[Bond Case Briefs]

Municipal Finance Law Since 1971

[With Interest Rates Low, Colleges Get In On 100-Year Debt.]

Colleges in need of capital are eyeing a financing option that lets them pay back their investment over a longer period than most bonds.

The University of Pennsylvania wasn't necessarily looking to issue bonds this summer, much less bonds that would take 100 years to repay. But as its analysts watched the debt markets, they saw an opportunity that was too good to pass up.

Colleges and universities regularly secure funds to improve their facilities by issuing bonds that they'll have to repay, with interest, over several years. Usually, the longest they will take to repay the bonds is 30 years. Since the Great Recession, however, a dozen elite public and private universities, including Penn, have issued century bonds, which don't mature for 100 years.

That timeframe lets schools pay off massive investments over a lifetime or more, usually at a fixed, low interest rate. For the investors that buy them, such as insurance companies, century bonds are a chance to lock in guaranteed returns even in tough market conditions. But the opportunity to issue them doesn't come up often.

So far this year, the pieces have fallen into place for four universities: Penn, the University of Virginia, Rutgers and Georgetown. Together, they have issued more than $1.23 billion in 100-year financing.

Penn's finance team knew the university was interested in issuing debt sometime in the next year, said MaryFrances McCourt, vice president of finance and treasurer. The university had issued century bonds once before — $300 million in 2012 — to help upgrade its facilities to meet environmental goals. Several developments moved university officials to consider those bonds again.

The first major signal was that interest rates were low — really low. In July, interest rates for 30-year municipal bonds were lower only about 1% of the time, while rates on 30-year U.S. Treasury bonds were only lower about 2% of the time, according to McCourt's office. "It kind of takes you aback," she said.

The second factor was that lenders weren't paying a significant penalty for long-term bonds. Investors usually demand higher interest rates for longer-term investments. But when Penn analysts looked at the market, they found little difference in interest rates for shorter- and longer-term investments.

Other market indicators were also favorable: The interest rates Penn would have to pay on its bonds were lower than usual relative to U.S. Treasury bonds. And the interest rates for taxable bonds were not significantly higher than the rates on the tax-exempt municipal bonds that public and private universities typically depend on.

Plus, Penn's fiscal models showed that the century bonds would help, not hurt, its financial situation in an economic downturn. If cash ran short or if interest rates in the bond market spiked, having access to a low-interest pool of money could let the university meet its capital needs.

“You don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow. All we knew was what was staring at us then,” McCourt said. “We decided we’ve got to move quickly on this.”

Education Dive

by Daniel C. Vock

Oct. 29, 2019