appraisal district to create and maintain a property tax database that: (1) contains information that is provided by taxing units located in the appraisal district; (2) is continuously updated as preliminary and revised data becomes available and is provided by the designated officers or employees of taxing units; (3) is accessible to the public; and (4) is searchable by property address and owner. TEX. TAX CODE § 26.17(a).

The property tax database is required to include various types of information with respect to each property listed on the appraisal roll for the appraisal district. A city's designated officer or employee is required to electronically incorporate the following information into the database as the information becomes available:

1. the no-new-revenue tax rate and the voter-approval tax rate;
2. the proposed tax rate;
3. the date, time, and location of the public hearing, if applicable, on the proposed tax rate;
4. the date, time, and location of the public meeting, if applicable, at which the tax rate will be adopted; and
5. the tax rate calculation forms.

Id. § 26.17(e).

Does S.B. 2 require a city to create a website?

Not quite. S.B. 2 requires every taxing unit to either maintain an internet website or have access to a generally accessible Internet website that may be used for the purposes of posting tax rate and budget information. TEX. TAX CODE § 26.18. A "taxing unit" means any city "that is authorized to impose and is imposing ad valorem taxes on property... ." TEX. TAX CODE § 1.04(12). Thus, any city that has adopted a property tax rate must comply with the website requirements in S.B. 2.

The term "generally accessible Internet website" is not defined in the bill, but presumably refers to Facebook or some other website that is widely accessible and on which the city can post its information.