

Property Tax Revenues and Debt Capacity

Authors: Edin Sasic & Tom Mikesell, Analysts

Date: March 8, 2022

This paper describes property taxes, which are a significant revenue source for the City of Seattle, as well as the City’s debt, which is used to finance capital projects.

City Property Taxes

The non-voted General Property Tax Levy provides approximately one-fifth of the City’s General Fund (GF) revenue. As shown in Table 1, for 2022 this was \$303.8 million out of the \$1.6 billion GF total.

Table 1: Sources of General Fund Revenue

Budgeted Revenue Source	2022 (\$ million)	% of Total
General Property Tax	\$303.79	18.46%
Medic One Levy (County Property Tax)	\$69.98	4.25%
Retail Sales Tax	\$280.01	17.01%
Criminal Justice (County Retail Sales Tax)	\$23.92	1.45%
Business & Occupation Tax	\$317.43	19.29%
Utility Business Taxes (multiple utilities)	\$215.92	13.12%
Other Tax	\$24.43	1.48%
Licenses and Permits	\$41.11	2.50%
Parking Meters	\$21.22	1.29%
Court Fines	\$20.43	1.24%
Payroll Expense Tax Fund Transfer	\$85.36	5.19%
External Service Charges	\$20.58	1.25%
All other revenues and transfers	\$221.70	13.47%
Total	\$1,645.87	

Source: 2022 Adopted Budget

The **revenue growth** of non-voted property tax is limited by state law¹ to one percent growth plus the value of new construction, and the City collects this maximum amount. The City may collect additional property tax revenues above the one percent growth limit (i.e., “lifting” the levy lid) with voter approval. If specifically included in the ballot title, a levy lid lift may establish a permanent² increase to the tax base; otherwise, the levy lid lift is temporary³ for the term of the ballot measure.

¹ Revenues are limited by the lesser of 1% growth per year or the Implicit Price Deflator (a measure of inflation), plus the value of new construction and remodels. This limit was first established by Initiative 747 in 2001, and subsequently affirmed by the state legislature in 2007. See [WAC 458-19](#).

² A permanent levy lid lift is included in the calculation of the new base for subsequent levies.

³ A temporary levy lid lift reverts to the amount that would have been allowed at the 1% growth limit.

The City currently has five temporary voter-approved levies that are not constrained by the one percent growth limit; these are shown in Table 2. The individual ballot measures specify the revenue growth over the term of the voter-approved levy, and this may vary from the one percent growth limit.⁴ All of the City’s existing voter-approved levies are temporary.

Table 2: Expected 2022 Cash Receipts from Property Tax Levies

Property Tax Levy	Term	2022 Receipts
General Property Tax (GF)	n/a	\$307.76 ⁵
Transportation	Nine Years, 2016-2024	\$107.54
Low Income Housing	Seven Years, 2017-2023	\$41.43
Families, Education, Pre-school & Promise	Seven Years, 2019-2025	\$88.50
Election Vouchers	Ten Years, 2016-2025	\$3.00
Library	Seven Years, 2020-2026	\$30.98
City Excess GO Bond	Varies with term of bond	\$16.31
Total		\$589.41

Source: CBO

State law limits the City’s maximum property tax **rate** to \$3.60 per \$1,000 assessed value (AV). This includes both the General Property Tax and voter-approved levy lid lifts. The property tax rate is established by dividing the total amount of property tax revenues to be collected by the total assessed property value in the taxing district. This rate becomes the basis for individual property tax bills. In 2022, the City’s total portion of the property tax rate was \$2.37 per \$1,000 AV⁶, which equals to \$1,801 for a 2022 median AV home of \$760,000.

Since the non-voted portion of the property tax levy is limited by the one percent growth limit, the \$3.60 per \$1,000 AV rate limit has the effect of capping the amount of property tax available for voter-approved levies. Rising property values in excess of one percent growth do not raise new tax revenue⁷; rather, they increase the available levy capacity under the rate limit. Conversely, falling property values reduce the capacity for future voter-approved levies⁸. If the City’s total requested property tax revenue ever results in a tax rate that would exceed \$3.60 per \$1,000 AV, then the City would have to determine which levies to reduce in order to stay under the maximum rate.

There is one exception to the \$3.60 per \$1,000 AV limit. With 60 percent voter approval, the City may levy “excess” property taxes (which do not count against the rate limit) to pay debt service on voter-approved bond measures. For 2022, the City levied \$16.3 million to pay debt service on voter-approved bond measures. In 2022 this amounts to approximately \$0.06 per \$1,000 AV in property tax rate.

⁴ RCW 84.55.050 allows voter-approved levies to exceed the 1% growth limit for up to 6 consecutive years, after which additional revenues are limited by the 1% growth limit.

⁵ Anticipated cash receipts for the GF vary slightly from the budgeted revenue shown in Table 1, reflecting timing of tax payments.

⁶ Includes Seattle Metropolitan Park District (SMPD) property tax rate of \$0.20 per \$1,000 AV.

⁷ An individual property owner will see an increase in their individual tax bill if their property’s value increases by a higher percentage than the change in total assessed value, however the total amount of City tax collected is fixed.

⁸ In 2010, falling property values resulted in a loss of approximately \$50 million of levy capacity at the \$3.60 per \$1,000 AV limit.

State law allows for the creation of certain special-purpose tax districts with separate taxing authority from the City of Seattle. In 2014, Seattle voters approved the creation of the Seattle Parks District which has the same boundaries as the City of Seattle and has a governing board consisting of all nine Seattle Councilmembers. The Seattle Parks District has its own taxing authority of up to \$0.75 per \$1,000 AV and may exceed this limit with voter approval. The 2022 rate was \$0.20 per \$1,000 AV. In September 2022, the Council, serving as the Park District’s Governing Board, adopted Resolution 51, which approved a new six-year funding plan. In 2023, taxpayers will pay an estimated rate of \$0.39 per \$1,000 AV. The Seattle Parks District transfers these revenues to the City to maintain, operate, and improve parks, community centers, pools, and other recreation facilities and programs⁹.

For 2022, the total property tax rate paid by a Seattle property owner was \$8.83 per \$1,000 AV, which equals to \$6,710 for a 2022 median AV home of \$760,000. Table 3 shows how this rate is allocated across all taxing jurisdictions.

Table 3: 2022 Property Tax Rates for Seattle Property Owners

Property Tax	2022 Rate	Percent of Total
City of Seattle	\$2.17 per \$1,000 AV	24.58%
Seattle Parks District	\$0.20 per \$1,000 AV	2.27%
Port of Seattle	\$0.11 per \$1,000 AV	1.25%
King County	\$1.23 per \$1,000 AV	13.93%
Seattle School District	\$1.79 per \$1,000 AV	20.27%
Emergency Medical Service	\$0.25 per \$1,000 AV	2.83%
Flood District	\$0.08 per \$1,000 AV	0.91%
Sound Transit	\$0.18 per \$1,000 AV	2.04%
State School Fund	\$2.82 per \$1,000 AV	31.94%
Total	\$8.83 per \$1,000 AV	

Source: King County Assessor Website

Levy Scenarios

The information provided in the previous section relies on 2022 data to demonstrate recent taxpayer impacts and levy revenues. This data, however, is point-in-time, and does not provide insight into how these impacts could change in the future based on different proposals. The levies listed in Table 2 in the prior section will require renewal authorization by voters in future years . Using several assumptions, it is possible to project future revenue and tax burden scenarios to allow for planning for levy renewals within the context of the renewal sequence. While these projections are simply rough estimates and not a precise calculation of a future result, they are valuable because they provide insights into impacts under different sizes of levies.

⁹ Another example of a special-purpose taxing district is the Seattle Transportation Benefit District (STBD), established in 2010. The STBD does not levy a property tax, but instead collects sales tax and a vehicle license fee. The STBD transfers these revenues to the City to purchase transit service and support transportation operations and maintenance. The STBD shares the same boundaries as the City of Seattle and has a governing board consisting of all nine Seattle Councilmembers.

Slides 14 through 17 of Attachment 1 show three different renewal scenarios. Three scenarios are modelled, including:

- Inflation scenario: Grows each levy by the growth in the Consumer Price Index;
- 100% increase: Doubles each levy; and,
- 200% increase: Triples each levy.

Common assumptions for each scenario include:

- Assessed valuation forecasts from the Office of Economic and Revenue Forecasts' November 2022 forecast;
- Assumes voter approval of all lid lifts; and,
- Increases in County levies commensurate with past approved increases at renewal.

For reference, the total revenue generated in each scenario, compared with the currently approved amount for each levy, is shown on slide 14 of Attachment 1; tax burden impacts are shown on Slides 15 and 16; and annual levy revenues are shown on Slide 17.

Debt Capacity

The City issues three types of debt to finance its capital improvement programs: Unlimited Tax General Obligation (UTGO) Bonds, Limited Tax General Obligation (LTGO) Bonds, and Revenue Bonds.

UTGO Bonds are repaid by property taxes and may be issued with 60 percent voter-approval¹⁰. Property taxes to support UTGO bonds do not count against the City's property tax rate limit (i.e., "Unlimited" bonds). State law limits the amount of outstanding UTGO debt by specific purpose, as shown in Table 4. As of December 31, 2021, the City had \$239 million in outstanding UTGO bonds.

LTGO Bonds may be repaid by various taxes and other government revenues. LTGO Bonds, also known as "Councilmanic" bonds, may be issued without voter-approval for general government purposes. Property taxes to support LTGO bonds count against the City's property tax rate limit (i.e., "Limited" bonds). State law limits the amount of outstanding LTGO debt to 1.5 percent of total assessed value. As of December 31, 2021, the City had \$702 million in outstanding LTGO bonds.

The City's Debt Management policies¹¹ govern the use of LTGO debt. Both the Chair of the Finance Committee and the Central Staff Executive Director are voting members of the Debt

¹⁰ Requirement is 60% of voters in an election in which the number of voters exceeds 40% of the voters in the most recent general election.

¹¹ The City's Debt Management Policies were last updated in 2014 by [Resolution 31553](#), and are included as Attachment A to that Resolution. The policies cover all forms of debt, including use of interfund loans.

Management Policy Advisory Committee¹² (DMPAC). DMPAC advises on the issuance of new debt. As a matter of policy, the City reserves \$100 million or 12 percent of the LTGO debt capacity (whichever is higher) for emergencies. Except in emergencies, net debt service¹³ paid from the General Subfund will not exceed 9 percent of the total General Fund budget. In the long run, the City will seek to keep net debt service at 7 percent or less of the General Fund budget.

Revenue Bonds are used to support the capital programs of Seattle City Light and Seattle Public Utilities. These bonds are paid solely through utility revenues (i.e., utility rates) and do not impact the City’s debt limits.

Table 4: City of Seattle’s Debt Capacity and Outstanding Debt

Form of Debt	Voter Approval	Source of Repayment	Statutory Limitation	Current Limit (\$ Billions)	Outstanding 12-31-21
UTGO: Parks & Open Space	Yes	Excess Property Tax	2.5% of AV	\$6.9	\$0
UTGO: Utility ¹⁴	Yes	Excess Property Tax	2.5% of AV	\$6.9	\$0
UTGO: General Purpose	Yes	Excess Property Tax	1.0% of AV ¹⁵	\$2.8	\$239M
LTGO: General Purpose	No	Regular Property Tax and other revenue	1.5% of AV	\$4.1	\$702M
Revenue Bonds: Utility ¹⁶	No	Utility Rates			

Source: 2021 Comprehensive Annual Financial Report (CAFR)

While the City has significant unused debt capacity remaining, it has limited revenues with which to service new debt. Issuance of new UTGO debt is contingent on the voter’s willingness to approve new excess property taxes. Issuance of new LTGO debt is constrained by available GF revenue, including the limits on property tax revenue discussed in the first part of this paper.

Attachments:

1. Central Staff Presentation: Property Tax Levy Overview

¹² DMPAC is comprised of the Director of Finance, the Chair of the Finance and Housing Committee, the General Manager of Seattle City Light, the Director of Seattle Public Utilities, the City Budget Director, and the Executive Director of Council Central Staff. DMPAC provides advice to the Mayor, City Council, and the Director of Finance on all matters pertaining to the incurrence of debt.

¹³ Net debt service is the total annual LTGO debt service minus any revenues generated by the debt-funded projects to pay the debt service.

¹⁴ This bonding authority is separate from the revenue bonds issued by Seattle City Light and Seattle Public Utilities.

¹⁵ The sum of outstanding general purpose UTGO and LTGO debt is limited to 2.5% of assessed value.

¹⁶ As of December 31, 2021, SCL and SPU had a total of \$4.2 billion in outstanding Revenue Bonds. Source: 2021 CAFR.