

**Letter of Findings: 04-20232318**  
**Gross Retail Tax Penalty**  
**For the Years 2019, 2020, 2021**

**NOTICE:** [IC 6-8.1-3-3.5](#) and [IC 4-22-7-7](#) require the publication of this document in the Indiana Register. This document provides the general public with information about the Department's official position concerning a specific set of facts and issues. This document is effective on its date of publication and remains in effect until the date it is superseded or deleted by the publication of another document in the Indiana Register. The "Holding" section of this document is provided for the convenience of the reader and is not part of the analysis contained in this Letter of Findings.

### HOLDING

The Department agreed with Retailer that it provided sufficient evidence and explanation justifying an abatement of a negligence penalty because it acted in a business-like manner, was not willfully neglectful, and exercised ordinary business care in accounting for its sales tax obligations. **ISSUE**

#### **I. Gross Retail Tax - Negligence Penalty.**

**Authority:** [IC 6-8.1-5-1](#); [IC 6-8.1-10-2.1](#); *Indiana Dept. of State Revenue v. Rent- A-Center East, Inc.*, 963 N.E.2d 463 (Ind. 2012); *Wendt LLP v. Indiana Dep't of State Revenue*, 977 N.E.2d 480 (Ind. Tax Ct. 2012); *Scopelite v. Indiana Dep't of Local Gov't Fin.*, 939 N.E.2d 1138 (Ind. Tax Ct. 2010); *Lafayette Square Amoco, Inc. v. Indiana Dept. of State Revenue*, 867 N.E.2d 289 (Ind. Tax Ct. 2007); [45 IAC 15-11-2](#).

Taxpayer asks that the Department abate a ten percent negligence penalty on the grounds that Taxpayer acted reasonably and exercised ordinary business care despite its failure to account for its sales tax responsibilities.

### STATEMENT OF FACTS

Taxpayer is an out-of-state retailer operating stores in Indiana and outside Indiana. The stores sell a broad range of goods to its customers. Taxpayer sells groceries, office supplies, construction materials and the like.

The Indiana Department of Revenue ("Department") conducted an audit review of Taxpayer's sales tax records and business records. In part, that review involved the use of a "statistical sample" in order to determine if Taxpayer had accurately accounted for any use or sales tax transactions conducted during the three years under review.

The audit considered issues such as - but not limited to - "exempt sales," time and material contracts, delivery charges, maintenance contracts, direct mail sales, computer software purchases, and capital asset purchases.

As a result, the Department issued notice of proposed assessment. The assessment included approximately \$295,000 in tax, \$27,000 in interest, and \$29,000 in penalty.

Taxpayer paid the tax, interest, and penalty. Taxpayer disagreed with the \$29,000 penalty charge and now seeks a refund on the grounds that it acted in good faith, exercised due diligence, and its actions were without "willful neglect."

Taxpayer submitted a protest, and a hearing was conducted by telephone in order to allow Taxpayer's representatives an opportunity to explain the basis for its protest. This Letter of Findings results.

#### **I. Gross Retail Tax - Negligence Penalty.**

### DISCUSSION

The issue is whether Taxpayer has met its burden of establishing that the ten-percent *penalty* should not have been assessed and that the Department should now refund that penalty.

The Department here points out that the tax and interest assessments are not at issue. Questions about use tax, maintenance contracts, computer software, and the like are not addressed here because those issues and

questions have come and gone.

As with any assessment of Indiana listed taxes, it is Taxpayer's responsibility here to establish that the proposed assessments of penalty were incorrect. As stated in [IC 6-8.1-5-1\(c\)](#) and Indiana case law, "The notice of proposed assessment is prima facie evidence that the [D]epartment's claim for the unpaid tax is valid, including during an action appealed to the tax court under this chapter. The burden of proving that the proposed assessment is wrong rests with the person against whom the proposed assessment is made." See also *Indiana Dept. of State Revenue v. Rent-A-Center East, Inc.*, 963 N.E.2d 463, 466 (Ind. 2012); *Lafayette Square Amoco, Inc. v. Indiana Dept. of State Revenue*, 867 N.E.2d 289, 292 (Ind. Tax Ct. 2007).

If a taxpayer provides only a poorly developed or non-cogent argument, the Department will treat that argument as having been waived. *Scopelite v. Indiana Dep't of Local Gov't Fin.*, 939 N.E.2d 1138, 1145 (Ind. Tax Ct. 2010); *Wendt LLP v. Indiana Dep't of State Revenue*, 977 N.E.2d 480, 486 n.9 (Ind. Tax Ct. 2012).

Nonetheless, [IC 6-8.1-10-2.1\(d\)](#) states that, "If a person subject to the penalty imposed under this section can show that the failure to . . . pay the full amount of tax shown on the person's return . . . or pay the deficiency determined by the department was due to reasonable cause and not due to willful neglect, the department shall waive the penalty."

Departmental regulation [45 IAC 15-11-2\(b\)](#) defines negligence as "the failure to use such reasonable care, caution, or diligence as would be expected of an ordinary reasonable taxpayer." Negligence is to "be determined on a case by case basis according to the facts and circumstances of each taxpayer." *Id.*

Departmental regulation [45 IAC 15-11-2\(c\)](#) requires that in order to establish "reasonable cause," the taxpayer must demonstrate that it "exercised ordinary business care and prudence in carrying out or failing to carry out a duty giving rise to the penalty imposed. . . ."

Taxpayer points out that it "collected and remitted sales tax on 99.93 percentage of all transactions." As such, the Department failed to account for sales tax on "less than 0.07[percent] of all Indiana transactions." Given the context and significance of that error, Taxpayer believes it acted reasonably and with ordinary business care in accounting for and fulfilling its sales tax obligations. In addition, the Department notes that the assessment was based employing a sample and projection method.

As noted above, [IC 6-8.1-5-1\(c\)](#) requires that Taxpayer establish that the penalty was unwarranted. In this case, the Department and Taxpayer agree that Taxpayer erred in failing to account for 100 percent of its sales tax obligations. However, there is insufficient information to establish that Taxpayer's actions were so egregious as to constitute "willful neglect." There is no evidence that Taxpayer intentionally attempted to underreport sales tax. Based on a "case by case" analysis and after reviewing "the facts and circumstances of [Taxpayer]," the Department agrees that the penalty should be refunded.

## FINDING

Taxpayer's protest is sustained.

December 19, 2023

*Replaces Finding Document at: New*

*Posted: 02/28/2024 by Legislative Services Agency*  
An [html](#) version of this document.