

# Monday was Screw Merchants Day in Idaho

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Whom do members of Idaho's House Revenue and Taxation Committee think they represent, anyway?

It sure isn't Idaho's Main Street retailers, who must collect the state's 6 percent sales tax on every sale they make while most online and catalog retailers collect nothing.

The retailers know this puts them at a competitive disadvantage. For that reason, the Idaho Retailers Association has always strongly supported the Streamlined Sales Tax Project through which 22 other states are working to capture tax dollars that are supposed to be paid by Idahoans making purchases, but for online or other distant sales almost never are.

A majority of Revenue and Taxation Committee members, however, see something sinister in the multistate enterprise to simplify and collect taxes owing from such sales. One member, Hayden Republican Jim Clark, says he doubts "there would ever be a right time for this issue."

Clark was among the majority that voted 10-6 to kill yet another attempt to permit Idaho's participation in the project Monday. The vote on Boise Democrat Bill Killen's bill authorizing it echoed the decision committee members also made the last two years.

The Retailers Association itself at one time sponsored legislation like Killen's, but has apparently given up until the makeup of the committee - from which all Idaho tax legislation must originate - changes.

That makes you wonder where the state's other business lobbies are on this matter. The Idaho Association of Commerce and Industry, for example, denies that it seeks to serve only the interests of the big companies whose representatives form its board. But the association's legislative priorities do not include giving Idaho's Main Street merchants tax parity with those who sell their wares online or through catalogs.

Even the Boise Chamber of Commerce, which withdrew from IACI in a dispute over differing priorities, appears silent on the issue. In a "sales tax policy statement" on its Web site, the chamber says it supports current state sales tax

exemptions, opposes expanding the tax to services and "will continue to analyze the changing nature of the economy and the trend toward more service transactions and Internet sales."

If some retailers serving Idahoans are required to collect 6 percent sales tax and some are not, what's to monitor? That is unfair on the face of it.

Legislative priorities for the Idaho branch of the National Federation of Independent Business are also silent on the matter.

The ultimate responsibility for legislators' failure to represent Main Street merchants, though, rests with the merchants themselves. How many of them know which committee members vote year after year to preserve a state policy that is screwing them? And of those who do know, what have they done to change those members' positions, or to remove them from the Legislature?

Until they take such voluntary actions, they will remain bound to unvoluntarily collect 6 percent more than other merchants, sometimes for the same goods. - J.F.