THE EVERYDAY TAX
Sales Taxation in Utah
INTRODUCTION

Since the creation of Utah’s sales tax in 1933, both the state population and the scope of the tax have changed substantially. More changes could be on the way. The run-up to the 2018 Utah Legislative Session was full of discussion about the sales tax, and the 2019 session promises even more discussion on the matter.

The sales tax is paid almost every day by most people who set foot in Utah, residents and visitors alike. It is one of the legs of Utah’s “three-legged stool” of tax revenues, along with property and income taxes. In 1975, it became the largest revenue-generator of the three – and by a substantial margin. However, during the past two decades its importance has diminished.

In 2016, the tax generated $3.4 billion. The majority of these funds go to the state, while the remainder goes to local towns, cities and counties. Due to dedications of other revenues, the state’s sales tax revenues form the backbone of its General Fund, providing 84% of its dollars.

HISTORY OF SALES TAX IN UTAH

The sales tax was first introduced in Utah in 1933, just two years after the introduction of the income tax. These new taxes were meant to offset losses from property taxes due to the Great Depression. Beginning with a rate of 0.75%, the sales tax was initially set to expire after two years. However, the Utah Legislature reconvened that same year to repeal the sunset date and raise the rate to 2.0%. Since the creation of Utah’s sales tax in 1933, both the state population and the scope of the tax have changed substantially. More changes could be on the way. The run-up to the 2018 Utah Legislative Session was full of discussion about the sales tax, and the 2019 session promises even more discussion on the matter.

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KEY FINDINGS OF THIS REPORT

- No taxes can be devised which are not more or less inconvenient and unpleasant. - George Washington, Farewell Address, 1796

- Sales taxes on services are supported by economists and policy analysts across the ideological spectrum.
- Among the nine western continental states that collect sales taxes, Utah has the lowest sales tax burden.
- Beginning in 1975, Utah’s sales tax imposed a larger tax burden than income or property taxes. During the past two decades its importance has diminished.
- Utah had essentially the same real per capita sales tax revenue in 1978 as in 2016 – meaning that, as costs climb, the state is losing purchasing power from this revenue source.
- More than 20% of the state’s sales tax revenues are earmarked – meaning the expenditures lack standard annual legislative oversight, and the government’s flexibility to meet changing needs is constrained.
- Among the nine western continental states that collect sales taxes, Utah has the lowest sales tax burden.
- If Utah broadened the sales tax base to include personal consumption transactions, the state could drop the effective rate to 2.1% (from 6.2% currently) and generate the same amount of revenue.
- Sales taxes on services are supported by economists and policy analysts across the ideological spectrum. However, expanding sales taxes to capture services can face intense pushback from industries to be affected and from citizens who fear the change will result in net tax increases.

THE EVERYDAY TAX | 1 | UTAH FOUNDATION
The sales tax burden – historically higher than income and property taxes – has declined since the 2000s.

Figure 1: Utah’s Sales, Individual Income and Property Tax Burdens (Revenues per $1,000 of Personal Income), 1993-2015

A companion tax was introduced in 1937: the use tax. It is imposed on items purchased out of state but brought into the state for use. The use tax is charged at the same rate as the general sales tax.

The local option sales tax was introduced in 1959, giving cities and counties the ability to levy a 0.5% tax and providing a source of income to local governments beyond property taxes. The Utah Legislature also expanded what was subject to the sales tax. Initially, the sales tax was limited to retail sales, utilities, food and admissions, but in 1959 the legislature expanded it to include repairs of property, short-term accommodations like hotels and laundry services.

In 1975, the Utah Legislature allowed for an increase of the standard local option from 0.5% to 0.75%. That same year, the legislature introduced a dedicated local tax for public transit systems. Since 1975, the state has added 16 local sales taxes in addition to a general local option. Local governments adopting these taxes are responsible for nearly all of the net increase in the real per capita sales tax revenue since 1978.

Differential sales tax rates started in 1977, when the legislature lowered the residential sales tax rate (for natural gas, electricity, etc.) to 1%. Residential fuel still has a differential tax rate, which today is 2%.

One of the most significant sales tax changes occurred in the early 1980s, when the legislature changed the distribution formula. Since the inception of the local sales tax, revenues had been distributed solely on a point-of-sale basis. Accordingly, local sales tax revenues stayed in the town, city or county where they were collected. This created an unfair advantage to certain communities, particularly in the view of predominantly residential communities with limited retail activity. In 1983, the Utah Legislature passed a law to share a portion of the local sales tax revenue statewide according to population, helping to support the coffers in communities with low retail activity.

The other big change, which remains controversial, was the introduction of the reduced tax rate on non-prepared food purchases. The legislature lowered the state sales tax rate for non-prepared food to 2.75% in 2007 and to 1.75% a year later. While non-prepared food was exempted from many of the local taxes, the general county and local options continued to apply to non-prepared foods, leading to a current combined state and local rate of 3%. The change remains a topic of debate among legislators. Discussions range from eliminating the tax on food entirely to reinstating the full rate.

Even as sales tax rates have generally trended upward, real per capita revenue from the tax has fluctuated.

Figure 2: A Timeline of Sales Tax Rates, Real per capita Revenues and Notable Changes

Source: U.S. Census, Bureau of Economic Analysis.
STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE SALES TAX

The sales, income and property taxes together make up the “three-legged stool” of Utah tax revenues. Each has comparative strengths that help counterbalance the weaknesses of the others. For example, the instability of the sales tax can be offset by the stability of the property tax; and the regressivity in the sales tax can be offset through progressivity in the income tax.

Among the strengths of the sales tax:

- It is paid in small portions, making it financially manageable for taxpayers. Compare that to lump sum payments in the thousands of dollars taxpayers can face if their property taxes are not collected by their mortgage holder or if they miscalculate their income tax withholdings.  
- The sales tax is collected by businesses, reducing the regulatory burden on taxpayers and easing the administration of the tax. There are more than 63,000 businesses in Utah, and not all of them collect sales tax.  
- Payment of the sales tax by consumers is straightforward and easy to understand. 
- The tax is considered fair from a certain point of view because everyone pays the same amount on the same transaction. 
- To a degree, consumers can control the amount of sales tax they pay by controlling their spending. 
- To some extent, the sales tax reflects an individual’s ability to pay the tax. Their level of consumption provides a reasonable index of economic ability to carry the cost of government services. 
- Sales tax revenues are generated not only by residents of a jurisdiction, but also visitors and commuters who benefit from the services and infrastructure provided by that jurisdiction. This can be particularly beneficial for jurisdictions with significant tourism. 

There are also drawbacks to the sales tax, which include:

- The sales tax is regressive. Low-income individuals will spend more of their income on consumption and less on sales-tax-free saving when compared to higher income individuals. 
- This regressivity is even worse when the predominant consumption taxed pertains to goods, since lower-income households spend a larger share of their income on goods than services when compared to higher-income households. 
- The sales tax is not transparent; because it is collected in small portions on a daily basis, few individuals understand how much they pay in sales taxes overall. 
- Large purchases, which are often a substantial component of the sales tax, are subject to economic cycles. As a result, sales tax revenues will often fall or stagnate during economic downturns.

WHAT IS TAXED – AND AT WHAT RATE?

Sales taxes and sales tax rates vary by local jurisdiction, as authorized by the Utah Legislature. Moab has the highest total sales tax rate, at 8.6%, while 38 cities and towns are tied for the lowest total tax rate, at 5.95%. Based on revenues and the imputed tax base, the average effective sales tax rate in Utah is 6.2%. Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of tax rates among municipalities.

Sales and use taxes are applied to financial transactions. The Utah Legislature includes the following in the state’s sales tax base:

- Sale, lease or rental of tangible personal property. 
- Repair or renovation of tangible personal property. 
- Residential and commercial use of natural gas, fuels oil, coal, heat, and electricity. 
- Prepared food and unprepared food. 
- Admissions (such as movies, sports, museums, performances and skiing). 
- Hotel and motel accommodations and services (if less than 30 consecutive days). 
- Sale or repair of products transferred electronically (such as downloaded music, movies or software). 
- Certain telecommunication services. 
- Certain cleaning services (such as laundry, dry cleaning, pet cleaning). 
- Motor vehicle rentals.  

Most combined tax rates fall between 6.2% and 6.85%.

Figure 3: Tax Distribution of Combined State and Local Tax Rates Among Municipalities, 2018

Source: Utah State Tax Commission.
Rates can vary based on the type of product purchased. Residential fuels are taxed at 2%. Cities and towns can impose up to an additional 6% on electricity and natural gas. Unprepared food is taxed at 3% (1.75% by the state and 1.25% by local entities). Most counties levy an additional 1% tax on food prepared by restaurants.7 Motor vehicles are taxed by the state at 2.5%, and depending on the county, local governments can levy an additional 3% or 7%. Transient rooms are taxed by the state at 0.32%, counties can levy an additional 4.25%, cities and towns can levy an additional 1.5%, and Salt Lake County can levy an additional 0.5%. Cities and towns can levy 3.5% beyond the state rate on telecommunication services, and the state collects 3.3% on prepaid phones and their usage.

Certain transactions are excluded from taxation, including numerous services. Examples of excluded services are health care, legal and accounting, advertising, maintenance, data processing, and many personal services such as landscaping, haircuts, service on real property (such as that provided by electricians or plumbers), storage and personal instruction.9 In addition, Utah grants specific exemptions to items that would otherwise generally fit within the tax base. There are 91 such exemptions. Figures 4 and 5 outline some of these exemptions. Figure 5 (on the next page) details different types of exemptions and examples of the exemption types.13

There are some broad reasons why products might be exempt from the sales tax. Many products are considered input components to more advanced products. In these cases, it is considered economically inefficient to tax business inputs. The primary reason for 48 of the state’s 91 sales tax exemptions is because they are considered business inputs.

Some exemptions are justified as strategic for economic development, such as energy generated from alternative energy sources or airplanes built in Utah. Other items are exempt because it would be difficult and burdensome to collect sales tax on these items. Some examples might be sales of personal property through classified ads or purchases from coin-operated amusement devices.

Many products associated with health care services are exempt for public health purposes, such as prescription drugs and prescribed medical equipment. Other exemptions relate to the perception of a public benefit, such as exemptions for non-profits, non-bottled water, college textbooks or newspapers.15

HOW ARE SALES TAXED?

Utah requires sellers to collect the sales tax on all taxable goods and services. In instances where the seller is not required to collect the tax, the buyer is subject to a use tax for the same amount.

Sales tax rates are based on the seller’s location if selling only taxable goods, or the buyer’s location if the seller sells only taxable services. When sellers sell both taxable goods and services they have the option to choose the location on which to base the rate. If a Utahn purchases a taxable good or service from outside the state or from a remote seller, the applicable sales tax rate is based on the buyer’s location.16

When sellers do not have nexus (generally thought of as a physical presence of stores, merchandise or workers), they are not required to collect sales tax to remit to the state, although they can do so voluntarily. Again, if the sellers do not collect sales tax on taxable goods and services, then the buyer is required to remit the equivalent amount in use taxes.

Sellers are required to keep the taxes they collect in trust, meaning the money cannot be used for any other purposes. Depending on the size of the sales tax
liability, sellers must file taxes annually, quarterly or monthly. Those who file monthly (generally sellers who collect $50,000 or more in sales tax annually) can keep for themselves 1.31% of the sales tax they collect on non-grocery items and of the standard tax rate on grocery items. (See the sidebar for more details.)

WHO PAYS?

Both residents and non-residents pay sales taxes in Utah. In some states with a high volume of tourism, the sales tax is used to shift the tax burden from local residents to non-residents making purchases in the state. Indeed, many jurisdictions in Utah rely on tourism to provide local government revenues. For tourism-heavy communities (those that have transient room capacity that is at least two-thirds the size of the permanent population), the Utah Legislature has authorized a resort community sales tax of 1.1% and has authorized voters to approve an additional 0.05%. As of 2016, 17 communities have adopted some level of tax, bringing in an additional $22 million annually. Park City alone generates $13 million in resort community tax revenue. Moab and Springdale are the only other communities that generate more than $1 million with this tax.17 Moab is one of seven municipalities in the state that collects no municipal property tax.18 This is because they can “export” much of the residents’ tax liability to tourists.

Businesses also pay sales taxes on many items, such as office supplies, personal property and even taxable services. Traditional economic theory would indicate that business’ inputs should not be subject to sales tax because that results in tax stacking – whereby taxes are imposed several times on the same goods or portions of goods.19 In many cases, the state’s sales tax exemptions reflect this philosophy as the Utah Legislature has exempted many types of business inputs from the sales tax. However, when products are broadly used by both businesses and consumers, exemptions become less feasible.

At times, especially for large purchases, consumers cross state lines to reduce their tax liability. With online sales, consumers might choose to purchase from sellers that lack a physical presence in Utah and therefore are not required to collect sales taxes. In both situations, residents are subject to the use tax, which applies to the same transactions as the sales tax and at the same rates. With vehicle purchases, the state has some enforcement mechanisms; for instance, owners are required to pay sales or use tax when first registering their vehicle in Utah. For many other purchases, there is limited compliance with the use tax.

THE CHALLENGE OF CREDIT CARD FEES

High-volume sellers – those collecting $50,000 or more in sales taxes annually – may keep 1.31% of the sales tax they collect. On $50,000 in sales tax, that is $655. This helps defray the cost of collecting taxes. However, most high-volume sellers collect payments through credit cards. Depending on the card, transaction fees can be 1.5% to 2.5% of the total transaction, including the sales tax portion. That means when a local grocery store collects sales taxes and the buyer uses a credit card, the grocery store will pay a transaction fee for the sales tax amount – which may be greater than the 1.31% of the sales tax revenues collected that high-volume sellers may keep. This may result in retailers losing money in transaction fees simply because they are required to collect sales tax.

WHERE DOES SALES TAX REVENUE GO?

In addition to the state sales and use taxes, there are many different county and local sales taxes. They generally are distinguished either by their purpose or the transactions to which they apply. Others are more general. The County Option Sales & Use Tax, for example, is directed at a wide variety of uses, from county jails to parades. Figure 6 lists Utah’s 18 funds that receive sales tax revenue.
State Sales Tax

The statewide sales tax is the primary funding mechanism for the Utah Legislature. The sales tax generated $2.5 billion for the state, $1.9 billion of which went into the Utah General Fund in fiscal 2017. These funds are used for post-secondary education, transportation, health care, corrections and more (see Figure 7). This spending is at the discretion of the Utah Legislature through the appropriations process.

County Sales Taxes

Every county in the state collects a 0.25% sales tax for the counties’ general funds. Counties may also levy additional sales taxes. These optional sales taxes are listed in Figure 8.20

Local Sales Taxes

Every town and city in the state collects a 1% sales tax, providing support to their governments’ funding. There are also additional taxes some cities levy, which are listed in Figure 9.21 (See the next page.)

Sales taxes produce 88% of state general fund revenues. Here’s where general fund revenues go.

Figure 7: Breakdown of All General Fund Expenditures, Fiscal Year 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Governmental service</th>
<th>Allocation</th>
<th>Share of general fund allocation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social services – health</td>
<td>$ 482,061,000</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social services – human services and youth</td>
<td>442,905,000</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education – colleges and universities</td>
<td>317,821,000</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult corrections and Board of Pardons</td>
<td>296,594,000</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courts</td>
<td>129,638,000</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business, economic development and labor</td>
<td>94,737,000</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public safety</td>
<td>92,794,000</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other capital budgets</td>
<td>84,726,000</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education – Utah Education Network</td>
<td>78,800,000</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debt service</td>
<td>68,736,000</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social services – workforce and rehab. services</td>
<td>60,065,000</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elected officials</td>
<td>59,953,000</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural resources and energy development</td>
<td>43,414,000</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture, environmental quality and public lands</td>
<td>29,588,000</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislature</td>
<td>26,376,000</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration and technology services</td>
<td>21,481,000</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education – buildings</td>
<td>20,000,000</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education – applied technology colleges</td>
<td>18,885,000</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heritage &amp; arts</td>
<td>18,525,000</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education – state administration</td>
<td>16,205,000</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Guard &amp; Veterans’ Affairs</td>
<td>11,101,000</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capitol Pres. Board, Dept. of Human Res. and Career Services</td>
<td>5,254,000</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public education – state administration and agencies</td>
<td>4,502,000</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>$ 3,000,000</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Utah Office of the Legislative Fiscal Analyst

County Sales Taxes

Every county in the state collects a 0.25% sales tax for the counties’ general funds. Counties may also levy additional sales taxes. These optional sales taxes are listed in Figure 8.20

Local Sales Taxes

Every town and city in the state collects a 1% sales tax, providing support to their governments’ funding. There are also additional taxes some cities levy, which are listed in Figure 9.21 (See the next page.)

Counties can levy an array of additional sales taxes.

Figure 8: Optional County Taxes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tax Name</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Usage Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public Transit</td>
<td>0.25 or 0.3</td>
<td>80% of taxable sales (countywide in Davis, Salt Lake, Utah, and Weber; 23 other areas in the state)</td>
<td>Public transit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Public Transit/Airport/Highways</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>65% of taxable sales (Davis, Salt Lake, Summit and Weber counties; Brigham City, Perry and Wildard)</td>
<td>Airports, highways and public transit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Transit/Fixed Guideway/Highways</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>15% of taxable sales (Utah County)</td>
<td>Transit and highway funding within Utah County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County Option Transportation</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>59% of taxable sales (Cache, Millard, Salt Lake, Summit, Weber)</td>
<td>Transportation funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Airport, Highway, Public Transit, or Other Transportation Purpose within Counties of Second Class</td>
<td>0.1 or 0.25</td>
<td>15% of taxable sales (Utah County)</td>
<td>Transportation and airport funding within Utah County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County Option Highway or Public Transit</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>21% of taxable sales (Carbon, Davis, Duchesne, Grand, Rich, San Juan, Sanpete, Sevier, Tooele, Weber)</td>
<td>Highway or transit funding within named counties</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>County Botanical, Cultural, Recreational, &amp; Zoological (ZAP tax in Salt Lake)</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>66% of taxable sales (Cache, Salt Lake, Summit, Uintah, Washington, Weber)</td>
<td>Used to fund organizations that provide cultural or scientific benefit to the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Health Care Facilities</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.6% of taxable sales (Daggett, Garfield, Kane, Grand)</td>
<td>Used to fund health care initiatives in rural areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplemental State Sales &amp; Use</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>16% of taxable sales (Davis &amp; Weber counties)</td>
<td>Distributed to public transit within the counties</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Legislative Research and General Counsel.
Cities and towns can levy an array of additional sales taxes. Figure 9: Optional Local Taxes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tax Name</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Usage Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Municipal Highway/Public Transit</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>1% of taxable sales</td>
<td>Highways and transit funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural City Hospital</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.1% of taxable sales (Beaver City)</td>
<td>Used to help fund rural health care initiatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City or Town Botanical, Cultural, Recreational &amp; Zoological / ZAP*</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>15% of taxable sales (30 cities/towns)</td>
<td>Funds organizations providing cultural or scientific benefit to community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resort Community/MIDA*</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>3% of taxable sales (17 cities/towns)</td>
<td>Used to help fund resort communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Resort Community</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.8% of taxable sales</td>
<td>Used to help fund resort communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town Option</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.01% of taxable sales (Snowville)</td>
<td>Used to help fund town initiatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City or Town Option</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>5% of taxable sales (Murray, Naples, South Salt Lake, Rivardale, Vernal)</td>
<td>Used to help fund town and city initiatives</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Military Installation Development Authority.

Source: Legislative Research and General Counsel.

Comparing Utah to Other States

Utah Tax Burden Comparison

There are numerous ways to compare states’ sales tax rates. Often, state comparisons look at the state sales tax rates alone. As of 2017, Utah’s rate of 4.7% was lower than average. It ranked 36th highest in the nation and 7th highest among 11 western states.22 Five states nationally, including two western states, do not collect sales taxes – Alaska, Delaware, Montana, New Hampshire and Oregon. That said, Alaska does allow some of its local governments to impose sales taxes, Montana allows resort communities to collect sales tax, and Delaware levies a gross receipts tax, which is similar in many ways to a sales tax.

When accounting for state and local sales taxes (weighted by population) Utah’s tax rate looks a bit higher. Utah has the 30th highest sales tax rates in the nation and is seventh highest among 11 Western states. Among Utah’s six surrounding states, only Idaho and Wyoming have lower rates.

However, looking at rates alone can obscure the true impact of the tax. Another key component when comparing sales tax is to consider what share of transactions is subject to the tax, as illustrated for Utah in Figure 4. In many states, groceries and clothing are exempt from the sales tax. Most states do not tax professional and personal services, and many states exempt items that are sold business-to-business.

Utah’s sales tax base (or taxable sales) is equivalent to 34% of the personal income generated in the state. The median state has a sales tax base that is equivalent to 35% of the personal income generated in the state. Hawaii is an excellent example of why both the base and the rate must be considered. While Hawaii has the 6th lowest rate in the nation, its sales tax base represents 104% of the personal income in the state. As a result, it has one of the highest sales tax burdens in the nation. Wyoming tells a similar story. While it has the 7th lowest sales tax rate, its sales tax base represents 62% of personal income, which means it also has historically rated in the top 10 states in terms of sales tax burden.

When analyzing the sales tax burden among states, both sales tax rates and the share of transactions applicable to the sales tax are considered. Utah’s sales tax burden is $22.97 for every $1,000 of personal income. That is the 28th highest sales tax burden nationally. But among the 11 continental Western states it is 9th highest; only Montana and Oregon, which lack sales taxes, have a lower tax burden. However, during the 1990s and 2000s, Utah was ranked between 4th and 6th among Western states. It is only since 2013 that Utah’s sales tax burden has fallen to the lowest among the Western states that collect sales tax.23 This shift occurred as Utah’s sales tax burden fell faster than the sales tax burdens of California, Colorado and Idaho.

Comparing the Reach of Utah’s Sales Tax

Given the wide variation in tax codes, compiling data on what is taxable and what is not among 50 states is a difficult task. However, the Federation of Tax Administrators, an association of state principal tax revenue agencies, administered a survey asking states whether businesses paid taxes on a series of services and commonly exempted or excluded goods. The survey does not provide a comprehensive list of all possible services and goods, but it offers some basis for comparison.
The survey asked states about 31 goods and 164 services. Responses separate the states into several categories. The five states with the most taxed transactions levy a gross receipts tax. This type of tax includes nearly all transactions. Some of the few items that escape taxation tend to be water, travel services and fees for financial services.

Utah is 19th highest in the number of goods and services surveyed applicable to items that escape taxation, meaning that the majority of states have more exemptions and exclusions.

The next group are 10 states that tax a majority of the goods and services surveyed. However, they largely have excluded or exempted professional services such as advertising, accountants, architects, attorneys and engineers. They also have exempted or excluded health care services and financial services, but they still tend to tax labor charges for repair as well as entertainment services.

Then next group, consisting of 12 states, is squarely in the middle. They tax fewer than half of the listed goods and services, but still a fair amount. Utah is one of these states. In addition to the exemptions and exclusions in the previous two groups, these states also tend not to tax labor charges on real property and many computing services.

After a noticeable cut off, the next group of 12 states tax only 45 to 56 of the surveyed goods and services. These states tend to add exemptions or exclusions for labor charges on personal property and some entertainment services, although usually not for entertainment that charges an admission fee such as amusement parks, circuses or professional sports.

The last group are those that tax the fewest services. This group includes states that do not have sales tax or a gross receipts tax. Oregon, New Hampshire, Montana, Alaska and eight other states tax fewer than 38 of the surveyed goods and services. All of these states (even those that do not technically have a sales tax) still have some sort of tax on transient lodging such as hotels and motels. Many of these states still tax telecommunication services and the sale or rental of personal property, while exempting or excluding most other transactions. While Alaska and Oregon appear to tax none of the surveyed services, Alaska localities can levy a tax on transient rooms, and Oregon levies a statewide transient room tax, as do several of its local governments.

States clearly take a variety of approaches to taxing services, goods that may seem like a service, or goods that are attached to a service. Utah tends to fall in the middle of the pack when it comes to the array of goods and services surveyed.

SALES TAX ISSUES IN UTAH

As legislative committees have discussed the state’s tax system during the past three years, several topics have received significant attention. These include the regressive nature of the sales tax and options to mitigate this concern. Earmarks have also come up, as their rapid rise during the past 15 years has reduced money that would otherwise be available in the state’s General Fund by 20%.

Not only have earmarks reduced funding flexibility, but taxable transactions as a share of personal consumption have been shrinking. There are two primary drivers of this trend: the increasing number of exemptions and changing consumer expenditure patterns.

Regressivity

Because a larger portion of their income goes toward purchasing necessities such as food and clothing, lower-income households are likely to spend a larger portion of their income on taxable transactions. Higher-income households, on the other hand, are more likely to place income into savings, investments and services not subject to sales tax. For this reason, the sales tax is well-known for being regressive.

Applying the Utah sales tax to the National Consumer Expenditures Survey clearly demonstrates that those in lower income households pay substantially more of their income on taxable services than higher income households do.

Those in the lowest quintile, on average, spend more in taxable transactions than they earn. This is possibly because many individuals in this income category are spending down savings or going into debt. They are also a group whose post-tax income is slightly higher than pre-tax income due to tax credits.

When looking at the share of income spent in taxable transactions among quintiles, the differences are quite stark. The lowest quintile spends 101% of its income in taxable transactions, the second lowest quintile spends over 50% of its income in taxable transactions, while the highest quintile spends less than a quarter of its income in taxable transactions.

However, when comparing the share of households’ expenditures on taxable goods, the difference is much smaller. This difference is likely because lower-income households are more likely to spend their money on goods rather than services compared to higher-income households. If all services and goods were taxed, then this would become at least somewhat more proportional. However, the sales tax system overall would continue to be regressive because individuals in the lowest quintile spend more than twice their income while individuals in the highest quintile spend less than 60% of their income (the rest remains unspent in some form of savings).
To help mitigate the regressive nature of the sales tax, many states reduce or exempt the tax on necessary items such as water, food and clothing. Some states also provide some sort of credit or rebate to low-income households.

Utah exempts water, along with most other states, and Utah is one of six states that has a reduced tax rate for unprepared food; only three states tax unprepared food at the full amount, while 32 states exempt unprepared food completely. Clothing is exempt in a handful of states, and another handful offer sales tax holidays on clothing when families are preparing to send their children back to school.

Some economists consider these exemptions to be inefficient tools for directing support to lower-income households. While few doubt that the sales tax is regressive and that food exemptions can give relief to lower-income households, middle- and higher-income households also benefit from the exemption.

Some states accept the tax as regressive and find ways to offset the sales tax in other ways, such as a progressive income tax structure or income tax credits. Hawaii, Idaho, Kansas and Oklahoma offer rebates or credits for the sales tax paid for necessary items provided solely to lower-income families. In addition, the federal government, 29 states and even some municipalities offer an earned income tax credit. These credits are often designed, in part, to offset the regressive nature of sales tax.

In Utah, the state’s taxpayer income tax credit reduces the tax liability of lower and middle-income households, adding a level of progressivity that offsets the regressive nature of the sales tax.

The Impacts of Earmarks

Most of Utah’s budget is appropriated by the state government each year. However, sometimes the legislature chooses to place a portion of those appropriations in a special class known as earmarks. Earmarks, also known as dedications or set-asides, are essentially auto-pilot appropriations. Earmarked funds proceed directly to designated accounts. Account administrators have various levels of control over those revenues, dependent on the fund. These earmarked revenues are then excluded from the revenues the legislature deliberately appropriates each legislative session.

In 1939, all of the sales tax revenue was dedicated to the Emergency Relief Fund. The fund was largely under the discretion of the governor to mitigate the devastating impact of the Great Depression. When Utah Foundation analyzed the sales tax 13 years later in 1946, it highlighted some interesting impacts of earmarking the sales tax for public aid. Wartime spending in Utah created unprecedented economic growth in the state. As a result, the state saw an unexpected increase in tax revenues, including those from the sales tax. However, those funds were all earmarked for public aid, but the dire need for public aid funds to address the devastation of the Great Depression was no longer there.

At that time, earmarks across revenue sources made up 80% of governmental funds. That means for every $100 collected, only $20 were subjected to legislative oversight – $80 was automatically sent to administrative accounts where unelected government administrators could spend it how they pleased with little or no legislative oversight.

While earmarks help to guarantee stable revenues to meet various needs, there are potential problems with earmarking. First, earmarks may create an “out of sight, out of mind” effect, and agencies receiving earmarks may not have to demonstrate the wise spending of those funds in order to justify their continuing appropriations for the next year.

Second, economic conditions can rapidly change and earmarks tend to make budgets less adaptable. For instance, legislators in 1939 allocated a revenue source that provided $3.5 million. By 1946, that revenue source was generating more than twice as much ($8.4 million), all of which was still dedicated to public aid. This issue can become even more problematic when other needs are left unfunded.

Third, earmarks can become dissociated from their need. For instance, the sales tax was initially linked to meeting the need of public welfare. During the war and post-war years, Utah’s booming economy and rapidly climbing personal income substantially decreased the need for public aid, even while generating more than twice the amount of money originally allotted to meet the need. But because those funds were allotted for that purpose, Utah saw average contributions to public aid recipients double in many instances. This led to Utah Foundation’s conclusion in a 1946 study that “A study of public aid reveals that Utah’s public assistance program is the most liberal among the 48 states, based upon ability to pay as measured by per capita income.”

The share of potential earmarked general fund revenues has increased rapidly during the past 15 years.

Figure 12: Earmarks as a Share of Potential General Fund Revenue, by Fiscal Year

During the past 15 years, earmarks have been consuming a growing portion of sales tax revenues, with most of the funds being dedicated to transportation projects.

In 2015, the Utah Tax Review Commission, which consists of legislators, appointees from the Governor’s Office and citizens, was reorganized after a four-year hiatus. They were tasked with investigating Utah’s sales tax earmarks. In November of the same year, after studying the earmarks for eight months, they recommended to the Revenue and Taxation Interim Committee that nearly all of these earmarks should be repealed.

A DIMINISHING ROLE FOR SALES TAX REVENUES

The base of a tax determines which transactions are taxable. Over the past several decades taxable transactions as a share of personal consumption have been shrinking nationwide. There are two primary ways this occurs. The state can choose to alter the sales tax base by choosing to exclude or exempt additional items, or consumer patterns can change such that a greater share of their consumption goes towards purchases that are exempt or excluded from sales tax.

North Dakota and South Dakota are the only states where the 2015 taxable base as a share of consumer spending was greater than the median rate between 1970 and 2010. Another 16 states have seen a decrease between 3% and 20%, while 27 states have seen a decrease of 20% to 44%. Utah’s tax base was one of the most impacted.

That has had an impact on state funding. Since 1978, Utah’s state real sales tax revenue per capita produced essentially as much as it did in 2016 – meaning that, as costs climb, the state is losing purchasing power from this revenue source. The local sales taxes have continued to grow, but primarily because of rate increases or a wider adoption of local options by local entities.

In contrast to the state’s real sales tax revenue per capita, real consumer expenditures per capita grew by 65% during the same time period.

It is not necessarily a bad thing for real per capita sales tax revenues to remain stable over the long term. Such a measure of revenue accounts for population growth and inflationary costs. However, the two largest programs historically reliant on state sales tax revenues, Medicaid and secondary education, are well known for outpacing inflation.32 As a result, Utah has found ways to deal with the decreased purchasing power of sales tax revenues. One way it has done so is by shifting income tax revenue toward secondary education. Before 1995, the general fund was responsible for nearly all non-tuition secondary education funding. In 2018, among appropriated funds, only 30% of non-tuition secondary education funds came from general fund revenues. See Utah Foundation’s recent report, The Education Tax: Income Taxation in Utah, for further discussion of this change.

There are two primary reasons the state’s real per capita sales tax revenues have remained stable while per capita consumer spending has nearly doubled: an increase in exemptions and changing consumer preferences.

Exemptions

The Utah Legislature has steadily added to the number of products exempted from the state sales tax.

Each exemption chips away at the revenue base. The Utah State Tax Commission has estimated the impact of 69 of the 91 exemptions is nearly $650 million per year, or about one-fifth of all current potential sales tax revenues. While this represents the best data available, it is flawed. The Commission cautions that 25 of those estimates are based on poor data, and only nine estimates are based on high-quality data.

Many of these exemptions have robust arguments in their favor. However, exemptions can create economic distortions and unfairly benefit specific industries over others. For example, there is an exemption on electricity purchased by ski resorts for ski lifts, but not electricity for other entertainment and leisure venues such as amusement and water parks. However, whether deserving or not, the increasing rate at which legislators are granting sales tax exemptions is contributing to the shrinking sales tax base.
Changing Consumer Patterns

Consumption patterns have changed in various ways over the past 80 years. These changes include a transition toward services (especially medical services) and economic shifts wrought by technological advancements. As a result, consumers have shifted a greater proportion of their expenditures to non-taxable transactions and away from taxable transactions.

A Shift Toward Services. Services, which are much less likely to be taxed than physical goods, have become an increasingly dominant part of the economy. When the sales tax was first introduced in 1933, 52% of the nation’s personal consumption expenditures were spent on goods. By 2017, that number had decreased to 32%.

Personal consumption expenditure data for Utah go back only as far as 1997, but still demonstrate the gradual shift toward services and away from goods. In 1997, 39% of personal consumption expenditures were spent on goods. By 2017, that number had decreased to 32%.

Bills of Health: What’s Driving Medical Service Costs in Utah, identified price and rate increases for medical services, advanced technology and prescription drugs as the primary drivers of rising health care costs.33 Growth in health care prices has outpaced total inflation in 62 of the past 71 years.34 Part of the reason more personal expenditures are shifting toward medical services is the aging population. Nationally, individuals 65 and older are spending 13% of their personal income on health care expenditures, while those under the age of 65 spend 5% of their income on health care expenditures.35 Utah has a lower share of individuals over 65, but population projections suggest that the share will double by 2065, growing from 9% to 20% of the population. With the aging of the population and health care cost increases consistently trending above inflation, health care services will probably continue to take an expanding portion of consumer expenditures.

Some reports have attempted to tie more recent movements toward services to the consumer preferences of Millennials (those born between 1981 and 1996).36 They posit that Millennials are prioritizing experiences (often non-taxed services) over goods. However, when comparing national consumer expenditures for those 34 and under to those 35 and over, both groups spend around 34% of their income on Utah’s taxable transactions. That said, if a consumer expenditure shift among
The salt lake city tax increase

Many counties, cities and towns seek to meet their communities’ changing needs by increasing the sales tax rate. Several jurisdictions have increased sales tax revenue through referenda as recently as 2015. More recently, Salt Lake City approved an increase through its City Council.

In 2015, the Utah Legislature gave Salt Lake City the right to increase its sales tax by 0.5% under the Impacted Communities Taxes Act. This was part of a deal between the legislature and the city to relocate Utah’s state prison from Salt Lake County to a location west of the Salt Lake International Airport.

The tax, passed by the Salt Lake City Council on May 1, is expected to generate $25 million in 2019 and $33 million by 2023. In 2018, remote sales through online companies accounted for 9% of all retail purchases (more than double the 4% just 10 years before). Estimates of the impact of remote sales on Utah’s sales tax revenues vary. A 2016 estimate put it in the large range of $80 million to $350 million. In his 2017 State of the State address, the Governor quoted an estimate between $150 million and $200 million. This is an issue not only because of foregone revenue, but because out-of-state entities that do not collect taxes gain a competitive advantage over entities within Utah that do. (That said, Utah entities selling out of state enjoy this advantage in other states.)

States have responded in various ways to attempt to capture these sales taxes. Some states like South Dakota have specifically created laws violating the ruling in Quill v. North Dakota as a part of an effort to return the issue to the Supreme Court. Other states have broadly included tracking cookies placed in users’ web browsers. Utah has addressed the issue by attempting to create voluntary agreements with major online retailers, with some success. In 2017, Utah’s taxable sales from “non-store retail” more than doubled the amount from the previous year. This 119% growth far outpaces both the growth in other retail revenue streams and the growth over previous years, indicating that Utah has begun collecting previously foregone revenues.

Utah’s quickly growing non-store retail tax revenues illustrate what many see to be a broader trend. In oral arguments in Wayfair v. South Dakota, U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts recently pointed out that data suggests “that this is a problem that has peaked in the sense that the bigger e-commerce companies find themselves with physical presence in all 50 states. So they’re already covered. And the work-arounds that some of the states have employed are also bringing more in.” While policymakers in the recent past have pointed to sales taxes on e-commerce as a potential source of more revenues, Utah, like many other states, has already found ways to capture much of the foregone revenue. The Supreme Court is expected to issue a related ruling on this case by the end of June 2018.

Another change allowed by technology is peer-to-peer transactions. Peer-to-peer transactions happen daily. Historically, such transactions have been exempted from the Utah sales tax as isolated or occasional sales from individuals or entities that are not regularly engaged in business. The sharing economy was a $14 billion industry in 2014, and one estimate suggests it will grow to $335 billion by 2025.

The sharing economy generally centers around a platform that allows buyers and sellers. Because the platform is not itself selling anything, it is generally not liable to collect sales tax on the transactions that occur over the platform. Many sellers on these platforms are engaged only in occasional or isolated sales and would not be responsible for sales tax. Others, however, are regularly involved on these platforms, but due to unfamiliarity with tax laws they might not be collecting sales tax even when required by law. In many cases, states and localities are so focused on the platforms’ right to operate in the locality that developing applicable sales tax regulations becomes an afterthought. Occasionally, platforms offer the ability to collect and remit sales taxes, but such services are intermittent and infrequent. The impact of these types of taxes on state revenues is unclear. However, there has been explosive growth in the sharing economy among various industries, likely contributing to the expansion of spending on untaxed goods and services.

It should be noted that there are ways to address exemptions, and trends in consumer behaviors are potentially reversible. Legislators could remove exemptions, and it is possible that future changes to consumer preferences could increase the share of consumer expenditures spent on taxable goods. The current base of transactions will likely generate an increasing amount of revenue well into the future, though perhaps at a rate substantially slower than personal expenditures. One option is to do nothing, but should the state choose this option, the revenues from the sales tax will probably not be able to support the same state services they did in the past, prompting the state to rely more on other revenue streams to make up the difference.

In 1992, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Quill v. North Dakota that companies without a presence in a state could not be required to collect sales tax for that state. At the time, the remote sales occurred by catalog. In 2018, remote sales through online companies accounted for 9% of all retail purchases (more than double the 4% just 10 years before). Estimates of the impact of remote sales on Utah’s sales tax revenues vary. A 2016 estimate put it in the large range of $80 million to $350 million. In his 2017 State of the State address, the Governor quoted an estimate between $150 million and $200 million. This is an issue not only because of foregone revenue, but because out-of-state entities that do not collect taxes gain a competitive advantage over entities within Utah that do. (That said, Utah entities selling out of state enjoy this advantage in other states.)

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POSSIBLE ACTIONS TO SHORE UP THE BASE

If tax revenues fail to rise in proportion to the needs of the state, Utah has several options. It can scale back public services, find other sources of revenue, raise the sales tax rate or expand the base. Shoring up the base could take different forms, including a gross receipts tax, a value added tax, taxing more services or merely rolling back some exemptions.

Gross Receipts Tax

On the face of it, a gross receipts tax bears many similarities to a sales tax, but there are some key differences. While sales tax is paid by the buyer, a gross receipts tax is paid by the seller. Gross receipt taxes are essentially a tax on all businesses, whereby they are required to pay a designated percentage of all their receipts – everything they sell. In the 1930s, as states were searching for new revenue, many initially chose a gross receipts tax instead of a sales tax. However, most gross receipt taxes were replaced by sales taxes or other taxes by the 1960s.47

While gross receipt taxes often have exemptions and exclusions similar to a sales tax, they tend to apply to a broader array of transactions. Generally, all receipts (sales) are taxed regardless of whether a company sells a service or a good, and regardless of whether the company sells to a private consumer, a business or a nonprofit. Delaware, Hawaii and Washington have gross receipt taxes that apply to nearly all transactions.

If Utah were to replace its sales tax with a gross receipts tax and capture a base that was 100% of personal income, it could potentially reduce the effective rate of the tax from 6.2% to 2.1% and generate the same amount of revenue.

Benefits and Drawbacks: A gross receipts tax would also mitigate several of the trends currently eroding the sales tax base. It would not matter whether the economy shifted from goods to services or to some other future sector, because all state companies would be taxed on their receipts, regardless of what they sell.

By capturing expenditures on services, a gross receipts tax would reduce the regressivity that stems from higher-income households spending more on untaxed services while lower-income households spend more on taxed goods.

A gross receipts tax would also reduce the level of administrative complexity. Current sales tax law outlines 91 exemptions and differential rates. Gross receipt taxes are generally much simpler.48 All companies would simply be liable for the legislated percentage of their gross sales, whether it be non-prepared food, personal property, or a previously untaxed service.

However, there are several downsides to the gross receipts tax. Because it includes business-to-business sales, it results in tax stacking, which economists generally discourage. To illustrate, consider the following: One company extracts raw materials from the ground and sells them to a refinery. The refinery extracts the valuable resource from the raw materials and sells the refined good to a manufacturer. The manufacturer uses the refined material to create a good which they in turn sell to a retailer which in turn sells it to a consumer. Under a gross receipt tax, that material was taxed four times, each time it was sold. As a result, gross receipt taxes can create economic inefficiencies by encouraging firms to integrate vertically. In the case of this example, the manufacturer may realize it gains a competitive advantage if it expands to extract, refine, manufacture and sell the product. Its product would then be cheaper since it would only be taxed once, while competing products not vertically integrated would remain subject to the tax four times.

Stacking has a particularly negative competitive impact on small businesses that find themselves less able to integrate vertically.49 That said, a gross receipts tax might offset other economic distortions associated with a sales tax.

Under the current system, services receive preferential treatment and distort individual actions when a comparable good is taxed while the service is not. For instance, hiring a tax firm to file your income tax return is a sales-tax free service, but purchasing software to file the return is taxed. Taking a skiing lesson is not taxable, but renting skis is. Hiring a landscaping service to mow your lawn would not be taxable but purchasing your own lawn mower would be. Ideally, economists would encourage as little distortion as possible by taxing all the various options at the same rate. A gross receipts tax would reduce this distortion, but the corrective effect might be offset by the distortions associated with tax stacking.

A gross receipts tax could diminish a state’s competitiveness. Tax stacking could increase the price for local goods and services, encouraging consumers to look outside the state for options. The impact could be particularly influential on companies where physical location is not important, such as companies in business consulting or technological industries. However, if the state lowered the tax rate as it expanded the base, the impact might be mitigated.

A gross receipts tax would increase the number of necessary items taxed. Many items of necessity in Utah such as water, food, and residential fuel are exempted or taxed at a differential rate. Extending a tax to include necessary services such as medical services or housing services would cause similar concerns to the taxation of food and other basic necessities and likely remain quite unpopular among the public.

Gross receipt taxes also do not account for the profitability of a business. Certain industries, while selling a lot of product, have narrow margins.50 As a result, their effective tax rate as a share of net income would be higher than for high-margin businesses under a gross receipts tax.
The taxation of business-to-business transactions. A number of the products exempted from Utah’s sales tax are the result of lawmakers attempting to ensure that taxes were not stacked. However, by exempting a product entirely, it means that end-consumers of that product might also not pay sales taxes. This contributes to the erosion of the sales tax base. Exempting all business transactions will eliminate the distortion while not providing tax benefits inefficiently.

Taxing services could leave Utah with certain competitive disadvantages in comparison with other states. If services in Utah were taxed, but none of the surrounding states had a tax on services, Utah consumers could change some of their service providers to other states. Haircuts are not an easy service to obtain from someone outside the state, while financial services can readily flow across borders. Such a competitive disadvantage could hurt Utah businesses as their customers seek tax-free out-of-state solutions. The use tax should in theory require those buyers purchasing from out of state to pay the tax, but compliance with the use tax is low.

There are a number of factors that could mitigate this impact. If Utah could effectively exempt or exclude business-to-business transactions, many companies would have lower operating costs, allowing them to keep prices competitive. In addition, if the broadening of the base were accompanied by a significant reduction of the overall sales tax rate, that competitive disadvantage for purchasing services would be at least partially mitigated. It might also be the case that a substantially lower rate might create a competitive advantage in terms of selling goods.

Again, extending taxes to include basic necessities such as health care and housing services would likely raise significant concerns among the general public. Including all non-business-to-business services in the tax base might also raise widespread resistance among the companies that were previously able to sell their services tax free. There are also potential complications of non-state businesses selling previously untaxed services in Utah. If exempted, it would provide an incentive for businesses to relocate outside of the state and sell their services into the state. If included in the tax base, compliance might be low due to unfamiliarity of state sales tax laws and not understanding that they would be required to collect sales tax.

One issue that would likely arise from excluding business-to-business purchase would be the individual use of businesses to purchase products or services for personal use. This might not include just the misuse of business exclusions but could include practices like the rise in company vehicles that allow individuals to sidestep the sales tax. The state might need more vigorous auditing practices to make sure business tax exclusions are not misused.

**Taxing Services Piecemeal**

Another alternative is expanding the taxation of services on a piecemeal basis. This might allow services that are predominantly business-to-business to be excluded or exempted while including services that are more focused on the end consumer. Additionally, it might allow lawmakers to avoid services that would be quite unpopular to tax, such as housing or health care services.

**Benefits and Drawbacks.** Expanding services piecemeal might allow legislators...
to expand the sales tax base in phases, choosing which services would be reasonable to tax and excluding services that are predominantly used in business-to-business transactions (such as advertising). This method might also face a lower level of political opposition because the tax would apply only to certain portions of the business community.

However, singling out certain services and leaving others untouched raises issues of fairness. It also keeps the door open to eroding the base through future exemptions.

Most of the benefits and drawbacks highlighted in the previous section stand true for this section. But to the degree that not all final consumption services are taxed, many of the benefits mentioned above would be scaled back or non-existent.

Massachusetts and Michigan attempted to expand their taxable services in this fashion but ran into problems figuring out how to classify which services would be taxed and which would not. Both states relied on industry codes that normally classify types of businesses rather than the services they provide.

**Value Added Tax**

In recent years, there has been increasing discussion about the U.S. adopting a value-added tax, or a VAT. This tax, rather than exempting business purchases, requires a business to pay a tax only on a fraction of the business input – the value added by just the seller. Another way of looking at the VAT would be to call it a fractional sales tax. The buyer pays sales tax only on the value added by the seller.

The VAT has been adopted by 160 countries. Europe countries employed it as a means of addressing the tax-stacking problems in previous tax systems. There are few examples of states adopting a VAT as a replacement or partial offset of the sales tax. The most prominent example is that of Michigan, which adopted and repealed the VAT twice, from 1953 to 1967 and from 1976 to 2006. Michigan used it specifically to replace the corporate income tax, which generated much more volatile revenue.

**Benefits and Drawbacks.** A VAT provides a broad base for revenue. The broader the base of any VAT, gross receipts tax or sales tax, the more stable revenues will be. Furthermore, the more that services are taxed under a VAT, the less regressive the system will be. Similarly, a broad-based VAT would provide many of the benefits and drawbacks of a broad-based sales tax that excludes all business-to-business transactions. Products would be taxed similarly, whether they be goods or services. As a result, goods could become more competitive in Utah while services could become less competitive.

One reason Michigan’s VAT was unpopular among business owners was because of its administrative complexity. Eliminating unnecessary complexity is critical for any state considering a VAT.

The biggest drawback to a state-adopted VAT pertains to interstate commerce. Businesses, often unfamiliar with the VAT, protest what they understand to be a net income tax or a tax on labor costs, and have challenged the state apportionment methods. Michigan found itself subject to constant litigation along these lines.

**BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF A WIDER BASE**

The primary benefit of taxing services is that it allows a broader tax base. A broad tax base generally provides a more stable source of revenue over the long term and allows a lower tax rate which tends to reduce the amount of economic distortion caused by taxes. In addition, policies that extend the sales tax to all non-business-to-business transactions help “future-proof” the sales tax base. Future shifts from goods to services or vice-versa would not impact the sales tax base because both would be included.

There are concerns that levying taxes on services could lead to a higher overall tax burden for consumers. In fact, that is one of the primary reasons behind a 2018 voter initiative campaign in Arizona proposing a constitutional amendment prohibiting the government from levying a sales tax on services.

This concern may be warranted. When Massachusetts and Michigan expanded their sales tax base to include services, the primary reason was to raise revenue. However, it is not necessarily the case that taxing services would lead to higher taxes. Naturally, if the government just included services as part of the sales tax base without lowering the rate, it would be a tax increase. However, legislation could easily be designed to make the change revenue-neutral or even provide a tax break by adjusting the sales tax rate accordingly.

Nonetheless, there is some truth to the argument that residents might end up paying more than they otherwise would have, even if the state passed revenue-neutral legislation. This would be a result of individuals’ tax liabilities slowly shifting toward previously untaxed service transactions as they become a larger part of consumer spending. In other words, it is not so much that taxes would increase, but the fractional tax reductions inherent in the current system would be removed.

Economists and organizations across the political spectrum promote broadening the taxable base. The sticking point is that the expansion of taxes tends to be unpopular with the public. Proposed expansions of the tax base would also probably face significant opposition from industries not previously subject to the tax.
Utah’s sales tax is the largest pool of unrestricted funds the Utah Legislature has to cover state-provided services. Starting in 1975, the sales tax revenues overperformed income and property tax revenues. However, that is changing with the increase in sales tax exemptions and shifts in consumer spending.

To address these changes, Utah has several choices. It can find ways to do more with less, scale back state-provided services, look to other revenue sources, repeal exemptions, raise the tax rate, or include more in the tax base.

If the state chooses to include more services in the tax base, it should recognize the change as a tax increase or lower the sales tax rate to produce the same amount of revenue. Expanding the sales tax to include all non-business-to-business transactions comes with a number of benefits, including removing economic distortions, future-proofing the sales tax base, reducing the level of regressivity of the sales tax, and making Utah’s goods more competitive when compared with other states. It would also come at the cost of making Utah’s services less competitive and increasing the amount of regulatory burden for businesses as they avoid paying the tax. Economists and policy experts on both sides of the aisle are in favor of including services in the sales tax base, but many states seem to be having a hard time implementing the change due to the political pressure of those who would incur the burden of the new taxes.

In the short term, keeping exemptions in check and looking for opportunities to reduce them might be the most manageable approach to shoring up the sales tax base. While arguments can be made for any exemption, the more they expand, the more upward pressure will come to bear on sales tax rates. Broadening the base, on the other hand, opens the possibility for governments to reduce the tax rate. This offers potential competitive benefits for Utah as a whole, but it is a matter of particular interest for lower-earning households, since they tend to spend a greater proportion of their income on taxable goods.

CONCLUSION

This is the third report in Utah Foundation’s Tax Policy Series. Part 1 examined property taxes; Part 2 examined the income tax. Find the whole series at utahfoundation.org.

ENDNOTES

1 Utah’s sales tax generated more revenue than the income tax in the first year it was fully implemented. It was only in 2006 that income tax revenues (both individual and income) surpassed sales tax revenues. A year later, the individual income tax alone generated more revenues than state and local sales taxes. Sales tax revenues overtook property tax revenues by 1975. Property tax revenues rose again above sales tax revenues in 2009.

2 Utah State Tax Commission, “History of the Utah Tax Structure,” 2017, https://tax.utah.gov/esu/history/history.pdf. There are different ways to calculate revenues from the sales tax. This amount includes the revenues generated by the standard state sales tax and all the local sales taxes that applied to the state base. This excludes taxes that impact single items such as the restaurant tax, transient room taxes and motor vehicle rental taxes. If you include all of these, you see a total of $3.5 billion, with $2.3 billion for the state and $1.2 billion for local governments.

3 At that time, the Utah Legislature included a provision requiring a property tax reduction if sales tax revenue reached a certain level.

4 Approximately 20% of households own their property free and clear, meaning they face annual lump-sum payments on their property.


14 The 2018 legislature passed a SB 233 that will further exempt machinery will less than a three-year lifespan if the remote sales tax generates $55 million in a calendar year.


Differentiating between a good and a service can at times be difficult. For this purpose, if a person generally walked away with a physical product they did not have before, it would be considered as a good. Otherwise it would be a service. For example, renting a movie or purchasing a newspaper would be classified as goods, despite a rental only being temporary and some might argue a newspaper is selling information rather than the paper itself. On the other hand, admission to an amusement park results in no physical product.


30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. National Center for Education Statistics, “Fast Facts: Tuition costs of colleges and universities,” 2016, https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=76; Bureau of Labor Statistics, “All items in U.S. city average, all urban consumers, seasonally adjusted, CUSR0000SA0; “All items less medical care in U.S. city average, all urban consumers, seasonally adjusted, CUSR0000SA0L5; and “Medical care in U.S. city average, all urban consumers, seasonally adjusted, CUSR0000SAM.”


34. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “BLS, all items in U.S. city average, all urban consumers, seasonally adjusted, CUSR0000SA0; “All items less medical care in U.S. city average, all urban consumers, seasonally adjusted, CUSR0000SA0L5; and “Medical care in U.S. city average, all urban consumers, seasonally adjusted, CUSR0000SAM.”


THE EVERYDAY TAX

SALES TAXATION IN UTAH