

Property Tax Advisory

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Property Taxability of Motor Vehicles

Purpose [RCW 84.36.595](#) exempts certain vehicles, including “motor vehicles,” from property taxation. This Property Tax Advisory (PTA) addresses which vehicles qualify as “motor vehicles” exempt from property taxation.

General Rule for Exemption Most vehicles licensed, and used or designed **primarily** for operation on public roads and highways are exempt from property tax. Unlicensed vehicles used in commercial activity (construction, farming, logging, etc.) are generally taxable personal property.

Definition of “Motor Vehicle” The Legislature enacted a property tax exemption in RCW 84.36.595, which applies to the following types of vehicles:

- motor vehicles;
- travel trailers;
- campers; and
- vehicles carrying exempt licenses.¹

The statute defines the term “motor vehicles” in two parts. RCW 84.36.595(1)(a). The first part of the definition describes what vehicles are considered to be “motor vehicles,” for purposes of the exemption from property tax. The second part describes what vehicles are *not* considered to be “motor vehicles,” and therefore do not qualify for the exemption.

¹ RCW 84.36.595(2).

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Specifically, “motor vehicle” means the following:

[A]ll motor vehicles, trailers, and semi-trailers used, or of the type designed primarily to be used, upon the public streets and highways, for the convenience or pleasure of the owner, or for the conveyance, for hire or otherwise, of persons or property, including fixed loads and facilities for human habitation;

However, the definition of motor vehicle² in RCW 84.36.595 also specifically *excludes* the following:

- vehicles carrying exempt licenses;³
- dock and warehouse tractors and their cars or trailers, lumber carriers of the type known as spiders, and all other automotive equipment not designed primarily for use upon public streets or highways;
- motor vehicles or their trailers used entirely upon private property;
- mobile homes as defined in [RCW 46.04.302](#); and
- motor vehicles owned by nonresident military personnel of the armed forces of the United States stationed in the state of Washington, provided personnel were also nonresident at the time of their entry into military service.

Because the statute specifically excludes these vehicles from the definition of motor vehicles as used in the section, they would be subject to property taxation and not exempt from personal property taxes as “motor vehicles” under RCW 84.36.850(2).

Other Statutory Definitions

RCW 84.36.595(2) provides a property tax exemption for motor vehicles. RCW 84.36.595(1)(a) defines motor vehicles for purposes of applying the exemption. However, the definition for motor vehicle uses the terms “motor vehicles” as well as “trailers, and semitrailers” to define what a motor vehicle is without further clarifying these terms. Additionally, RCW 84.36.595(1)(a) uses a number of other related terms that are undefined.

² [RCW 82.44.010\(2\)](#) has substantially the same definition of what is considered a “motor vehicle” for the purposes of the chapter 82.44 RCW Motor Vehicle Excise Tax. For vehicles subject to excise tax, and vehicles exempted from excise tax, see [RCW 82.44.125](#).

³ Because the “motor vehicle” definition in RCW 84.36.595(1) excludes “vehicles carrying exempt licenses,” in order to be exempt, the Legislature needed to add language specifically exempting “vehicles carrying an exempt license” in another part of the statute. The result is that although “vehicles carrying exempt licenses” may not be considered “motor vehicles,” they are still exempt from property tax as their own class of vehicles.

Consistent with longstanding practice, the Department applies the definitions found in the Motor Vehicle Code⁴ for purposes of administering the exemption in RCW 84.36.595 to the extent they are related and not in conflict. The following definitions are applied in administering RCW 84.36.595:

Motor Vehicle

[RCW 46.04.320](#) defines “motor vehicle” as “a vehicle that is self-propelled or a vehicle that is propelled by electric power obtained from overhead trolley wires but not operated upon rails.”

“Motor vehicle” includes neighborhood electric vehicles, medium-speed electric vehicles, and certain golf carts. “Motor vehicle” excludes electric personal assistive mobility devices (EPAMD), power wheelchairs, certain golf carts (except golf carts for the purposes of chapter [46.61 RCW](#)), mopeds, and personal delivery devices.⁵ Definitions for these terms are also found in the Motor Vehicle Code. See [RCW 46.04.357](#): Neighborhood electric vehicle; [RCW 46.04.295](#): Medium-speed electric vehicle; [RCW 46.04.1945](#): Golf cart; [RCW 46.04.1695](#): EPAMD; [RCW 46.04.415](#): Power wheelchair; [RCW 46.04.304](#): Moped; [RCW 46.75.010](#): Personal delivery device.

Trailers, Semi-trailers, Fixed Loads, and Facilities for Human Habitation

The terms “trailers,” “semi-trailers,” “fixed loads,” and “facilities for human habitation” are included in the definition of vehicles that are exempt from property tax under RCW 84.36.595. Definitions for these terms are also found in the Motor Vehicle Code. See [RCW 46.04.620](#): Trailer; [RCW 46.04.530](#): Semitrailer; [RCW 46.04.186](#): Fixed load vehicle.

Motor vehicles that are “facilities for human habitation” are also generally exempt from property tax. Although that term is not defined in statute, the Motor Vehicle Code includes two types of property that are defined in terms of “facilities for human habitation”: “motor homes” and “campers.” See [RCW 46.04.305](#) and [RCW 46.04.085](#), respectively. Campers are specifically exempted in subsection (2) of RCW 84.36.595. “Motor homes” are defined in RCW 46.04.305 as “motor vehicles originally designed, reconstructed, or permanently altered to provide facilities for human habitation, which include lodging and cooking or sewage disposal, and is enclosed within a solid body shell with the vehicle, but excludes a camper or like unit constructed separately and affixed to a motor vehicle.”

In contrast, mobile homes are specifically excluded from the definition of motor vehicles, and they are not otherwise exempted from property taxation. Mobile homes means “a structure, designed and constructed to be transportable in one or

⁴ Title 46 RCW Motor Vehicles.

⁵ See RCW [46.04.670\(2\)](#) for further exclusions of some vehicles.

more sections, and is built on a permanent chassis, and designed to be used as a dwelling with or without a permanent foundation when connected to the required utilities that include plumbing, heating, and electrical systems contained therein.”⁶ The primary distinction between a mobile home and a motor home is that a motor home is a type of motor vehicle, designed for temporary dwelling while traveling; whereas a mobile home is designed for permanent dwelling and use on real property.

Exempt vs. Taxable Motor Vehicles

The key question for determining whether a vehicle is an exempt “motor vehicle” is whether it is used or designed **primarily** to be used on public roads and highways. A vehicle capable of being used on public roads, but not **primarily** designed to be used on public roads is not exempt. For example, some vehicles are self-propelled and may be used on public roads, but only as a temporary convenience to move the vehicle from one job site to another. Similarly, motor vehicles or their trailers that are used entirely upon private property are not exempt.

Examples of motor vehicles that **are subject to property tax** because they are not used or designed primarily for use on public streets or highways include the following:

- Any vehicle or automotive equipment that is designed and used primarily for grading of highways, paving of highways, earth moving, construction work, or similar use.⁷
- Vehicles that are in excess of the legal width, length, height, or unladen weight, and may not be moved on a public highway without the permit specified in [RCW 46.44.090](#).⁸
- Farm vehicles operated within a radius of twenty-five miles of the farm where it is principally used or garaged for the purposes of traveling between farms or other locations to engage in activities that support farming operations; farm tractors and farm implements, including trailers designed as cook or bunk houses used exclusively for animal herding, temporarily operating or drawn upon public highways; and trailers used exclusively to transport farm implements from one farm to another during daylight hours or at night when the trailer is equipped with lights that comply with applicable law.⁹
 - Occasional operation of a farm vehicle on a public highway will not exempt the vehicle.

⁶ [RCW 46.04.302](#).

⁷ [RCW 46.04.551](#).

⁸ The maximum requirements for vehicles operating on public roads or highways are set forth in [RCW 46.44.010](#) (outside width limit), [RCW 46.44.020](#) (height), [RCW 46.44.030](#) (lengths), [RCW 46.44.034](#) (lengths – front & rear protrusions), [RCW 46.44.041](#) (gross weights).

⁹ [RCW 46.04.181](#); [RCW 46.16A.080\(3\)\(a\)-\(c\)](#).

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- Forklifts.¹⁰
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Fixed Load Vehicles

A fixed load vehicle means a commercial vehicle that has a structure or machinery permanently attached. Examples of structures or machinery permanently attached are, air compressors, bunk houses, conveyors, hoists, rock crushers, tool houses, and well drilling machines, among others. Fixed load vehicles are incapable of carrying any additional load other than the structure or machinery that is permanently attached.¹¹

A fixed load vehicle is exempt if it meets the following criteria:

1. The fixed load vehicle must be used or designed primarily to be used upon public streets or highways;¹²
2. The vehicle itself, together with its attachment, must be one that can be operated on public streets or highways without the need to obtain a special permit (such as the permit specified in [RCW 46.44.090](#) for vehicles of excessive size, either or load) or without the need for special signage, pilot cars, or other special authorization to operate on the streets or highways;¹³
3. The vehicle must be licensed and registered together with the structure or machine that is permanently attached;¹⁴
4. The license fee paid on the scale weight of the vehicle must include the combined weight of the vehicle and the structure or machine attached;¹⁵
5. The motor vehicle excise tax paid on the vehicle includes the value of the attached equipment or structure;¹⁶ *and*
6. The retail sales or use tax paid on the vehicles includes the value of the attached equipment or structure.¹⁷

Equipment Added to a Vehicle

Separate from fixed load vehicles, the taxability for equipment that is added to a vehicle depends more on the equipment being attached than the use of the vehicle. A key factor in determining if the equipment is taxable is if the equipment can be used separate from the vehicle. For equipment to be exempt, it must meet the following requirements:

¹⁰ [RCW 46.16A.080\(4\)](#).

¹¹ [RCW 46.04.186](#).

¹² [RCW 84.36.595\(1\)\(a\)](#).

¹³ The maximum requirements for vehicles operating on public roads or highways are set forth in [RCW 46.44.010](#) (outside width limit), [RCW 46.44.020](#) (height), [RCW 46.44.030](#) (lengths), [RCW 46.44.034](#) (lengths – front & rear protrusions), [RCW 46.44.041](#) (gross weights).

¹⁴ “Fixed load vehicles” are subject to the registration requirements of [RCW 46.17.335](#). For trucks and trailers that are converted to “fixed load vehicles” after licensing, see [RCW 82.44.035\(2\)](#).

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ [RCW 82.44.125\(1\)\(c\)](#).

¹⁷ [RCW 82.12.045\(2\)](#).

1. Be permanently attached to the vehicle;¹⁸
2. Be designed to be used on a vehicle and have no useful purpose apart from the vehicle;
3. Be licensed and registered with the vehicle as one unit; *and*
4. The license fee, motor vehicle excise tax, and retail sales or use tax paid includes the value of the equipment.

Example 1:

- **Facts:** A boom truck is a flatbed truck with a boom. The boom is permanently attached to the truck, and serves no useful purpose apart from the truck. The truck and boom are licensed and registered as one unit, and all fees and taxes paid include the boom.
- **Result:** The boom truck may be exempt from property tax as a motor vehicle, if the truck meets the definition of motor vehicle as described in this PTA.

Example 2:

- **Facts:** A welding machine is attached to a trailer and can be operated independently of the trailer. The welding machine has been attached merely as a convenience so that it does not require temporary tie downs while in transit.
- **Result:** The welding machine attached to a trailer is not exempt as part of the vehicle.

**Neighborhood
Electric Vehicles &
Medium-Speed
Electric Vehicles**

A “neighborhood electric vehicle” is a self-propelled, electrically powered motor vehicle whose speed attainable in one mile is more than twenty miles per hour and no more than twenty-five miles per hour.¹⁹

A “medium-speed electric vehicle” is a self-propelled, electrically powered motor vehicle, equipped with a roll cage or crush-proof body design, whose speed attainable in one mile is more than twenty-five miles per hour but not more than thirty-five miles per hour.²⁰

While “neighborhood electric vehicle” and “medium-speed electric vehicle” are included in the definition of “motor vehicle” under RCW 46.04.320, that alone does not mean those vehicles are exempt from property tax. The motor vehicle in question must still be a type of motor vehicle that is used, or is of the type that is designed **primarily** to be used, on public streets and highways.²¹ These types of

¹⁸ The Department interprets “permanently attached” to mean attached by weld, bolts, screws, or the like that would, at minimum, require tools to remove.

¹⁹ [RCW 46.04.357](#).

²⁰ [RCW 46.04.295](#).

²¹ [RCW 84.36.595\(1\)\(a\)](#).

vehicles are not designed primarily for use on public streets and highways, and do not qualify for an exemption from property tax under Title 84.
