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SENATE BILL NO. 463

IN THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF ALASKA

FIFTEENTH LEGISLATURE - SECOND SESSION

A BILL

For an Act entitled: "An Act relating to unused airline tickets."

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF ALASKA:

* Section 1. AS 34.45.760(10) is amended to read:

(10) "intangible property"

(A) includes

(i) money, checks, drafts, deposits, interest, dividends, and income;

(ii) credit balances, customer overpayments, gift certificates, security deposits, refunds, credit memos, unpaid wages, [UNUSED AIRLINE TICKETS,] and unidentified remittances;

(iii) stocks and other intangible ownership interests in business associations;

(iv) money deposited to redeem stocks, bonds, coupons, and other securities, or to make distributions;

(v) amounts due and payable under the terms of insurance policies; and

(vi) amounts distributable from a trust or custodial fund established under a plan to provide health, welfare, pension, vacation, severance, retirement, death, stock purchase, profit-sharing, employee savings, supplemental unemployment insurance, or similar benefits;

(B) does not include

(i) unused airline tickets; or

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(ii) shares of stock issued by a corporation organized under 43 U.S.C. 1601 - 1629a (Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act) or [TO] unclaimed dividends payable on the shares of stock;

DISCUSSION ON ABANDONED PROPERTY LAW RE: UNUSED AIRLINE TICKETS

MarkAir's position is that unused airline tickets should not be classified as abandoned property. The main reasons for this position are:

- I Of all the airline tickets sold, very few of these tickets actually result in unused transportation.
- II Of all the tickets sold but not used, most have a de minimus value.
- III Accounting for tickets sold over an extended period carries a significant and burdensome cost.
- IV Tickets are sold with the understanding they are good for travel anytime within the subsequent year unless restrictions are imposed on their use due to special discounted fares.

MarkAir utilizes a computerized system to account for the sale of tickets and passenger revenue. The system matches each sales document with its related tickets based on the ticket and coupon number.

A simplified description of how MarkAir's sales and Match-Use Accounting System works may be helpful at this point.

A passenger ticket or excess baggage ticket is prepared at a MarkAir ticket counter, city ticket office or any of five hundred plus travel agency locations authorized to issue tickets on MarkAir. An accounting copy of the transaction

is submitted to the Anchorage accounting office for recording its value, taxes, routing and other data by ticket number.

The ticket number, along with its value and issue date becomes the basis of a Match-Use file and general ledger transportation liability account. As a flight coupon is used by the passenger, the coupon is processed into the file using its fourteen digit ticket number. The system will then match the coupon to a sales record and reduce the liability value of the file and the general ledger for the amount of the ticket.

The entire sales record for each ticket will remain in the file until one of two events occur: (1) all coupons are matched off or, (2) the record becomes fifteen months old, at which time the remaining open coupons are removed.

The checks and balances in the system include a computerized file which provides an item by item history of transportation coupon values and is the support to the transportation liability account in the general ledger. On a monthly basis, the general ledger account is reconciled to the computer file, with accepted differences resulting in revenue adjustments.

Since the monthly revenue dollars are entirely controlled within the computer system, tickets which are used but are not processed for whatever reason, are excluded from the match process. This results in an overstatement of the transportation liability and understatement of revenue. Unmatched tickets having an issue date in excess of fourteen months from the current month are recorded as revenue.

The major areas which cause revenue to age-off rather than be matched-off are as

follows:

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1. Failure to lift flight coupons and excess baggage coupons from passengers makes it impossible to remove them by the match-use process from the sales record.
2. Loss of entire flight envelopes containing the flight coupons lifted from passengers results in used MarkAir flight coupons not being match-used off the sales record.
3. Failure of headquarters accounting personnel and the system to match used flight coupons off the sales record by:
 - a) Failure to process coupons/data.
 - b) Key punch error in fourteen digit ticket number.
 - c) Unable to read the fourteen digit ticket number.
4. Failure for other airlines to bill MarkAir because of similar mishandling problems as mentioned in 3.
5. Tickets which are refunded but are not removed from the sales record because of the absence of applicable ticket and coupon number.
6. Refunds of "Aged" sales. Refunds of tickets over fourteen months in age are made and accounted for in the current accounting period. No adjustments for these refunds can ever be made to a closed record.

7. Unsupported exchange use tickets not being removed from the sales record because the applicable ticket and coupon numbers were not available.

Adjustments to the transportation liability account are also required to adjust the sales record for fare changes, refund fees and commission expense paid to travel agencies.

An analysis of ticket sales and lift processing has been performed to define what accounts for this failure to achieve matched use removal:

About sixty-three percent of use against MarkAir sales is from LIFT use. Passenger coupons can be lifted by MarkAir personnel in several airport locations. For passenger convenience and to relieve congestion, some flight coupons may be lifted at the podium in the gate waiting area and some are lifted by the inflight attendants at the doorway to the plane. All coupons for the same flight are consolidated, put into a flight envelope and sent into the Anchorage accounting office.

The flight envelopes are checked against a flight roster. Coupons issued by other airlines are separated from those issued by MarkAir. The other airline sales coupons are input and processed to the billing system. MarkAir lift coupons are input and processed to be matched to the sales record computer file.

Approximately twenty-nine percent of the tickets sold by MarkAir are used for flights on other airlines. The other airlines then bill MarkAir for these used flight coupons. The billed coupon numbers are entered into our system to match-off use from the computer sales record file. A major problem encountered

here is that many times an airline will bill multiple coupons for the same ticket but indicate only one coupon number with the entire billing on the one coupon. This results in a failure to remove used coupons from the sales record file.

Refunds are made at ticket counters, ticket offices, at travel agencies and in the Anchorage accounting office. When refunds are made, the refunded coupons are batched and sent to data input so that the ticket and coupon numbers can be input to relieve the sales records. There have always been a number of difficulties processing refunded coupons to the computer file. The refunds are made but the coupons may go to storage prematurely without the use (refund) being processed against the sales record file. Some refunds made in the field are missing entire or partial coupon and ticket numbers or we are unable to read them. Other refunds are made to passengers who have lost their flight coupons and we are unable to determine the complete ticket or coupon number.

The exchange of one ticket for another ticket creates a new sales record. When flight coupons are exchanged for new transportation, the exchanged flight coupons are normally attached to the new sales records and sent into the accounting office to process both the "use" on the old sale and to establish a new sale record. Whenever new transportation is issued without receiving the old flight coupon, the necessary ticket and coupon number required to clear the old record is absent and the transportation liability is incorrectly overstated.

Approximately ninety-nine percent of use is properly applied in the normal routine manner to the computer sales record file. The other one percent is

taken as aged revenue because we know the problems and errors which exist in the handling of used tickets. MarkAir has always been concerned about use processing errors, but it has never been economically justifiable to seek a hundred percent accuracy from the many employees handling transactions many times.

While nearly all tickets sold are used by the passenger, some very small percentage remain unused. Since we refund expired tickets as well as lost tickets, unused and unrefunded tickets are most likely of little value. We have found people generally seek refunds on unused tickets of almost any value, however, refund fees and adjustments for breaking restrictions on discounted tickets e.g., weekender or supersaver fares, make the nuisance of applying for the refund of certain tickets not worth the value of these promotional tickets.

Accounting for sold tickets over an extended period carries significant costs. These costs arise from record keeping, research, auditing and storage. For a carrier like MarkAir, this cost today would involve adding additional personnel, record storage space and computer processing and storage capability. These costs would continue to rise over the years as additional sales records continue to be added to historical files. Small carriers without a computerized match-use system would be forced to add personnel and computer hardware and software to develop a similar capability. The result would be the eventual resolution of most unused tickets as misprocessed or mishandled or unused discounted tickets which through the passage of time may have no refund value.

Finally, since tickets are generally valid for one year after purchase, being forced to refund unused tickets many years after they are sold infringes on the contract made between the airline and the ticket purchaser. The airline will

have provided the availability of transportation for the year after purchase and incurred the costs associated with producing the service and schedule. Whether the tickets are used or not, airlines will have held up their side of the contract and one year later if the ticket has expired they deserve to retain the value of the ticket and not be required to incur the costs to track, audit and research old tickets for years.