

CHAPTER 9: OVERVIEW

Chapter 9 filings are not common, but they have become more frequent in recent years. From 1986-2011, there were 263 Chapter 9 bankruptcies filed nationwide, in 2011 there were 13 filed. The majority of the cases in the last 40 years have been for utility districts and not sovereign government entities. This trend is changing as large municipalities and counties have faced greater financial distress as a result of decreased tax revenue and increased spending on programs in the wake of the recent financial downturn.

On December 6, 1994, Orange County California became the largest municipality in U.S. history ever to file for bankruptcy.

The City of San Bernardino filed for bankruptcy protection under chapter 9 of the United States Bankruptcy Code on August 1, 2012. The case was filed in the Court's Riverside Division. The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals has designated Judge Meredith A. Jury to preside over the case.

The purpose of chapter 9 is to provide a financially-distressed municipality protection from its creditors while it develops and negotiates a plan for adjusting its debts. Reorganization of the debts of a municipality is typically accomplished either by extending debt maturities, reducing the amount of principal or interest, or refinancing the debt by obtaining a new loan. In a chapter 9 case, the bankruptcy court is generally limited to: determining if the debtor is eligible for filing a chapter 9 case; confirming a plan of debt adjustment; and ensuring implementation of the plan.

Although similar to other chapters in some respects, chapter 9 is significantly different in that there is no provision in the law for liquidation of the assets of the municipality and distribution of the proceeds to creditors. Such a liquidation or dissolution would undoubtedly violate the Tenth Amendment to the Constitution and the reservation to the states of sovereignty over their internal affairs. Indeed, due to the severe limitations placed upon the power of the bankruptcy court in chapter 9 cases (required by the Tenth Amendment and the Supreme Court's decisions in cases upholding municipal bankruptcy

legislation), the bankruptcy court generally is not as active in managing a municipal bankruptcy case as it is in corporate reorganizations under chapter 11. The functions of the bankruptcy court in chapter 9 cases are generally limited to approving the petition (if the debtor is eligible), confirming a plan of debt adjustment, and ensuring implementation of the plan. As a practical matter, however, the municipality may consent to have the court exercise jurisdiction in many of the traditional areas of court oversight in bankruptcy, in order to obtain the protection of court orders and eliminate the need for multiple forums to decide issues.

Eligibility

Only a "municipality" may file for relief under chapter 9. 11 U.S.C. § 109(c). The term "municipality" is defined in the Bankruptcy Code as a "political subdivision or public agency or instrumentality of a State." 11 U.S.C. § 101(40). The definition is broad enough to include cities, counties, townships, school districts, and public improvement districts. It also includes revenue-producing bodies that provide services which are paid for by users rather than by general taxes, such as bridge authorities, highway authorities, and gas authorities.

Section 109(c) of the Bankruptcy Codes sets forth four additional eligibility requirements for chapter 9:

1. the municipality must be specifically authorized to be a debtor by state law or by a governmental officer or organization empowered by State law to authorize the municipality to be a debtor;
2. the municipality must be insolvent, as defined in 11 U.S.C. § 101(32)(C);
3. the municipality must desire to effect a plan to adjust its debts; and
4. the municipality must either:
 - obtain the agreement of creditors holding at least a majority in amount of the claims of each class that the debtor intends to impair under a plan in a case under chapter 9;
 - negotiate in good faith with creditors and fail to obtain the agreement of creditors holding at least a majority in amount of the claims of each class that the debtor intends to impair under a plan;
 - be unable to negotiate with creditors because such negotiation is impracticable; or
 - reasonably believe that a creditor may attempt to obtain a preference.

Commencement of the Case

Municipalities must voluntarily seek protection under the Bankruptcy Code. 11 U.S.C. §§ 303, 901(a). They may file a petition only under chapter 9. A case under chapter 9 concerning an unincorporated tax or special assessment district that does not have its own officials is commenced by the filing of a voluntary "petition under this chapter by such district's governing authority or the board or body having authority to levy taxes or assessments to meet the obligations of such district." 11 U.S.C. § 921(a).

A municipal debtor must file a list of creditors. 11 U.S.C. § 924. Normally, the debtor files the list of creditors with the petition. However, the bankruptcy court has discretion to fix a different time if the debtor is unable to prepare the list of creditors in the form and with the detail required by the Bankruptcy Rules at the time of filing. Fed. R. Bankr. P. 1007.

Assignment of Case to a Bankruptcy Judge

One significant difference between chapter 9 cases and cases filed under other chapters is that the clerk of court does not automatically assign the case to a particular judge. "The chief judge of the court of appeals for the circuit embracing the district in which the case is commenced [designates] the bankruptcy judge to conduct the case." 11 U.S.C. § 921(b). This provision was designed to remove politics from the issue of which judge will preside over the chapter 9 case of a major municipality and to ensure that a municipal case will be handled by a judge who has the time and capability of doing so.

Notice of Case/ Objections/ Order for Relief

The Bankruptcy Code requires that notice be given of the commencement of the case and the order for relief. 11 U.S.C. § 923. The Bankruptcy Rules provide that the clerk, or such other person as the court may direct, is to give notice. Fed. R. Bankr. P. 2002(f). The notice must also be published "at least once a week for three successive weeks in at least one newspaper of general circulation published within the district in which the case is commenced, and in such other newspaper having a general circulation among bond dealers and bondholders as the court designates." 11 U.S.C. § 923. The court typically enters an order designating who is to give and receive notice by mail and identifying the newspapers in which the additional notice is to be published. Fed. R. Bankr. P. 9007, 9008.

The Bankruptcy Code permits objections to the petition. 11 U.S.C. § 921(c). Typically, objections concern issues like whether negotiations have been conducted in good faith, whether the state has authorized the municipality to file, and whether the petition was filed in good faith. If an objection to the petition is filed, the court must hold a hearing on the objection. *Id.* The court may dismiss a petition if it determines that the debtor did not file the petition in good faith or that the petition does not meet the requirements of title 11. *Id.*

If the petition is not dismissed upon an objection, the Bankruptcy Code requires the court to order relief, allowing the case to proceed under chapter 9. 11 U.S.C. § 921(d).

Automatic Stay

The automatic stay of section 362 of the Bankruptcy Code is applicable in chapter 9 cases. 11 U.S.C. §§ 362(a), 901(a). The stay operates to stop all collection actions against the debtor and its property upon the filing of the petition. Additional automatic stay provisions are applicable in chapter 9 that prohibit actions against officers and inhabitants of the debtor if the action seeks to enforce a claim against the

debtor. 11 U.S.C. § 922(a). Thus, the stay prohibits a creditor from bringing a mandamus action against an officer of a municipality on account of a prepetition debt. It also prohibits a creditor from bringing an action against an inhabitant of the debtor to enforce a lien on or arising out of taxes or assessments owed to the debtor.

Section 922(d) of title 11 limits the applicability of the stay. Under that section, a chapter 9 petition does not operate to stay application of pledged special revenues to payment of indebtedness secured by such revenues. Thus, an indenture trustee or other paying agent may apply pledged funds to payments coming due or distribute the pledged funds to bondholders without violating the automatic stay.

Proofs of Claim

In a chapter 9 case, the court fixes the time within which proofs of claim or interest may be filed. Fed. R. Bankr. P. 3003(c)(3). Many creditors may not be required to file a proof of claim in a chapter 9 case. For example, a proof of claim is deemed filed if it appears on the list of creditors filed by the debtor, unless the debt is listed as disputed, contingent, or unliquidated. 11 U.S.C. § 925. Thus, a creditor must file a proof of claim if the creditor's claim appears on the list of creditors as disputed, contingent, or unliquidated.

Court's Limited Power

Sections 903 and 904 of the Bankruptcy Code are designed to recognize the court's limited power over operations of the debtor.

Section 904 limits the power of the bankruptcy court to "interfere with – (1) any of the political or governmental powers of the debtor; (2) any of the property or revenues of the debtor; or (3) the debtor's use or enjoyment of any income-producing property" unless the debtor consents or the plan so provides. The provision makes it clear that the debtor's day-to-day activities are not subject to court approval and that the debtor may borrow money without court authority. In addition, the court cannot appoint a trustee (except for limited purposes specified in 11 U.S.C. § 926(a)) and cannot convert the case to a liquidation proceeding.

The court also cannot interfere with the operations of the debtor or with the debtor's use of its property and revenues. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that in a chapter 9 case, there is no property of the estate and thus no estate to administer. 11 U.S.C. § 902(1). Moreover, a chapter 9 debtor may employ professionals without court approval, and the only court review of fees is in the context of plan confirmation, when the court determines the reasonableness of the fees.

The restrictions imposed by 11 U.S.C. § 904 are necessary to ensure the constitutionality of chapter 9 and to avoid the possibility that the court might substitute its control over the political or governmental affairs or property of the debtor for that of the state and the elected officials of the municipality.

Similarly, 11 U.S.C. § 903 states that "chapter [9] does not limit or impair the power of a State to control, by legislation or otherwise, a municipality of or in such State in the exercise of the political or governmental powers of the municipality, including expenditures for such exercise," with two exceptions – a state law prescribing a method of composition of municipal debt does not bind any non-consenting creditor, nor does any judgment entered under such state law bind a nonconsenting creditor.

Role of the U.S. trustee/bankruptcy administrator

In a chapter 9 case, the role of the U.S. trustee (or the bankruptcy administrator in North Carolina or Alabama) (1) is typically more limited than in chapter 11 cases. Although the U.S. trustee appoints a creditors' committee, the U.S. trustee does not examine the debtor at a meeting of creditors (there is no meeting of creditors), does not have the authority to move for appointment of a trustee or examiner or for conversion of the case, and does not supervise the administration of the case. Further, the U.S. trustee does not monitor the financial operations of the debtor or review the fees of professionals retained in the case.