



TENNESSEE RETAIL
ASSOCIATION

ROLAND H. MYERS III
PRESIDENT & CEO

July 19, 2021

Submitted via email to regs.comments@federalreserve.gov

Ann E. Misback
Secretary, Board of Governors
Federal Reserve
20th Street & Constitution Ave, NW
Washington, DC 20551

RE: Docket No. R-1748, RIN 7100-AG15

Dear Ms. Misback:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Board of Governors' proposal to amend Regulation II to clarify the requirement that each debit card transaction must be allowed to be processed on at least two unaffiliated payment card networks for card-not-present transactions. On behalf of the members of the Tennessee Retail Association, I write to share my members' perspective. My members report that the fees associated with accepting debit cards and the growing barriers to accessing competitive networks is increasing their operating costs and ultimately impacting the customers they serve every day. The Tennessee Retail Association respectfully requests that the Board of Governors take immediate action to enforce the routing competition provisions and reduce the regulated rate as required by law.

All merchants rely on debit network routing options to help contain network costs. Networks competing for both banks' and retailers' business benefits all stakeholders in the merchant economy—and, most importantly, the consumer. Retail is highly competitive and functions on razor thin profit margins. When shopping, consumers have a great number of choices in their community and online. Price is often the only determining factor when a consumer makes a purchasing decision. The consumer has many choices on where and how to buy what they need; however, merchants have little to no choice when it comes to routing card payments used for online purchases.

The events of the past year placed previously unimaginable strains on the retail industry. Store owners pivoted from being ordered to close down their stores to collectively investing billions of dollars into health and safety protocols and measures. In a matter of weeks, consumers shifted a significant portion of their shopping to online and as a result went from paying with various tender forms to paying almost exclusively with debit and credit cards. In response to this change, retailers have invested significant resources to accept, fulfill, and deliver online orders to meet this increased consumer demand.

This shift has greatly increased Tennessee Retail Association members' cost of doing business, placing further strains on their ability to keep prices low--while also faced with rising inflation. The Board can provide direct relief to retailers in Tennessee by enforcing the routing provisions in the



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2010 debit reform law and reducing the regulated debit interchange rate commensurate with cost reductions.

While my members are overwhelmingly utilizing competitive routing for in-store transactions, they do not enjoy the same access to competitive debit networks when the card is used online and in mobile transactions. The Board's proposed clarification will do that, and establish that banks and payment networks must compete for retailer business—just as retailers compete for consumers' business and loyalty--regardless of where the transaction occurs. My members report that many banks already enable a second "PINless" network, and they may choose among service providers when the card is used online. Some of the largest issuers with a vast majority of the debit business are not enabling a second network--leaving the retailer with no option but to run across more expensive global networks.

The intent and language of the law is clear: retailers must have access to competitive networks for debit transactions. No network or issuing bank can remove that choice. The Board is entrusted to enforce the law, particularly when more dominant networks are benefiting at the expense of retailers and other networks. As the Board notes, currently only 6 percent of online debit transactions are being processed by single-message networks. This marketplace distortion is problematic and within the ability of the Board to rectify.

Therefore, the Tennessee Retail Association strongly supports the Board acting quickly to finalize the clarifications and enforce the debit routing provisions. Doing so will help ensure that my members will have access to at least two unaffiliated debit networks before they head into the busy holiday season. In addition to providing merchants with the competitive choice to which they are entitled, the Board of Governors' proposal will help bring about the competition that is needed to get debit interchange fees under control. Card processing fees ultimately increase prices for consumers and should not be allowed to continue to grow.

The Tennessee Retail Association also respectfully requests the Board act quickly to reduce the regulated debit rate to reflect both the reduction in cost and fraud burden of the regulated issuing banks, pursuant to the survey that was released by the Board at the same time as this request for comment. U.S. merchants paid \$24.38 billion in debit interchange fees in 2019. With the significant shift to online and card usage, that number will have increased dramatically in 2020.

The Board set the current regulated rate for covered issuers at 21 cents plus five basis points with an additional penny for fraud adjustment when the law was initially implemented ten years ago. However, even with issuer costs having reduced by half, the rate has never been adjusted. The Board, in its biannual survey of issuer costs and fraud losses, reports that it costs covered issuers less than four cents to process a debit transaction. Additionally, the Board noted "the percentage of losses from fraudulent transactions reported by covered issuers absorbed by merchants steadily increased from 38.3 percent to 56.3



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percent...” These two facts are indicators that it is time for the Board to bring the regulated rate into alignment with the statutory requirement that is both reasonable and proportional to issuers’ actual costs.

Thank you for your consideration of my members’ views. The Tennessee Retail Association is eager to work with the Board to ensure robust enforcement of the debit routing law and reducing the regulated debit rate.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Roland H. Myers III". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the last name "Myers" being particularly prominent.

President & CEO
Tennessee Retail Association