

Memorandum in Opposition

Committee on the Tort System

Tort #3

February 12, 2020

S. 7508 – Part Q
A. 9508 – Part Q

By: BUDGET

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Senate Committee: Finance

Assembly Committee: Ways and Means

Effective Date: 120 Days after becoming law

AN ACT to amend the business corporation law, the executive law, the general associations law, the general business law, the limited liability company law, the not-for-profit corporation law, the partnership law, the private housing finance law, the real property law and the tax law, in relation to streamlining the process by which service of process is served on a corporate or other entity with the secretary of state; and to repeal certain provisions of the real property law relating thereto.

THE COMMITTEE ON THE TORT SYSTEM OPPOSES THIS LEGISLATION

Background

Governor Cuomo, for several years in a row, has submitted as part of his Executive Budget, Part Q of S.7508/A.9508 (herein Part Q), an Article VII proposal to amend various sections of law in relation to removing from the Secretary of State the responsibility for mailing a copy of service of legal papers (e.g., summons and complaint) to business entities registered with the with the Department of State. The Committee on the Tort System has previously opposed this legislation for reasons stated in our Memorandum in Opposition dated 3/4/2019. The committee has reviewed this year’s Executive Budget, Part Q and opposes it as follows:

“Under existing law, persons or entities suing corporations may serve the attendant legal papers upon the Secretary of State as the agent for the defendant corporate entity. The Secretary must then mail copies of such process documents to the defendant entity. This bill would require that plaintiffs serve these papers on the Secretary and the defendant entity at the same time.”

The supporting memorandum for this proposal recites a savings to the Department of State of \$600,000.

The bill amends various sections of New York law that deal with service of process on various business entities that have designated the Secretary of State as agent for service. Service still may be made by delivering legal papers to the Secretary of State as before. However, service now requires the party filing legal papers to complete service by certified mailing, return receipt requested, to the business entity at the address on file with the Secretary of State. On the same day that process is mailed, a duplicate copy of the process and proof of mailing, together with the statutory fee shall be personally delivered to and left with the Secretary of State in Albany. Proof of mailing shall be by Affidavit of Compliance.

Service of process on the corporation or other entity is complete when the Secretary of State is so served.

Discussion

A. Incongruence with the objective of the Uniform Notice of Claim Act resulting in undue confusion.

It is unclear what would be the societal benefit of enacting Part Q. The only stated goal in enacting Part Q is the assumption that doing so would, perhaps, save \$600,000 in a state budget totaling \$176.4 billion--that is to say, a possible savings of 0.034% of the total state budget. At what cost? . . . Unpredictability and additional litigation for New York State's already overburdened court system.

While there are several things troubling about the proposal, it is hard to understand the logic of enacting Part Q given the enactment of the Uniform Notice of Claim Act (the Act) in 2012. With the Act, state leaders clearly proclaimed their stated purpose in the supporting memo for that legislation, which states, in pertinent part:

“The purpose of this bill is to provide plaintiffs with *uniform, fair and statutorily consistent procedure* for serving a notice of claim . . .”. (emphasis supplied).

The supporting memo for the Act went on to justify the legislation by stating, in pertinent part:

The current statutes governing the filing of notices of claim and commencing an action or proceeding against a public corporation *have become confusing and unfairly difficult for all concerned, including the judiciary and the governmental entities involved. . .*

In addition, costly, time-consuming and resource-wasting litigation often ensues over arcane issues of notice of claim service and other procedural quirks, unnecessarily burdening the courts . . ., while at the same time undermining public confidence in the reasonableness and rationality of New York's laws. (emphasis supplied).

While we, as experienced legal practitioners, realize that service on a corporation by serving the Secretary of State and filing a notice of claim pursuant to the Uniform Notice of Claim Act are not identical legal mechanisms, they both have very similar and effective goals.

Part Q would put at considerable risk the “*uniform, fair and statutorily consistent procedure*” that has come to be relied upon by the judiciary, legal profession and the public by serving the Secretary of State as an agent of business entities. Part Q flies in the face of the recent public policy declarations by the state leaders in enacting the Uniform Notice of Claim Act, a bill that passed both houses of the Legislature with overwhelming bipartisan support.

B. Abrogates historic reliance on well-established and effective procedure.

Moreover, Part Q would undo a procedure that is well established and has been relied upon for several decades. Changes to these time tested procedures would also very likely lead to the problems sought to be addressed by the Uniform Notice of Claim Act, i.e. “...costly, time-consuming and resource-wasting litigation [that] often ensues over arcane issues of ... service and other procedural quirks, unnecessarily burdening the courts as well as the agencies involved, while at the same time undermining public confidence in the reasonableness and rationality of New York's laws.” These serious concerns were articulated with respect to the state of service of process prior to enactment of the Uniform Notice of Claim Act. If Part Q were enacted it would have a deleterious effect on the well-established, recognized and effective procedure now relied upon for service upon business entities.

The system that is now in place, and has been for many decades, was developed for good reasons that have not changed. The current system works well and provides certainty in an increasingly uncertain world.

Part Q would introduce uncertainty into a now-certain process.

C. Drafting Concerns

These concerns were raised in the 2019 memorandum, all matters appear uncorrected in the 2020.

In addition to the previously articulated policy concerns the Committee has with Part Q, we note what appear to be several drafting errors in the bill. For example, we are concerned that the requirement of simultaneous (i.e., same day) service on the Secretary of State and on the defendant by mail may present difficulties, which could lead to motion practice related to lack of personal jurisdiction due to defective service. Additional drafting errors are highlighted below.

1. General Associations Law (GAL)

Part Q Section 22 appears to have an error referring to certified mailing to the corporation or other business entity. It should say "Association". (See Executive Budget Part Q § 22(19), p. 43)

Also – the definition of "process" under both the GAL and the Real Property Law (See Executive Budget Part Q § 78(2)(d) at p. 62) is new. It is unclear what this new definition is based upon, which may lead to confusion and further litigation.

“Process” means judicial process and all orders, demands, notices or other papers required or permitted by law to be personally served on an association, for the purpose of acquiring jurisdiction of such association (board of managers in the RPL) in any action or proceeding, civil or criminal, whether judicial, administrative, arbitative or otherwise, in this state or in the federal courts sitting in or for this state.

2. General Business Law

In Section 24 of Part Q, amending Section 686 of the General Business Law, – it does not appear that the changes to service found elsewhere in the bill apply. The language of that Section still provides that the service of process is sent forthwith by the Department. This Section requires clarification.

Conclusion

If Part Q were enacted it would have a deleterious effect on the well-established, recognized and effective procedure now relied upon for service of legal papers upon business entities. Such effect would far outweigh the assumed and miniscule savings that may be realized.

The system now in place to effectuate service of process, which has been in place for many decades, was developed for good reasons. There has been no change that would justify these amendments. This proposal would only introduce unwelcomed uncertainty into a now-certain procedure.

Based on the foregoing the NYSBA’s Committee on the Tort System respectfully **OPPOSES** passage and enactment of Part Q.