

REDACTED DECISION – DK# 16-425 RPD

**BY: CRYSTAL S. FLANIGAN, ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE
SUBMITTED FOR DECISION ON AUGUST 12, 2019
ISSUED ON FEBRUARY 7, 2020**

FINAL DECISION

This matter is one of over twenty matters pending before this Tribunal regarding Taxpayers who seek the downward modification contained in West Virginia Code Section 11-21-12(c)(6). Due to the number of cases, and the length of time they have been on the Docket of this Tribunal, brief telephonic evidentiary hearings were held in each, during which, with the agreement of both parties, the details of what actions the Tax Commissioner took in denying the requested modification were offered by proffer. Those details are contained in the findings of fact below.

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. The Petitioner was a resident of West Virginia during the 2013, 2014, and 2015 tax years, and therefore, are required to pay West Virginia personal income tax.
2. During Petitioner's working career, he was a law enforcement officer with the City of [REDACTED] Police Department and the [REDACTED].
3. After the Petitioner retired, he received a pension from the [REDACTED] City's Policeman's Pension and Relief Fund for his employment with the [REDACTED] City Police Department. He also receives retirement income from his employment with the [REDACTED] through the Public Employees Retirement System (hereinafter "PERS").
4. The Petitioner filed his West Virginia income taxes for tax years 2013, 2014, and 2015 in such a way as to subtract from his federal adjusted gross income the entirety of the pensions he received.

5. These tax filings led the Tax Commissioner to issue three return change letters, on August 12, 2016. These letters had the effect of denying the modification sought by the Petitioner for the tax years in question.

DISCUSSION

This matter concerns a provision in West Virginia law which allows certain West Virginia residents to deduct from their federal adjusted gross income, all of the retirement income they receive from certain sources. Specifically, residents who receive retirement income from any West Virginia police or fireman's retirement system, one of two state police retirement funds or the deputy sheriff retirement system. *See* W. Va. Code Ann. § 11-21-12(c)(6) (West 2018). The Petitioner receives retirement income from one of these sources but also receives retirement income that is not from one of those sources.

Some history is necessary for clarity. In tax years 2010 and 2011 a retired federal marshal named James Dawson sought the same modification that Petitioner seeks. He too, received no retirement income from any of the sources mentioned in West Virginia Code Section 11-21-12(c)(6), and the Tax Commissioner also denied his request. His case proceeded from this Tribunal all the way to the United States Supreme Court of Appeals. Without belaboring the point, the legal arguments in the Dawson case involve whether West Virginia Code Section 11-21-12(c)(6) violates the doctrine of intergovernmental immunity, as codified in 4 U.S.C. 111, because it is alleged that subdivision (6) allegedly discriminates against certain federal employees. The U.S. Supreme Court held that West Virginia Code Section §11-21-12(c)(6) does discriminate against federal employees under the doctrine of intergovernmental immunity. Mr. Dawson did not pursue the issue of discrimination between retirement income for law enforcement officers receiving a modification pursuant to West Virginia Code Section 11-21-12(c)(6) and law enforcement officers receiving other retirement income from West Virginia, such as PERS. Accordingly, the U.S. Supreme Court did not provide a ruling to this issue. As stated above, Petitioner

is not a retired federal employee, therefore, the Dawson decision does not answer the question before us.

That brings us to the issue before this Tribunal, which, at its essence, is that it is unfair that Petitioner, a retired West Virginia law enforcement officer, does not get the same modification to his retirement income from his service with the [REDACTED] that he receives from his [REDACTED] City Policeman's Pension and Relief Benefits. Obviously, the Petitioner's arguments, are predicated on a violation of the Petitioner's constitutional rights, specifically their right to equal protection under the laws.

What is missing from the Petitioner's argument is any mention of what errors the Tax Commissioner has made in regard to the Petitioner. The reason for this is because the Tax Commissioner has not made any errors. West Virginia Code Section 11-21-12(c)(6) allows certain individuals a tax break on their retirement income; the Petitioner gets the benefit from one retirement system but not the other. Therefore, when the Tax Commissioner informs the Petitioner that he is not entitled to that modification, he is simply following the law as written. What is also missing from the Petitioner's argument is any citation to any legal authority that would allow the Tax Commissioner, when confronted with a situation such as this to say to the Taxpayer "you're right, this tax statute gives you a raw deal, so I'm going to fix things for you." The Petitioner cites no such authority, because obviously none exists. The Tax Commissioner cannot rewrite the tax laws on a whim, based upon some vague standard of fairness.

We do not seek to minimize the Petitioner's constitutional arguments, but it is well settled that, as part of the executive branch, neither the Tax Commissioner nor this Tribunal can declare a statute unconstitutional. Actually, two concepts are well settled. The first is the separation of powers doctrine. In West Virginia, as in many states, it is more than a doctrine and is actually an article of our State Constitution.

The legislative, executive and judicial departments shall be separate and distinct, so that neither shall exercise the powers properly

belonging to either of the others; nor shall any person exercise the powers of more than one of them at the same time, except that justices of the peace shall be eligible to the Legislature.

W. Va. Const. art. V, § 1. The West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals has elaborated on this constitutional provision on many occasions, including mere weeks prior to the issuance of this decision. “The separation of powers doctrine works six ways. The Courts may not be involved in legislative or executive acts. The Executive may not interfere with judicial or legislative acts.” State ex rel. Workman v. Carmichael, 819 S.E.2d 251, 261 (W. Va. 2018).

Next, we must ask, is declaring a statute unconstitutional a purely judicial act? The short answer is yes, and virtually every state court in the nation has, at some time in the past, clearly and cogently stated as such. *See e.g.* Gordon v. State by & through Capitol Bldg. Rehab., 2018 WY 32, 413 P.3d 1093 (Wyo. 2018) (Declaring the validity of statutes in relation to the constitution is a power vested in the courts); Gannon v. State, 305 Kan. 850, 390 P.3d 461 (2017) (the judiciary has the sole authority to determine whether an act of the legislature conforms to their supreme will, *i.e.*, is constitutional); Gen. Engines Co. v. Dir., Div. of Taxation, 23 N.J. Tax 515 (2007) (Division of Taxation, as an administrative agency, has neither the responsibility, the authority, nor the jurisdiction to declare statutes unconstitutional).

The West Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals has never answered the precise question before us, namely can an executive branch agency declare a statute unconstitutional. What the Court has said is that the mere fact that an executive branch agency performs quasi-judicial functions does not make it a court, and that it is the duty of the courts to declare statutes unconstitutional. *See e.g.* State ex rel. State Bldg. Comm’n v. Bailey, 151 W. Va. 79, 150 S.E.2d 449 (1966) (it is the duty of a court to declare a statute invalid if its unconstitutionality is clear); Rice v. Underwood, 205 W. Va. 274, 517 S.E.2d 751 (1998) (the deciding of contested cases by a board or regulatory body is a recognized administrative function and does not transform the administrative agency into a court). We do not think the fact that the Bailey Court failed to say that it is “solely” the duty of a court to declare a

statute unconstitutional is determinative. This Tribunal is quite certain that the concept is as equally well settled in West Virginia as elsewhere.

In summation, Petitioner's retirement income is derived from two sources, one source which is mentioned in West Virginia Code Section 11-21-12(c)(6) and another source, PERS, which is not mentioned in the statute. Therefore, the Tax Commissioner cannot have committed an error when he informed the Petitioner that he was not entitled to the requested modification for his [REDACTED] retirement income. Nor can the Tax Commissioner or this Tribunal declare Section 11-21-12(c)(6) unconstitutional. Therefore, the Petitioner has not met his burden of showing that the Tax Commissioner's actions in this matter were contrary to West Virginia law, clearly wrong, or arbitrary and capricious.

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

1. It is the duty of the Tax Commissioner to see that the laws concerning the assessment and collection of all taxes and levies are faithfully enforced. *See* W. Va. Code Ann. § 11-1-2 (West 2010).

2. "The Tax Commissioner shall collect the taxes, additions to tax, penalties and interest imposed by this article or any of the other articles of this chapter to which this article is applicable." W. Va. Code Ann. § 11-10-11(a) (West 2010).

3. Resident individual means an individual: (1) Who is domiciled in this State, unless he maintains no permanent place of abode in this State, maintains a permanent place of abode elsewhere, and spends in the aggregate not more than thirty days of the taxable year in this State W. Va. Code Ann. § 11-21-7 (West 2013).

4. The Petitioner is a resident individual, as that term is defined in West Virginia Code Section 11-21-7, and as such, he pays West Virginia taxes.

5. There shall be subtracted from federal adjusted gross income to the extent included therein: . . . (6) Retirement income received in the form of pensions and annuities after December 31, 1979, under any West Virginia police, West Virginia Firemen’s Retirement System or the West Virginia State Police Death, Disability and Retirement Fund, the West Virginia State Police Retirement System or the West Virginia Deputy Sheriff Retirement System, including any survivorship annuities derived from any of these programs, to the extent includable in gross income for federal income tax purposes. W. Va. Code Ann. § 11-21-12(c)(6) (West 2018).

6. The Tax Commissioner did not commit an error in denying the modification contained in West Virginia Code Section 11-21-12(c)(6) to the Petitioner’s retirement income that he receives from PERS as is not from the sources discussed in this statute.

7. The legislative, executive and judicial departments shall be separate and distinct, so that neither shall exercise the powers properly belonging to either of the others; nor shall any person exercise the powers of more than one of them at the same time, except that justices of the peace shall be eligible to the Legislature. W. Va. Const. art. V, § 1.

8. As a part of the executive branch, neither the Tax Commissioner nor this Tribunal may perform a judicial act, and declaring a statute unconstitutional is a judicial act. *See e.g. State ex rel. State Bldg. Comm’n v. Bailey*, 151 W. Va. 79, 150 S.E.2d 449 (1966); *Rice v. Underwood*, 205 W. Va. 274, 517 S.E.2d 751 (1998). *See also Gordon v. State by & through Capitol Bldg. Rehab.*, 2018 WY 32, 413 P.3d 1093 (Wyo. 2018); *Gannon v. State*, 305 Kan. 850, 390 P.3d 461 (2017); *Gen. Engines Co. v. Dir., Div. of Taxation*, 23 N.J. Tax 515 (2007).

9. “Annuities, retirement allowances, returns of contributions and any other sources of benefit received under the West Virginia Public Employees Retirement System...shall be limited to the first two thousand dollars.” W.Va. Code Ann. § 11-21-12(c)(5) (West 2018).

10. “Federal adjusted gross income in the amount of eight thousand dollars received from any source after the thirty-first day of December one thousand nine hundred eighty-six, by any person

who has attained the age of sixty-five on or before the last day of the taxable year.” W.Va. Code Ann. § 11-21-12(C)(8) (West 2018).

11. In a hearing before the West Virginia Office of Tax Appeals on a petition for reassessment, the burden of proof is upon the Petitioner to show that the actions taken by the Tax Commissioner are erroneous, unlawful, void or otherwise invalid. *See* W. Va. Code Ann. § 11-10A-10(e) (West 2010); W. Va. Code R. §§ 121-1-63.1 and 69.2 (2003).

12. In this matter, the Petitioner have not met his burden of showing that the return change letters issued against him for tax years 2013, 2014, and 2015 were contrary to West Virginia law, clearly wrong, or arbitrary and capricious.

DISPOSITION

WHEREFORE, it is the final decision of the West Virginia Office of Tax Appeals that the return change letters issued to the Petitioner should be and hereby are **MODIFIED** downward to remove penalties/additions, if any. In all other respects, the return change letters are hereby **AFFIRMED**.

WEST VIRGINIA OFFICE OF TAX APPEALS

By: _____
Crystal S. Flanigan
Administrative Law Judge

Date Entered