

REDACTED DECISION – DK# 20-322 PERSONAL

**BY: CRYSTAL S. FLANIGAN, ADMINISTRATIVE LAW JUDGE
SUBMITTED FOR DECISION ON DECEMBER 9, 2021
DECISION ENTERED ON MARCH 8, 2022**

FINAL DECISION

This matter is one of several 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 Petitioners [John and Jane X] were residents of West Virginia during the 2016, 2017, and 2018 tax years, and therefore, are required to pay West Virginia personal income tax.
2. During Mr. X's working career, he was a law enforcement officer with the Harrison County Sheriff's Department from 1991 to 2013. Mr. X carried a weapon and was authorized to make lawful arrests.
3. After Mr. X retired, he received a pension from the Public Employees Retirement System (PERS). He has not received a pension from the West Virginia Deputy Sheriff Retirement System or any other state law enforcement retirement system. He has not received any pension from any federal law enforcement retirement system.

4. The Petitioners filed their West Virginia income taxes for tax years 2016, 2017, and 2018 in such a way as to subtract from their federal adjusted gross income the entirety of the pension Mr. X received.

5. These tax filings led the Tax Commissioner to issue an assessment and denial of refund on October 20, 2020, for tax years 2016, 2017 and 2018. This assessment and denial of refund had the effect of denying the modification sought by the Petitioners for the tax years in question.

6. The assessment and denial of refund informed the Petitioners that \$_____ had been assessed against them for 2016, 2017, and 2018 and that their claim of refund \$_____ for the 2016 tax year was denied. The assessment represents the underlying tax of \$_____, interest of \$_____, and penalties and additions of \$_____ for the 2016 tax year. It also represents the underlying tax of \$_____, interest of \$_____, and penalties/additions of \$_____ for the 2017 tax year. Finally, it includes the underlying tax for \$_____ for underlying tax, interest of \$_____, and penalties/additions for \$_____for the 2018 tax year.

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 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). Mr. X does not receive retirement income from any 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 Mr. X 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 Dawson v. Steager, 586 U.S. ____, 139 S.Ct. 698, 203 L. Ed.2d 29 (2019) 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 retirement income from West Virginia sources not provided in this statute. Accordingly, the U.S. Supreme Court did not provide a ruling to this issue. As stated above, Mr. X 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 Mr. X, a retired West Virginia law enforcement officer does not get the same modification to his retirement income that other retired West Virginia law enforcement officers get. Obviously, the Petitioners' arguments are predicated on a violation of the Petitioners' constitutional rights, specifically their right to equal protection under the laws.

What is missing from the Petitioners' argument is any mention of what errors the Tax Commissioner has made in regard to the Petitioners. 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; Mr. X is not one of those individuals. Therefore, when the Tax Commissioner informs the Petitioners that they are not entitled to that

modification, he is simply following the law as written. What is also missing from the Petitioners' 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 Petitioners cite 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 Petitioners' 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. "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, Mr. X does not receive retirement income from any of the sources mentioned in West Virginia Code Section 11-21-12(c)(6). Therefore, the Tax Commissioner cannot have committed an error when he informed the Petitioners that they were not entitled to the requested modification. Nor can the Tax Commissioner or this Tribunal declare Section 11-21-12(c)(6) unconstitutional. Therefore, the Petitioners have not met their burden of showing that the Tax Commissioner’s actions in this matter were contrary to West Virginia law, clearly wrong or arbitrary and capricious.

There is one final issue that must be resolved to conclude this matter. The proffer agreed upon by the parties regarding what actions the Tax Commissioner took only addressed the denial

of the (c)(6) modification. However, there are two other modifications contained in Subsection (c). Subdivision (5) grants a \$2,000.00 downward modification for retirement monies received from the West Virginia Public Employees Retirement System and Subdivision (8) grants an \$8,000.00 downward modification for income from any source, once a person reaches sixty-five on or before the last day of the taxable year.¹

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 Petitioners are resident individuals, as that term is defined in West Virginia Code Section 11-21-7, and as such, they pay West Virginia taxes.

¹ “(c) *Modifications reducing federal adjusted gross income* There shall be subtracted from federal adjusted gross income to the extent included therein:

(5) Annuities, retirement allowances, returns of contributions and any other benefit received under the West Virginia Public Employees Retirement System . . . this modification shall be limited to the first \$2,000 of benefits received . . . (8) Federal adjusted gross income in the amount of \$8,000 received from any source after December 31, 1986, 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 (West).

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 Petitioners, because the Petitioners do not receive retirement income from any of the sources discussed in the subdivision.

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. “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).

10. Retirement monies received from the West Virginia Public Employees Retirement System provides for a \$2,000.00 downward modification. W.Va. Code Ann. §11-21-12(C)(5).

11. In a hearing before the West Virginia Office of Tax Appeals on a petition for refund, the burden of proof is upon the Petitioners 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 Petitioners have not met their burden of showing that the assessment and denial of refund issued against them for tax years 2016, 2017, and 2018 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 actions taken by the Tax Commissioner in denying the Petitioners the reducing modification contained in West Virginia Code Section 11-21-12(c)(6) for tax years 2016, 2017, and 2018 was not erroneous, unlawful, void or otherwise invalid, and thus should be and hereby is **AFFIRMED** in its entirety.

Interest continues to accrue on the unpaid tax until this liability is fully paid pursuant to the West Virginia Code Section 11-10-17(a).

WEST VIRGINIA OFFICE OF TAX APPEALS

By: _____
Crystal S. Flanigan
Administrative Law Judge

Date Entered