

STATE OF NEW YORK

DIVISION OF TAX APPEALS

In the Matter of the Petition :
of :
STEEL PAN LLC : **DETERMINATION**
 : **DTA NO. 828322**
for Revision of a Determination or for Refund of Sales and :
Use Taxes under Articles 28 and 29 of the Tax Law for the :
Period December 1, 2010 through November 30, 2015. :

Petitioner, Steel Pan LLC, filed a petition for revision of a determination or for refund of sales and use taxes under articles 28 and 29 of the Tax Law for the period December 1, 2010 through November 30, 2015.

The Division of Taxation, by its representative, Amanda Hiller, Esq. (Jessica DiFiore, Esq., of counsel), brought a motion dated January 19, 2018, seeking an order dismissing the petition or, in the alternative, summary determination in the above-referenced matter pursuant to sections 3000.5, 3000.9 (a) (1) (ii) and 3000.9 (b) of the Rules of Practice and Procedure of the Tax Appeals Tribunal. At the request of petitioner, appearing by Melvin B. Berfond, Esq., an extension of time was granted to respond to the Division of Taxation's motion. The 90-day period for issuance of the order commenced on March 1, 2018. Based upon the motion papers, the affidavits and documents submitted therewith, and all pleadings and documents submitted in connection with this matter, Kevin R. Law, Administrative Law Judge, renders the following determination.

ISSUE

Whether petitioner filed a timely request for conciliation conference with the Bureau of Conciliation and Mediation Services following the issuance of a notice of determination.

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. The subject of the motion of the Division of Taxation (Division) is the timeliness of petitioner's protest of a notice of determination, dated November 9, 2016, and bearing audit case identification number X-666664258 (notice). The notice asserts liability against Steel Pan LLC (petitioner) as a bulk sale purchaser for taxes determined to be due in accordance with sections 1141 (c) and 1138 (a) (3) of the Tax Law from Enzo Third Ave., LLC (Enzo). The notice is addressed to petitioner at an address in New York, New York and references the following assessments owed by Enzo for the period December 1, 2010 through November 30, 2015:

Assessment No.	Tax Assessed	Payments and credits	Balance Due
L-045669003	\$14,009.34	0	\$14,009.34
L-045669004	\$35,992.10	0	\$35,992.10
L-045669005	\$144,299.59	0	\$144,299.59

2. On May 11, 2017, petitioner filed a request for conciliation conference with the Division's Bureau of Conciliation and Mediation Services (BCMS) in protest of the notice.¹

3. On May 26, 2017, BCMS issued a conciliation order dismissing request (conciliation order) to petitioner. The conciliation order determined that petitioner's protest of the notice was untimely and stated, in part:

¹The request for conciliation conference, as well as the petition filed in this matter, only purport to contest petitioner's liability as bulk sale purchaser for the tax asserted against Enzo contained in notice L-045669005.

“The Tax Law requires that a request be filed within 90 days from the date of the statutory notice. Since the notice(s) was issued on November 9, 2016, but the request was not mailed until May 11, 2017, or in excess of 90 days, the request is late filed.”

4. On August 21, 2017, petitioner filed a timely petition with the Division of Tax Appeals in protest of the conciliation order.

5. To show proof of proper mailing of the notice, the Division provided the following with its motion papers: (i) an affidavit, dated October 26, 2017, of Deena Picard, a Data Processing Fiscal Systems Auditor 3 and Acting Director of the Division’s Management Analysis and Project Services Bureau (MAPS); (ii) a “Certified Record for Non-Presort Manual Mail - Assessments Receivable” (CMR) postmarked November 9, 2016; (iii) an affidavit, dated October 31, 2017, of Fred Ramundo, a supervisor in the Division’s mail room; (iv) a copy of the notice with the associated mailing cover sheet; (v) a copy of petitioner’s request for conciliation conference, dated and mailed May 11, 2017; (vi) a copy of the conciliation order issued to petitioner on May 26, 2017 (CMS No. 275122); and (vii) a copy of petitioner’s electronically filed Form IT-204 (New York State Partnership Return), for the tax year 2015, filed on September 1, 2016, which lists the same address for petitioner as that listed on the notice. The 2015 tax return was the last return filed with the Division by petitioner before the notice was issued.

6. The affidavit of Deena Picard, who has been in her current position since May 2017, and was previously a Data Processing Fiscal Systems Auditor 3 since February 2006, sets forth the Division’s general practice and procedure for processing statutory notices. Ms. Picard is the Acting Director of MAPS, which is responsible for the receipt and storage of CMRs, and is familiar with the Division’s Case and Resource Tracking System (CARTS) and the Division’s

past and present procedures as they relate to statutory notices. Statutory notices are generated from CARTS and are predated with the anticipated date of mailing. Each page of the CMR lists an initial date that is approximately 10 days in advance of the anticipated date of mailing. Following the Division's general practice, this date was manually changed on the single page of the CMR in the present case to the actual mailing date of "11/9/16." In addition, as described by Ms. Picard, generally all pages of the CMR are banded together when the documents are delivered into possession of the United States Postal Service (USPS) and remain so when returned to the Division. The pages of the CMR stay banded together unless otherwise ordered. The page numbers of the CMR run consecutively, starting with "PAGE: 1," and are noted in the upper right corner of each page.

7. All notices are assigned a certified control number. The certified control number of each notice is listed on a separate one-page mailing cover sheet, which also bears a bar code, the mailing address and the Departmental return address on the front, and taxpayer assistance information on the back. The certified control number is also listed on the CMR under the heading entitled "Certified No." The CMR lists each notice in the order the notices are generated in the batch. The assessment numbers are listed under the heading "Reference No." The names and addresses of the recipients are listed under "Name of Addressee, Street, and PO Address."

8. The CMR in the present matter consists of one page and lists three certified control numbers along with corresponding assessment numbers, names and addresses. Ms. Picard notes that the copy of the CMR that is attached to her affidavit has been redacted to preserve the confidentiality of information relating to taxpayers who are not involved in this proceeding. A USPS representative affixed a postmark, dated November 9, 2016, to the CMR, wrote and circled

the number “3” next to the heading “Total Pieces Received at Post Office,” and initialed or signed the CMR.

9. The CMR indicates that a notice with certified control number 7104 1002 9730 0058 9792 and reference number X-666664258 was mailed to petitioner at the New York, New York, address listed on the notice. The corresponding mailing cover sheet, attached to the Picard affidavit as exhibit “B,” bears this certified control number and petitioner’s name and address as noted.

10. The affidavit of Fred Ramundo describes the Division’s mail room’s general operations and procedures. Mr. Ramundo has been in this position since 2013 and, as a result, is familiar with the practices of the mailroom with regard to statutory notices. The mailroom receives the notices and places them in an “Outgoing Certified Mail” area. Mr. Ramundo confirms that a mailing cover sheet precedes each notice. A staff member receives the notices and mailing cover sheets and operates a machine that puts each notice and mailing cover sheet into a windowed envelope. Staff members then weigh, seal and place postage on each envelope. The first and last pieces of mail are checked against the information on the CMR. A clerk then performs a review of the pieces listed on the CMR, by checking those envelopes against the information listed on the CMR. A staff member then delivers the envelopes and the CMR to one of the various USPS branches located in the Albany, New York, area. A USPS employee affixes a postmark and also places his or her initials or signature on the CMR, indicating receipt by the post office. The mail room further requests that the USPS either circle the total number of pieces received or indicate the total number of pieces received by writing the number on the CMR. The CMR in exhibit “A” of the Picard affidavit contains a USPS postmark of November 9, 2016. Corresponding to “Total Pieces and Amounts,” is the preprinted number three and next to “Total

Pieces Received At Post Office” is the handwritten and circled entry “3.” There is a set of initials or a signature on the CMR.

11. According to both the Picard and Ramundo affidavits, a copy of the notice was mailed to petitioner on November 9, 2016, as claimed.

12. In response to the Division’s motion, petitioner submitted the affirmation of Melvin Berfond, Esq., along with the affidavit of Vartan Arutyunov, a member of Steel Pan LLC, and attached documents. Petitioner argues the Division erroneously treated its purchase of Enzo as a bulk sale. Included with its submission was a letter sent to the Division on August 25, 2016 by petitioner disputing that a bulk sale took place. Petitioner contends that this letter should have been considered a request for conciliation conference.

13. Also included with petitioner’s submission was a September 29, 2016 letter from the Division disagreeing with the contentions raised in petitioner’s August 25, 2016 letter. The September 29, 2016 letter provides, in part, that:

“In accordance with Section 1141 (c) of the New York State Sales and Use Tax Law, submit a *Notification of Sale, Transfer or Assignment in Bulk* (form AU-196.10) and provide us with the allocation of the total sales price into the sales price paid for tangible personal property...on your Notification. Failure to provide us with this information may result in the issuance of an assessment for the sales tax due on your purchase of tangible personal property. . .”

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

A. As noted, the Division brings a motion for summary determination under section 3000.9 (b) of the Rules of Practice and Procedure (Rules). As the petition in this matter was filed within 90 days of the conciliation order (*see* Finding of Fact 4), the Division of Tax Appeals has jurisdiction over the petition and, accordingly, a motion for summary determination under section

3000.9 (b) of the Rules is the proper vehicle to consider the timeliness of petitioner's request for conciliation conference. This determination shall address the instant motion as such.

B. A motion for summary determination "shall be granted if, upon all the papers and proof submitted, the administrative law judge finds that it has been established sufficiently that no material and triable issue of fact is presented" (20 NYCRR 3000.9 [b] [1]).

C. Section 3000.9 (c) of the Rules provides that a motion for summary determination is subject to the same provisions as a motion for summary judgment pursuant to CPLR 3212. "The proponent of a summary judgment motion must make a prima facie showing of entitlement to judgment as a matter of law, tendering sufficient evidence to eliminate any material issues of fact from the case" (*Winegrad v New York Univ. Med. Ctr.*, 64 NY2d 851, 853 [1985], citing *Zuckerman v City of New York*, 49 NY2d 557, 562 [1980]). As summary judgment is the procedural equivalent of a trial, it should be denied if there is any doubt as to the existence of a triable issue or where the material issue of fact is "arguable" (*Glick & Dolleck, Inc. v Tri-Pac Export Corp.*, 22 NY2d 439, 441 [1968]; *Museums at Stony Brook v Village of Patchogue Fire Dept.*, 146 AD2d 572 [2d Dept 1989]). If material facts are in dispute, or if contrary inferences may be drawn reasonably from undisputed facts, then a full trial is warranted and the case should not be decided on a motion (*Gerard v Inglese*, 11 AD2d 381 [2d Dept 1960]). "To defeat a motion for summary judgment, the opponent must . . . produce 'evidentiary proof in admissible form sufficient to require a trial of material questions of fact on which he rests his claim'" (*Whelan v GTE Sylvania*, 182 AD2d 446, 449 [1st Dept 1992], citing *Zuckerman*).

D. A taxpayer may protest a notice of determination by filing a petition for a hearing with the Division of Tax Appeals within 90 days from date of mailing of such notice (Tax Law

§ 1138 [a] [1]). Alternatively, a taxpayer may contest a notice by filing a request for a conciliation conference with BCMS “if the time to petition for such a hearing has not elapsed” (Tax Law § 170 [3-a] [a]). It is well established that the 90-day statutory time limit for filing either a petition or a request for a conciliation conference is strictly enforced and that, accordingly, protests filed even one day late are considered untimely (*see e.g. Matter of American Woodcraft*, Tax Appeals Tribunal, May 15, 2003; *Matter of Maro Luncheonette*, Tax Appeals Tribunal, February 1, 1996). This is because, absent a timely protest, a notice of determination becomes a fixed and final assessment and, consequently, the Division of Tax Appeals is without jurisdiction to consider the substantive merits of the protest (*see Matter of Lukacs*, Tax Appeals Tribunal, November 8, 2007; *Matter of Sak Smoke Shop*, Tax Appeals Tribunal, January 6, 1989).

E. Where the timeliness of a request for conciliation conference or petition is at issue, the initial inquiry is whether the Division has carried its burden of demonstrating the fact and date of the mailing to petitioner’s last known address (Tax Law § 1147 [a] [1]; *see Matter of Katz*, Tax Appeals Tribunal, November 14, 1991). To meet its burden, the Division must show proof of a standard procedure used by the Division for the issuance of statutory notices by one with knowledge of the relevant procedures, and must also show proof that the standard procedure was followed in this particular instance (*see Matter of Katz; Matter of Novar TV & Air Conditioner Sales & Serv.*, Tax Appeals Tribunal, May 23, 1991).

F. Here, the Division has offered proof sufficient to establish the mailing of the notice to petitioner’s last known address on November 9, 2016. The CMR has been properly completed and therefore constitutes highly probative documentary evidence of both the date and fact of mailing (*see Matter of Rakusin*, Tax Appeals Tribunal, July 26, 2001). The affidavits submitted

by the Division adequately describe the Division's general mailing procedure as well as the relevant CMR and thereby establish that the general mailing procedure was followed in this case (*see Matter of DeWeese*, Tax Appeals Tribunal, June 20, 2002). Further, the address on the mailing cover sheet and CMR conforms with the address listed on petitioner's 2015 e-filed tax return, which satisfies the "last known address" requirement. It is thus concluded that the Division properly mailed the notice on November 9, 2016, and the statutory 90-day time limit to file either a request for conciliation conference with BCMS or a petition with the Division of Tax Appeals commenced on that date (Tax Law §§ 170 [3-a] [a]; 1138 [a] [1]).

G. Petitioner's assertion that the August 25, 2016 letter disagreeing with the Division's claim that a bulk sale had taken place should be construed as a request for a conciliation conference. This argument is rejected as petitioner's disagreement was made before the notice was issued. The critical time period in this case began on November 9, 2016, the date the notice was issued, and ended on February 7, 2017, the date by which a protest of the notice was required to be filed. At no time during this 90-day time period did petitioner file any written document that could be construed to be a petition for hearing or a request for conference. It is well settled that a petition (or request for conciliation conference) filed before issuance of a notice of determination cannot function as a petition of the notice of determination (*Matter of West Mountain Corp. v Dept. of Taxation and Fin.*, 105 AD2d 989 [3d Dept 1984], *affd* 64 NY2d 991 [1985]). The Tax Appeals Tribunal has held that where a petition is filed before a notice of determination has been issued, "[r]eview by the Division of Tax Appeals would be premature and meaningless if the Division of Taxation's assessment was only a proposed one, subject to change under the internal procedures within the Division of Taxation" (*Matter of Yegnukian*, Tax Appeals Tribunal, March 22, 1990).

H. Petitioner's request for conciliation conference was filed on May 11, 2017. This date falls after the 90-day period of limitations for the filing of such a request. Consequently, the request was untimely (*see* Tax Law §§ 1138 [a] [1]; 170 [3-a] [b]) and the same was properly dismissed by the May 26, 2017 order issued by BCMS. Petitioner has offered no claim or evidence to meet his burden to prove that any timely protest was filed before the 90-day period of limitations for challenging the notice expired.

I. The Division's motion for summary determination is hereby granted, the petition is denied, and the May 26, 2017 conciliation order dismissing petitioner's request is sustained.

DATED: Albany, New York
May 24, 2018

/s/ Kevin R. Law
ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE