
Muni Investors With $250,000 to Spend Want Individual Attention.

- **Separately managed accounts are becoming popular among them**
- **Lowering investment minimum has opened these up to more people**

Investors with $250,000 or more to spend on municipal bonds are increasingly seeking opportunities to pick and choose what goes into their portfolios.

They're flocking to investment vehicles called separately managed accounts that allow them to select individual securities with the help of a professional.

Assets under management for such accounts that invested in municipal bonds stood at $987 billion as of the first quarter, according to a JPMorgan Chase & Co. survey of 74 firms. Mutual funds held about $769.7 billion of municipals as of that period, Federal Reserve data showed.

Continue reading.

Bloomberg Markets

By Amanda Albright

July 17, 2023

Taking Advantage of an Anomaly in the Municipal Yield Curve.

An unusual inversion in the municipal-bond yield curve has resulted in attractive yields in short-dated issues. One compelling opportunity in this environment: municipal bond ladders.

The shape of the U.S. Treasury curve gets a lot of attention. Since yields on two-year notes moved above those of 10-year notes in early 2022, it has been hard to miss the deluge of headlines regarding the relevance and various implications of the inverted Treasury yield curve. What rarely gets much attention, however, is the municipal-bond yield curve.

A distinguishing characteristic of the municipal yield curve has been its consistent upward slope, with 30-year bonds always offering higher yields than short-term bonds. Several factors have contributed to this enduring steepness (as discussed in this Market View), especially certain behavioral biases among bond issuers and muni buyers. Much of municipal bond supply is in longer maturities, while a significant portion of the demand gravitates toward the shorter and intermediate parts of the curve, especially from individual investors, who are the predominant buyers of municipals. This tends to result in excess demand on the short end and higher yields at the long end. Over longer-term holding periods, those higher yields have translated to higher total returns in longer-maturity bonds.

Despite some flattening over the last year, the municipal curve has retained its upward slope between the two-year and 30-year maturity range — a stark contrast to the Treasury curve, which is inverted by roughly 100 basis points when measured both between the two-to-10-year, and the two-to-30-year maturity range. What is unique about today's environment, however, is that the two-to--0-year segment of the municipal yield curve inverted for the first time in history and has remained so for several months.

Continue reading.

Lord Abbett

By Stephen Hillebrecht, Nicholas Bragdon

July 17, 2023

BlackRock's Carney: Munis Might Lag If Treasuries Rally

Sean Carney, BlackRock's head of municipal strategy, says strong technicals and weak Treasuries are responsible for the current success of municipal bonds, but if Treasuries keep rallying munis may not be able to keep up. He speaks on "Bloomberg Markets: The Close."

Watch video.

Bloomberg Markets: The Close

July 12th, 2023

JPMorgan Launches 2 New Municipal Bond ETFs.

JPMorgan Asset Management has launched two new municipal bond ETFs on the New York Stock Exchange.

The JPMorgan High Yield Municipal ETF (NYSE Arca: JMHI) invests in high yield munis exempt from federal income taxes. The JPMorgan Sustainable Municipal Income ETF (NYSE Arca: JMSI), meanwhile, seeks to deliver current income exempt from federal income taxes by investing in munis with use of proceeds that provide positive social or environmental benefits.

JMHI may invest in securities rated below investment-grade, which offer a higher yield than investment-grade securities but involve a greater degree of risk. It currently has 384 holdings and carries an expense ratio of 0.35%.

JMSI uses a value-oriented approach to invest in a core fixed income portfolio of municipal bonds. It conducts an extensive risk/reward analysis of factors such as income, interest rate risk, credit risk, and the transaction's legal/technical structure. It had 436 holdings at the time of its inception and carries an expense ratio of 0.18%.

JPMorgan continues to expand its ETF suite at a rapid pace. In May, the investment firm launched the JP Morgan BetaBuilders Emerging Markets Equity ETF (BBEM) and the JP Morgan BetaBuilders U.S. TIPS 0-5 Year ETF (BBIP). JMHI and JMSI bring the full JPMorgan suite of U.S. ETFs to 54 products with more than $118 billion in AUM, as of July 17.

"JPMorgan has emerged as one of the fastest-growing fixed income ETF providers," said VettaFi's head of research Todd Rosenbluth. "It is great to see them expand their municipal bond suite."

ETFTRENDS.COM

by JAMES COMTOIS

JULY 17, 2023

Municipal Midyear Outlook: Come on In, the Water's Fine

With the highest yields in years, the muni bond market looks increasingly attractive.

After the worst showing in four decades in 2022, the muni market regained some ground in 2023. There was some chop along the way, but the Bloomberg Municipal Bond Index etched a 2.67% return through June 30.

As anxieties tempered toward midyear, investors gradually returned to the market. Most were attracted by strong muni issuer fundamentals, the likelihood the Fed is nearing the end of its rate-hike cycle, and historically high yields (Display).

Continue reading.

advisorperspectives.com

by Matthew Norton, Daryl Clements of AllianceBernstein, 7/17/23

Municipals Deliver on Seasonal Expectations.

June update

- Municipal bonds posted positive absolute and relative performance in June.
- Modest primary and secondary supply was outpaced by improved demand.
- While July has historically been a top-performing month, we maintain some near-term caution.

Market Overview

Municipal bonds delivered on expectations for the summer strength and posted positive absolute and relative performance in June. Despite a mid-month pause by the Federal Reserve at the June FOMC meeting, interest rates rose in the front and intermediate part of the yield curve as strong economic data, persistent inflation, and hawkish Fed guidance prompted the market to reprice for a longer tightening cycle. However, improved supply-and-demand technical helped municipals to significantly outperform comparable Treasuries. The S&P Municipal Bond Index returned 0.89%, bringing the year-to-date total return to 2.52%. Longer duration (i.e., more sensitive to interest rate changes) and lower-rated bonds performed best.

Continue reading.

advisorperspectives.com

by Peter Hayes, James Schwartz, Sean Carney of BlackRock, 7/13/23

SIFMA US Municipal Bonds Statistics.

SIFMA Research tracks issuance, trading, and outstanding data for the U.S. municipal bond market. Issuance data is broken out by bond type, bid type, capital type, tax type, coupon type and callable status and includes average maturity. Trading volume data shows total and average daily volume and has customer bought/customer sold/dealer trade breakouts. Outstanding data includes holders' statistics. Data is downloadable by monthly, quarterly and annual statistics including trend analysis.

YTD statistics include:

- Issuance (as of June) $178.5 billion, -18.2% Y/Y
- Trading (as of June) $12.6 billion ADV, -9.6% Y/Y
- Outstanding (as of 1Q23) $4.0 trillion, -0.8% Y/Y

Download xls

July 5, 2023

Fitch Global Cross-Sector Mid-Year Outlook 2023.

Fitch Ratings' 2023 sector outlooks have shown positive momentum since the beginning of the year, reflecting stronger-than-expected economic growth in 1H23. The US labour market and consumption has held up despite monetary policy tightening and the March banking liquidity scare. The end to Zero-Covid resulted in a consumption-driven bounce in China in 1Q23 and several other large emerging markets have had substantive improvements to their 2023 macro outlook. Forecasts for the eurozone have also improved relative to our earlier expectations. A total of 20 sector outlooks were changed since they were first published in December. Of these, 17 were in a positive direction, with 15 changing to 'neutral' from 'deteriorating' and the remaining two to "improving" from 'neutral'. The trends in our sector outlooks have been rooted in updates to our economic base case. Our June Global Economic Outlook includes a 2023 global growth forecast of 2.4%, up from 1.4% at the beginning of the year. This includes a material increase in our China growth forecast to 5.6% from 4.1% as well as positive changes to our US and eurozone growth forecasts to 1.2% and 0.8%, from 0.2% for both at end-2022.

ACCESS REPORT

Tue 27 Jun, 2023 – 11:55 AM ET

Fitch: Most North American Sectors Retain Deteriorating Outlook

Fitch Ratings-New York-30 June 2023: Nearly three quarters of North American sectors maintain a deteriorating outlook for 2023, reflecting Fitch Ratings' expectation for weaker core credit drivers relative to 2022. Inflation, rising rates, and tightening lending conditions remain key considerations for North American sector outlooks.

There are no mid-year changes to our sector outlooks except for U.S. REITs, for which we changed the sector outlook to deteriorating from neutral, taking into account further tightening of commercial real estate (CRE) lending conditions amid ongoing valuation pressure and macro headwinds.

Economic growth in 1H23 was stronger than expected, supported by robust employment and consumption, which have been mostly resilient to rising rates. We have raised our 2023 economic growth forecasts for the U.S. to 1.2% from 1.0% and Canada to 1.3% from 0.8%.

However, demand indicators are showing signs of slowing, according to our latest Global Economic Outlook. We forecast a shallow U.S. recession in 4Q23-1Q24, driven by tighter credit conditions, lower savings, reduced business investment and expected negative job growth. The effects of these factors on the consumer are key considerations underlying our deteriorating outlooks for financial institutions, consumer securitizations, the retail sector and sectors tied to residential real estate. For some corporations and infrastructure projects, demand erosion may weaken pricing power, and still-high operating costs and capex could pose challenges to cost recovery and contribute to margin pressures.

Anticipated regulatory changes as a result of the March banking sector crisis, combined with recession concerns and lower banking system liquidity from monetary tightening, will continue to impair credit availability. Financial sector tightening has been most evident in refinancing risk for CRE loans, but leveraged loans are also starting to feel its effects. Weak demand and higher vacancies have caused certain office and retail property values to drop, which may have material negative implications for REITs, CMBS, municipalities and financial institutions.

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[What Puerto Rico's Prepa Bankruptcy Means for Munis.]

Craig Brandon, Eaton Vance's co-head of municipals, discusses what the bankruptcy of Puerto Rico's main source of electricity means for muni investors. Speaking on "Bloomberg Markets: The Close," Brandon also explains why he finds municipal bonds attractive right now.

Watch video.

Bloomberg Markets: The Close – Muni Moment

June 28th, 2023

Fitch: SCOTUS College Rulings Have No Immediate Rating Impacts but May Affect Future Enrollment

Fitch Ratings-Chicago/New York-30 June 2023: Fitch Ratings does not expect any immediate rating impacts on Fitch-rated colleges and universities stemming from the U.S. Supreme Court rulings on June 29, 2023 to ban the express consideration of applicants' race in college admissions. However, long-term effects on the sector are possible.

The court's decisions will apply to all U.S. public and private institutions (except the U.S. military academies), but the heightened scrutiny of college admissions following the decisions is expected to be focused on selective colleges such as the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill ('AAA'/Stable) and Harvard University, the named subjects of the cases. Fitch does not expect the impact of the rulings to impair enrollment numbers or demand at these or other selective schools.

Fitch believes colleges and universities have been preparing for this possible court outcome and will continue to develop their enrollment pipelines to meet their strategic aims around diversity and access, short of explicit admission policies around race. The use of race in admissions has already been banned in nine states. While some institutions in these states cite negative effects on the diversity of their student bodies, overall demand and enrollment (key revenue and ratings factors for many institutions) have not been directly impacted.

Over the longer term, however, the impact on student demand and enrollment in the sector could vary. In the year following California's ban on race-conscious admissions, the number of Black and Hispanic students fell sharply at the University of California ('AA'/Stable) and California State University systems, according to a recent Chronicle of Education analysis. Federal government data shows that college enrollment rates were lowest among Black, Hispanic and Native American racial/ethnic groups. This data also shows that over the last decade, the only group with meaningful growth in undergraduate enrollment was Hispanics, with 2.6 million enrolled in 2010 and 3.3 million enrolled in 2021.

Based on demographic data, Fitch expects that high school graduating classes will become more diverse while shrinking in absolute number of students. Minority and underrepresented groups will become an increasingly important pipeline of growth in an overall dwindling domestic enrollment pool of high school graduates. A 'chilling effect' that discourages college applications from these vulnerable groups of students could have implications for the sector overall. In particular, smaller, less selective institutions that rely on growth in these populations to maintain viable enrollment levels may be further challenged.

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[3 Tips for Public Sector Leaders Looking to Take Advantage of Federal Funding for Infrastructure.]

State and local government agencies have come to love some of the recent alphabet soup cooked up on Capitol Hill. There was the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Securities (CARES) Act, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSA) and the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 (ARP) to aid communities with pandemic response and recovery. ARP included $122 billion in Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds, giving K-12 districts access to critical funding that can be used for updating, renovating and reopening schools. More recently, the passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) promises much-needed financial support and relief to strained communities.

Thanks to these pieces of Congressional legislation, there has been a historic outpouring of federal funding into states, counties, cities, towns, school districts and other public entities over the past two years.

While the legislation may at times seem like it’s a gift with a shiny red bow on top, it can also feel like a gift wrapped in nothing but layers of red tape. This influx of federal funds has resurfaced a major challenge that public sector procurement officials must navigate to be good stewards of taxpayer dollars. With typically short cycle times to distribute the funds, government professionals must stay on their toes and position themselves to take advantage of every opportunity.

Continue reading.

americancityandcounty.com

Written by Bill Symon

7th July 2023

How Cities Can Navigate Their State's Broadband Preemption Laws.

The National League of Cities takes a look at how municipalities can expand broadband even when state authority may limit their ability to do so.

When state preemption laws on municipal broadband expansion are too restrictive, local leaders should learn how to work around bureaucratic red tape so they can deliver critical internet access to their communities, one expert says.

State-level legislative restrictions can exacerbate local digital divides and resident burdens, said Christy Baker-Smith, a director of research and data at the National League of Cities. Plus, they can cause cities to lose out on federal funding such as the recently announced $42 billion available under the bipartisan infrastructure law meant to support states' efforts to improve broadband for under- and unserved communities.

A brief released last week by NLC found that 44% of states limit local decision-making on issues related to broadband services and programs in some way. NLC's findings are based on data from 2019 to 2022 gathered by the Center for Public Health Law Research at Temple University's Beasley School of Law.

Continue reading.

ROUTE FIFTY

by KAITLYN LEVINSON

JULY 6, 2023

'Reconnecting Communities' Grant Applications Expanded.

The federal Transportation Department announced $3.35 billion in grant opportunities to reconnect communities divided by highways, rail lines and other infrastructure.

State and local agencies could get a slice of up to $3.35 billion to repair problems created by highways, rail lines and other infrastructure that divides communities, the Biden administration announced this week.

The U.S. Department of Transportation said it will combine the application process for two similar grant programs that Congress created in recent years to make things easier for potential applicants. The joint application will allow communities to get a portion of $198 million through the Reconnecting Communities pilot program or $3.155 billion for the Neighborhood Access and Equity Program. Submissions are due by Sept. 28.

"Transportation should never divide communities. Its purpose is to connect people to jobs, schools, housing, groceries, family, places of worship and more," said U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg in a statement. "By combining these two grant programs into a single application, we are making it easier for communities to seek and receive the funding they need to build better, safer, inclusive infrastructure for the future."

Continue reading.

Route Fifty

By Daniel C. Vock,
Senior Reporter, Route Fifty

JULY 6, 2023

Some Hospitals That Spent Big on Nurses During Pandemic Are Now Short on Cash.

Distressed institutions are closing unprofitable services, selling assets to avoid default on debts

Kaweah Health paid more than $200 an hour for nurses during the worst of the pandemic's upheaval. Pay rates have eased, but the Visalia, Calif., health system's financial struggles persist.

High labor costs and financial losses have put Kaweah afoul of lenders, who demanded $18 million of its dwindling reserves as a guarantee for bondholders. To preserve cash, Kaweah closed a diabetes clinic and a nursing home that lost money. It hasn't been enough to recover. Kaweah plans to ask the state for a loan. "We'll get what we get," Chief Executive Gary Herbst said.

Distressed hospitals are reporting they don't have enough cash to satisfy lenders, which typically require borrowers to meet periodic profit and other financial targets. Lenders are demanding that hospitals hire consultants to help turn around their operations or set aside cash for repayment. Failures to meet such obligations to lenders can technically count as default, putting hospitals at risk of credit downgrades and higher interest rates.

Continue reading.

The Wall Street Journal

By Heather Gillers and Melanie Evans

July 5, 2023 5:30 am ET

Munis Wrap the First Half of 2023 (Bloomberg Audio)

Joe Mysak, Editor of the Bloomberg Brief: Municipal Bonds for Bloomberg News, joins us to discuss the municipal bond market. Hosted by Paul Sweeney and Madison Mills.

Listen to audio.

Jun 30, 2023

[Muni Market Second Half Outlook (Bloomberg Audio)]

Eric Kazatsky, Senior Municipal Strategist with Bloomberg Intelligence, updates us on the muni bond market. Hosted by Madison Mills and John Tucker.

[Listen to audio.]

Jul 07, 2023

[Stay Defensive With Intermediate Municipal Bonds.]

While it appears to be safe to add duration to investors' fixed income portfolios, there's still reason to be cautious. Or at least, defensive. So, for advisors looking to defensively construct their portfolios, intermediate municipal bonds may be just what they're looking for.

Despite industry observers saying that bonds are back, fixed income markets and interest rates have still been volatile this year. And while the Federal Reserve paused its rate hikes in June, the Fed is unlikely to lower rates anytime soon. While having dropped from its 9% peak last June, inflation could be stickier than it's been in a long time.

While many advisors are becoming a little more risk-on with duration, they're not ready to go full long duration. That's where the Vanguard Tax-Exempt Bond ETF (VTEB) can come into play.

[Continue reading.]

ETFTRENDS.COM

by JAMES COMTOIS

JUNE 28, 2023

[Thoughts From The Municipal Bond Desk (June Edition)]

Summary

- The municipal market has been able to post positive performance thus far in 2023 despite negative net mutual fund flows.
- Negative fund flows have been manageable as issuance has remained muted, and flows are expected to turn as funds from coupons and maturing bonds reenter the market.
- Elevated inflation has hampered the profitability of not-for-profit health care systems. We believe bottom-up fundamental credit research will be the key to investing in the sector going forward.

[Continue reading.]

Seeking Alpha

Jun. 30, 2023

[First Half Public Finance Primary Issuance Down 20%, Foreshadows Potential Scarcity of Municipal Investment Options.]

- Issuance was 20% lower in the first half of 2023 compared to the first six months of 2022.
- Activity averaged $29 billion a month, matching our expectation.
- Municipal mutual fund flows are turning, tells us municipal investor sentiment is strengthening.
- A scarcity of municipal bonds could develop because of the supply and demand dynamic in the near term, and because of federal tax policy in the medium term.
- The above dynamic, along with historically attractive municipals yields, reinforces the case we have been making to investors about the appealing nature of the municipal bond market.

Continue reading.

advisorhub.com

by Tom Kozlik, HilltopSecurities

July 5, 2023

[Amid Recession Fears, Get Exposure to Municipal Bonds.]

With the ongoing capital markets discussion on inverted yield curves, the threat of a recession still looms. Fixed income investors need not fret, however, if they consider the right exposure — one option being municipal bonds.

Quality is still key when it comes to getting bond exposure, even if the bond market is rallying in 2023. That said, municipal bonds offer just that with their low credit risk and tax-free yields.

"Municipal bonds are generally a high-quality asset class with a very low historical default rate," said Nathan Will, principal and head of municipal credit research at Vanguard. "What sets them apart is the combination of strong credit fundamentals and the opportunity to earn tax-exempt income."

Now the question is: Where exactly should investors start? One place is the American Century Diversified Municipal Bond ETF (TAXF B), which offers diversified exposure via its 450+ holdings, as of April 30. Furthermore, the fund offers an actively managed strategy that allows for portfolio tailoring by seasoned portfolio managers.

Continue reading.

etfdb.com

by Ben Hernandez

Jul 05, 2023

[Diversification and Quality Dominate: An Analysis of Top Performing Muni Strategies]

According to investment manager Lord Abbett, the municipal bond market outlook appears positive midway through 2023, driven by factors such as the anticipated cessation of interest rate hikes by the U.S. Federal Reserve, moderating inflation, and an improving supply-demand dynamic. These developments are expected to make municipal bonds more attractive to investors seeking tax-free income, notwithstanding persistent uncertainties related to inflation and potential market crises.

The Federal Reserve's projected pause in rate hikes, coupled with signals of decelerating economic growth and easing inflation, may bode well for municipal bond market performance and fund flows. Higher yields on municipal issues offer investors a chance to secure appealing return prospects, providing a buffer for total returns that could be beneficial in the face of potential economic downturns.

Recovery in demand and an uptick in mutual fund inflows are predicted as rate volatility diminishes. Despite recent trends of negative mutual fund flows, the decrease rate is slower than the previous year. Supply has been somewhat limited to date this year, attributed to issuers postponing market entry due to elevated interest rates and substantial reserves. However, a catch-up in supply is anticipated in the second half of the year.

Continue reading.

dividend.com

by Shauvik Haldar

Jul 05, 2023

[NASBO Fiscal Survey of States - Spring, 2023]

Overview – Spring 2023

This edition of the report provides state-by-state information on general fund spending, revenue, ending balances, and rainy day funds for fiscal 2022 (actual), fiscal 2023 (estimated) and fiscal 2024 (recommended). It also contains information on recommended changes to taxes and fees and employee compensation.

Highlights of the Spring 2023 Fiscal Survey include:

General Fund Spending

- Recommended budgets for fiscal 2024 call for general fund spending of $1.23 trillion, a 2.5 percent increase over a high baseline established in fiscal 2023.
- General fund spending is on track to grow 12.6 percent in fiscal 2023, following a record annual increase of 16.8 percent in fiscal 2022; spending growth in both years was affected in part by an

uptick in one-time expenditures. Adjusted for inflation, spending grew 8.1 percent in fiscal 2022 and an estimated 4.4 percent in fiscal 2023.
- Twenty-three states reported net mid-year spending increases in fiscal 2023, including one-time expenditures from surplus funds, while five states reported net mid-year cuts; only one of the five states attributed the cuts to a revenue shortfall.

General Fund Revenue

- After two consecutive years of double-digit percentage growth, general fund revenue in the aggregate is estimated to decrease 0.3 percent in fiscal 2023 from the high baseline established in fiscal 2022 and decline by another 0.7 percent in fiscal 2024 proposed budget forecasts.
- 45 states reported fiscal 2023 general fund revenues were exceeding enacted revenue forecasts; at the time of data collection, current estimates for fiscal 2023 were up 6.5 percent compared to original revenue projections used in enacted budgets.
- States recommended net tax reductions in fiscal 2024 with a general fund revenue impact of -$13.8 billion (1.2 percent as a share of forecasted revenue for fiscal 2024); more than half of this total impact (-$7.3 billion) is attributable to one-time/temporary tax cuts.

State Balances

- 39 states are on track to further increase the size of their rainy day fund balances in fiscal 2023. The median rainy day fund balance as a share of spending is expected to increase from 11.5 percent in fiscal 2022 to 12.0 percent in fiscal 2023 and 13.5 percent in recommended budgets for fiscal 2024. In nominal dollars, rainy day fund balances in the aggregate rose to $164.3 billion in fiscal 2022 and are expected to drop slightly in fiscal 2023.
- Total balances (rainy day funds + general fund ending balances) by the end of fiscal 2022 were more than 3.5 times their aggregate level in nominal dollars at the end of fiscal 2020, and represented 37.3 percent as a share of total general fund expenditures. As states begin to draw down their elevated general fund balances, total balances are projected at 22.8 percent of general fund expenditures by the end of fiscal 2024, according to governors' budgets.

View the full report.

California Is Signaling a Recession. Will the Rest of the U.S. Follow?

The U.S. unemployment rate has fallen to historically low levels in the past two years, even as the Federal Reserve has ramped up interest rates to tamp down inflation. But record-low unemployment isn't the case any more in California, the nation's most populous state, where a steadily climbing unemployment rate might be moving beyond normalization and into treacherous territory.

It is tempting to write off California's unemployment spike as a localized effect of the tech industry's rebalancing. Yet, based on at least one economic indicator, the state's labor outlook is signaling that a nationwide downturn could be in the offing.

California's unemployment rate increased from 3.83% in August 2022 to 4.5% in May 2023; the national unemployment rate was 3.7% last month. That means California's three-month moving average rose by 0.63 percentage points relative to its low in the past year, putting the state in or near recession territory, according to the well regarded Sahm rule.

Continue reading.

Barron's

By Megan Leonhardt

June 21, 2023

S&P: In The Race To A Fiscal 2024 Budget, U.S. States Face Off Against Stubborn Inflation And Slowing Revenue Growth

Key Takeaways

- Fifteen states have yet to enact their fiscal 2024 budgets. Two of those states without a fiscal 2024 budget have additional time to complete negotiations.
- In S&P Global Ratings' view, most U.S. states' fiscal 2024 budgets are structurally balanced; however, some budget negotiations could extend past the fiscal year-end as legislators work to balance inflation-driven spending demands and provide tax relief amid softening revenue conditions.
- Of the remaining states without a budget, only one is projecting a revenue shortfall.
- States' strong reserve levels provide cushion to address shallow economic growth projected in fiscal 2024.

Continue reading.

22 Jun, 2023

Fitch: U.S. Toll Roads Hold Steady as Summer Travel Approaches and Recession Looms

Fitch Ratings-New York-20 June 2023: The typical seasonal upswing in traffic going into the summer months bodes well for U.S. toll roads, although a potential recession could soften demand for leisure and commercial traffic, according to Fitch Ratings.

A positive trend for leisure traffic this year is lower gas prices. The average U.S. gas price is relatively high compared to historical levels but is lower than prices of over $4 per gallon last summer. Vehicle miles travelled peak in the summer months thanks largely to leisure traffic, which is more prone to declines from high gas prices than commuter traffic. 2023 traffic growth will continue to be driven by the strength of regional economies. Growth due to recovery from the pandemic has tapered off and new traffic patterns have settled, according to Fitch.

"Passenger traffic has not fully recovered largely due to telecommuting, which trends higher in the northeast than the south," said Anne Tricerri, Director at Fitch Ratings. "Downward shifts in traffic since the pandemic are relatively small and have not been material enough to result in downgrades."

Fitch does not anticipate rating action from a potential mild recession in 2023 since its forward-looking metrics assess credit quality through the full economic cycle.

Traffic on facilities with significant leisure traffic, such as Mid-Bay Bridge (BBB+/BBB/Stable), which links to the beach in the Florida panhandle and Rickenbacker Causeway (BBB+/Stable) in Miami surged past pre-pandemic levels in the summer of 2021 due to pent-up travel demand. Last summer, traffic declined year-over-year but was still higher than in 2019.

Facilities across the southern U.S. have performed well since the pandemic due to underlying economic drivers. Florida and Texas had the third and sixth highest compound annual growth rates in population from 2020 to 2022, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. High population growth is evident in the increase in toll transactions. Fitch-rated toll roads in Florida and Texas have on average been the fastest to recover. Traffic on Florida’s Central Florida Expressway (A+/A/Stable), Miami-Dade Expressway (BBB+/Stable), and Alligator Alley (A+/Stable) and Texas’ Harris County Toll Road Authority (AA/Stable) surpassed 2019 levels by the end of 2021 and continues to grow.

In the Northeast, commercial traffic on Pennsylvania Turnpike (AA-/A/Stable) and New Jersey Turnpike (A+/Stable) exceeds 2019 levels, though total traffic has not fully recovered due to lower passenger traffic.

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Additional information is available on www.fitchratings.com

Fitch: Performance Dims As Expected for U.S. Public Power Utilities

Fitch Ratings-New York-20 June 2023: A decade of de-leveraging has officially come to an end for U.S. public power utilities, according to Fitch Ratings in its latest peer review for the sector.

Leverage metrics for U.S. public power utilities weakened meaningfully, effectively reversing the trend of deleveraging that began over 10 years ago. Coverage of full obligations also weakened for retail systems, wholesale systems and the portfolio overall, ending an upward trend that began as early as 2015 for certain systems.

“Outlooks for public power utilities by and large will remain stable thanks to strong financial cushions and independent rate-setting authority, though the performance declines are noteworthy and warrant closer scrutiny,” said Fitch Managing Director Dennis Pidherny. “Utilities are now contending with higher costs and weaker liquidity, with cash holdings declining in order to meet higher operating expenses, capital spending and working capital requirements. Cash on hand medians are also down for both retail and wholesale systems to levels not seen in over eight years.”

The median capex-to-depreciation ratio for wholesale systems was 76%, the seventh time in nine years that median capex-to-depreciation remained at or below 100%, suggesting continuance of a low reinvestment cycle.

This year's results are in line with Fitch's outlook for U.S. public power utilities, which the rating agency revised to 'deteriorating' late last year. The sector is contending with a more challenging environment and the likelihood of a broader economic recession, which Fitch economists are projecting to take hold later this year.

Fitch's 'U.S. Public Power — Peer Review' is available at 'www.fitchratings.com'.

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Public Transit Systems Remain Vulnerable to Cyber Threats.

Despite repeated warnings, a report on Washington, D.C.'s transit authority finds it is still at risk of a cyberattack. Its issues aren't unique, though, and experts warn that public transportation at-large is vulnerable unless leaders act.

In early January, a former contractor for the transit agency in Washington, D.C., was vacationing in Russia when he opened his computer and logged onto a sensitive agency directory.

Four years before that, penetration testing by a third-party revealed several "critical" cybersecurity vulnerabilities on a train the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority was operating. That same year, an internal audit raised concerns that there was a lack of encryption on WMATA-owned devices.

These incidents were all highlighted in a recent report that chronicled ongoing cybersecurity vulnerabilities at WMATA. But experts warn that these types of issues are common in transit agencies across the country and that public transportation will remain vulnerable unless leaders act.

Continue reading.

ROUTE FIFTY

by CHRIS TEALE

JUNE 23, 2023

[Feds Want to Help Prevent Cyberattacks On the Water Sector.]

The National Institute of Standards and Technology is seeking input on guidelines for mitigating the risks of cyberattacks on water and wastewater systems.

The National Institute of Standards and Technology is wading into the water sector with its first-ever cybersecurity framework designed specifically for water infrastructure.

NIST's National Cybersecurity Center of Excellence is seeking input from technology vendors, water sector members and other key stakeholders on a new practical reference design for mitigating cyber risks in water and wastewater systems.

Jim McCarthy, a NIST senior security engineer and the lead federal researcher for the project, told Nextgov/FCW that the goal is to provide the water and wastewater sector with practical examples of commercial tools and technologies that can be used to prevent major cyber intrusions.

Continue reading.

ROUTE FIFTY

by CHRIS RIOTTA

JUNE 23, 2023

The National Cybersecurity Strategy: A Guide for Critical Infrastructure Owners and Operators

Protecting critical infrastructure has become a national security priority. On March 2, 2023, the Biden administration released the National Cybersecurity Strategy, a far-reaching document that sets forth its vision for the nation's public and private cyberdefenses.

The initiative seeks to shift some of the burden of mitigating cybersecurity risks away from end users and critical infrastructure operators to the private sector enterprises that are best-positioned to make meaningful advancements in security and resiliency. The Strategy also emphasizes realigning incentives to favor long-term investments for the private sector.

The Strategy is organized around five pillars:

1. Defend critical infrastructure.
2. Disrupt and dismantle threat actors.
3. Shape market forces to drive security and resilience.
4. Invest in a resilient future.
5. Forge international partnerships to pursue shared goals.

Each pillar contains specific strategic objectives designed to build on prior programs and guide the implementation efforts of governmental and private sector entities.

The New Regulatory Wave

The Strategy seeks to usher in a new cybersecurity regulatory paradigm for critical infrastructure sectors by departing from voluntary guidelines to mandatory cyber regulations, which the Strategy concedes will require some legislative action. Driving this initiative is a demand for a "more intentional, more coordinated, and more well-resourced approach to cyber defense."

The Strategy also recognizes the heightened risks in the current era of global digitalization and deepening digital dependencies accelerated by emerging technologies. Rapid technological advancements are also forcing critical infrastructure sectors to grapple with the risks of converging informational technology and operational technology systems, which must be designed and secured in very different ways. A complicated geopolitical environment exacerbates those risks, as state-sponsored cyberthreats to critical infrastructure are on the rise.

While specifics of how the Strategy will be carried out are uncertain, implementing the objectives promptly will be key in an evolving world, where threats may outpace regulation and lawmaking. The Biden administration has alluded to some overarching principles in addition to mandatory regulations, such as security by design as a core business principle, operational availability to avoid systemic interruptions, and the promotion of rulemaking harmony across jurisdictions.

The New Insurance

Cyber insurance is now offered as a standalone type of coverage that earns billions of dollars in premiums for the insurance industry. This relatively "new" type of insurance covers various types of liabilities or direct losses from events related to electronic activities and systems. Part of the Strategy involves exploring a federal cyber insurance backstop, reflecting a partnership between the government and insurance industry to support the issuance of cyber coverage for commercial entities, consistent with national goals. The benefits of a cyber insurance backstop could be multifold:

- **Benefits to Insurers:** Increased financial certainty and stability, and a potential mechanism for more standardization and data sharing.
- **Benefits to Insured Companies:** Potentially more affordable coverage, as well as potential standardization and improvement of terms.
- **Benefits to the Public:** Increased prevalence of cyber insurance, encouraging a more sophisticated, resilient society, with the potential for improved data sharing among public and private actors.

Challenges

For all of its benefits and forward-looking initiatives, there are some challenges with analyzing and implementing the Strategy. The first is harmonization of duplicative or overlapping requirements. Companies facing a cyber incident are often challenged with juggling multiple (sometimes conflicting) reporting requirements, which can divert personnel and resources away from remediating the actual threat. The Strategy recognizes the challenge of regulatory harmonization, but is scarce on implementation details.

One of the trickiest pieces for companies to navigate is understanding how the agencies may address the recommendations from the Strategy with the tools they have today—not just their processes and people, but also the extent of their legal authority. Some federal agencies already have significant and broad security and safety authority in the critical infrastructure sector, and the Strategy makes it clear that regulators should consider leveraging those powers to start executing outlined priorities.

Recent Federal Initiatives Targeting the US Cyber Posture

In addition to announcing the Strategy, the federal government has taken steps in other areas, while coordinating with state municipal authorities, private sector, and federal stakeholders to improve the national cyber posture and capabilities in the face of intensifying cybersecurity threats.

Among these efforts include guidance by the Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency (part of the US Department of Homeland Security) on software bill of materials and updating the cross-sector Cybersecurity Performance Goals; the proposed requirements by the US Securities & Exchange Commission for cybersecurity risks; the US Environmental Protection Agency's memorandum for public water systems; and the expansion of the Transportation Security Administration's pipeline-focused security directives to the aviation and rail sectors.

Assess. Plan. Monitor.

For critical infrastructure owners and operators, there are several key steps to take today:

- **Policy Advocacy**: Regulator education is critical. Consider participation in stakeholder opportunities to shape requirements before formal rulemaking, if possible.
- **Interdisciplinary:** Compliance can be achieved through coordination among IT/OT, security, compliance, and legal departments, as well as by supply chain management, human resources, finance, and other personnel. Shortchanging one area may increase a company's risk exposure.
- **Cultural Change:** Ensure that cybersecurity is taken seriously not only at the highest levels, but also throughout the entire organization. Use guidance, standards, best practices, and continuous training to shore up cyber posture.

Morgan, Lewis & Bockius LLP – Arjun Prasad Ramadevanahalli, Stephen M. Spina and Robert Jacques

June 23 2023

Hospital Cyber Attacks Surge, Risking Struggling Bottom Lines.

- **Hackers target health care to grab data on millions of people**
- **Large systems attacked with smaller facilities most at risk**

Cyberattacks on US hospitals are on the rise, adding a layer of financial pressure onto an industry still struggling to recover from the pandemic.

Health facilities have been hit with 226 digital incursions affecting 36 million people this year, on track to be more widespread than 2022 attacks, according to John Riggi, the national advisor for cybersecurity and risk at the American Hospital Association.

Cyber raids on hospitals more than tripled in the past five years and have become more sophisticated, just when hospitals are coping with higher costs for labor and supplies and grappling with staff shortages. The industry in 2022 had what Moody's Investors Service analyst Matthew Cahill called "arguably the worst year in health-care history" for financial performance.

Continue reading.

Bloomberg Technology & Cybersecurity

By Lauren Coleman-Lochner

June 23, 2023

State Coffers to Take a Hit With the End of Extra Federal Medicaid Funding.

During the pandemic, states received more than $117 billion in additional federal Medicaid funding in return for pausing disenrollments. That extra money is set to end this year.

Much of the attention on Medicaid these days is focused on how many people are losing their health care coverage, as states for the first time since the beginning of the pandemic and the end of the public health emergency go about reevaluating eligibility for the roughly 93 million people on the program.

But garnering less attention is the impact Medicaid will have on state coffers, notes a new study by the health care policy think tank KFF.

During the pandemic, states received more than $117 billion in additional federal Medicaid funding in return for states pausing disenrollments. That increased funding will be gradually going away over the next few months. And even though millions are expected to be removed from the rolls, the cost to states is still likely to be higher without the extra federal funds.

Continue reading.

ROUTE FIFTY

by KERY MURAKAMI

JUNE 22, 2023

Wall Street Sours on America's Downtowns.

The pessimism from investors who bet on office buildings and mass transit can be seen in market signals that are flashing red

Wall Street is betting against America's downtowns.

Investors are paying less for bonds linked to New York subways and buses. Downtown-focused real-estate investment trusts trade at less than half their prepandemic levels. Bondholders are demanding extra interest to hold office-building debt.

Downtowns have been a mother lode for American cities over the years, providing billions of dollars in tax revenue along with their distinctive skylines. In turn, investors who bet on downtown office towers, or on the trains and buses delivering workers to them, could generally trust they held a winning hand.

Continue reading.

The Wall Street Journal

By Heather Gillers

June 20, 2023

The Best and Worst Run Cities in America.

By comparing the operating efficiency of 149 of the largest U.S. cities, experts at WalletHub, the personal finance firm, have come up with a score for which ones are managed best.

The U.S. has over 100,000 cities and towns, including 317 that have a population over 100,000. Everybody has a favorite, but which ones operate the most efficiently? That's the question WalletHub, the personal finance firm, set out to answer. They wanted to learn how well city officials manage and spend public funds by comparing the quality of services residents receive against the city's total budget.

Looking at 149 big and small cities in the country, researchers were able to quantify the complexities of city management. They constructed a "Quality of Services" score made up of 36 metrics grouped into six service categories, which was then measured against the city's per capita budget.

The result? The city of Nampa, Idaho, came out with the highest score, followed by Lexington, Ky.; Nashua, N.H.; and Boise. At the bottom of the list were New York City, Chattanooga and San Francisco.

Continue reading.

governing.com

by Governing News Staff

June 23, 2023

S&P: Could Empty Offices Lead To Empty Coffers For U.S. Cities?

Key Takeaways

- Large U.S. cities face the looming trifecta of pressures stemming from remote work: Falling commercial property valuations, the potential for weaker tax collections in urban cores, and struggling public transit systems.

- We believe the most affected cities will see general obligation credit pressures amplify within the next few years, requiring management actions to preserve credit stability and enhance the economic vitality of many downtown spaces amid depressed activity.
- Although we believe that most large cities are equipped to meet near-term challenges if they are proactive in identifying potential revenue shortfalls and formulating timely solutions to sustain structural budgetary balance, significant outyear uncertainty remains, given that conditions in the commercial real estate market are still evolving.

Continue reading.

22 Jun, 2023

Brookings: Big Cities Are Showing Signs of Recovery after Historic Population Losses, New Census Data Shows

America's biggest cities endured brutal population losses during the early part of the pandemic—a result, in large measure, of an exodus of residents due to a fear of close proximity to others as well as a broader shut down of offices, commercial activities, and transit options. Lower immigration from abroad, a rise in Covid-related deaths, and a downturn in fertility also contributed.

Previous Census Bureau statistics showed that between July 2020 and July 2021 (referred to here as the "prime pandemic year"), well over half of the nation's 88 largest cities lost population—many for the first time in decades. And among those that gained population, those gains tended to be smaller than in previous years.

Recently, the Census Bureau updated these statistics through July 2022—a year still impacted by the pandemic, but one in which most large cities, especially the largest, showed signs of demographic recovery. This trend was hinted at in a previous census release for county populations. The new data permits an examination of recent population changes across the nation's cities, including comparisons with each other and over time.

Continue reading.

The Brookings Institute

by William H. Frey

Thursday, June 22, 2023

Exploring the Complex Interplay of Municipal Debt Markets and Political Shifts.

The municipal debt market is a critical component of local government financing, serving as a means for municipalities to fund infrastructure projects, public services, and other essential initiatives. However, the dynamics of this market are not immune to the influence of political shifts. When political tides change, whether at the local, regional, or national level, it sets in motion a series of interconnected consequences that reverberate through the municipal debt market.

This article delves into the intricate relationship between political shifts and the municipal debt markets, examining how changes in political power, policies, and ideologies can significantly impact borrowing costs, investor confidence, and market stability.

The Power Shift Paradigm & Potential Policy Reforms

A political shift, such as a change in party control or leadership, can create a paradigm shift in the municipal debt market. The political party in power often introduces new policies and reforms that align with its ideological agenda. These changes may directly impact the financial landscape for municipalities, leading to shifts in borrowing costs and altering market dynamics. For instance, a party focused on fiscal conservatism may implement policies that prioritize debt reduction and austerity measures, potentially constraining borrowing options for municipalities.

Furthermore, policy reforms play a crucial role in shaping the municipal debt market. Changes in tax regulations, infrastructure spending, public-private partnerships, and environmental initiatives are just a few examples of policies that can significantly impact municipal borrowing. When a political shift occurs, new policies and regulations may be implemented or repealed, influencing the perceived creditworthiness of municipalities and altering investor sentiment. This, in turn, can lead to fluctuations in interest rates, bond yields, and demand for municipal bonds. Along the same lines, any changes to the tax code can/will impact the attractiveness of municipal debt for investors and whether the investment carries the same tax-exempt income benefit.

Market Volatility, Investor Confidence, and Risk Appetite

The municipal debt market is not immune to broader market volatility, particularly during periods of political transition, how the new political party views the current market environment, and whether it needs any interventions (i.e., potential economic stimulus). Hence, fluctuations in interest rates, market sentiment, and credit spreads can affect borrowing costs for municipalities. Uncertainties surrounding political shifts can lead to increased market volatility, resulting in higher yields and borrowing costs for municipal issuers. Consequently, these higher costs can put additional pressure on already strained municipal budgets, potentially impacting the affordability and feasibility of projects.

Political shifts can also significantly impact investor confidence and risk appetite within the municipal debt market. Investor sentiment is sensitive to political stability, economic outlook, and policy continuity. A change in political power can introduce uncertainties and market volatility, affecting the willingness of investors to allocate funds to municipal bonds. Moreover, shifts in policy direction may alter the risk profiles associated with different municipal projects, leading to variations in investor demand and pricing.

Creditworthiness and Ratings

For municipal debt markets, credit rating agencies play a crucial role when assessing the creditworthiness of municipal debt issuers. When rating municipal debt, these agencies evaluate various factors to determine the likelihood of timely repayment of principal and interest. The assessment process includes an examination of a municipality’s financial health, economic conditions, revenue sources, budgetary practices, debt profile, and governance. Additionally, rating agencies consider the legal framework governing the municipality’s debt obligations and any potential risks associated with the specific project or purpose for which the debt is being issued. Based on their analysis, credit rating agencies assign a rating to the municipal debt, typically using a standardized rating scale, which helps investors gauge the relative risk and expected return associated with investing in those securities. The ratings provided by these agencies serve as an important tool for investors, as they guide investment decisions and influence borrowing costs for municipalities in the debt market.

Political shifts can potentially influence the creditworthiness and credit ratings of municipalities. Changes in political power and associated policies may affect the overall fiscal position of municipalities, leading to credit rating upgrades or downgrades. These rating changes can have significant implications for borrowing costs, as lower credit ratings may result in higher interest rates and reduced access to credit markets.

The Bottom Line
Political shifts have far-reaching consequences that extend beyond the realm of policy and governance. The interconnectedness between politics and the municipal debt markets is a complex web, wherein changes in political power, policy reforms, and investor confidence can impact borrowing costs, market stability, and creditworthiness. It is imperative for policymakers, market participants, and investors to navigate these intricacies and understand the implications of political shifts to make informed decisions in the municipal debt market. By recognizing the interplay between political dynamics and market forces, stakeholders can better adapt to changes and work toward maintaining a stable and resilient municipal debt market.

Municipal debt investors should carefully review the strength of revenue sources backing their holdings and how they can be impacted in a political transition.

dividend.com

by Jayden Sangha

Jun 22, 2023

Bonding Time: A Discussion with Tom Kozlik, HilltopSecurities

The BDA's most recent episode of Bonding Time features a discussion with Tom Kozlik of HilltopSecurities. The podcast was led by Brett Bolton of the BDA and covers:

- The debt ceiling compromise and what the legislation includes;
- An outlook on the potential for continued legislative drama heading into budget season; and
- Municipal bond legislative outlook for the remainder of 2023.

Listen to audio.

Bond Dealers of America

June 21, 2023

16th Amendment's Pruskowski Sees Opportunities in Credit.

James Pruskowski, 16th Amendment Advisors CIO, discusses finding value in the municipal bond market with Romaine Bostick and Scarlet Fu on "Bloomberg Markets: The Close."

Watch video.

June 23rd, 2023

Bloomberg Markets: The Close

[Muni Headlines and Outlook (Bloomberg Audio)]

Joe Mysak, Editor of Bloomberg Brief: Municipal Markets, joins to discuss muni bonds. Hosted by Paul Sweeney and Madison Mills.

Listen to audio.

Jun 23, 2023

Why IG Munis Present an Opportunity for the Second Half.

Chip Hughey, Truist managing director of fixed income, discusses the outlook for municipal bonds in the second half of the year. Speaking with Scarlet Fu and Romaine Bostick on “Bloomberg Markets: The Close,” Hughey also explains why he favors investment grade municipals.

Watch video.

Muni Moment | Bloomberg Markets: The Close

June 21st, 2023, 12:44 PM PDT

Muni Bonds Coming Back Into Style.

In what’s a positive sign for conservative, income-seeking investors, muni bonds are trending higher in 2023. That’s supporting upside for a variety of exchange traded funds, including the Vanguard Tax-Exempt Bond ETF (VTEB).

VTEB, which follows the Standard & Poor’s National AMT-Free Municipal Bond Index and yields 3.48% on a 30-day SEC basis, is higher by 1.39% year-to-date. Home to 7,419 municipal bonds, VTEB has the diversification investors crave in aggregate muni strategies. Moreover, VTEB is an investment-grade fund, so its credit risk is low.

Speaking of the credit outlook for munis, the primary avenue for assessing credit quality of municipal bonds is to evaluate the tax-collecting capabilities of issuers (cities and states). Broadly speaking, tax collections are solid across most of the country.

“Income tax collections were mixed in April, but sales and property taxes continue to grow. Also, most state and local governments still have plenty of cash on reserve in case the economy performs worse than our economists expect. That cash comes from all the aid that the federal government provided, several hundred billion dollars, in fact, to municipal issuers in response to COVID,” noted Mark Schmidt, Morgan Stanley head of municipal strategy.

Rate Pause Could Help VTEB
VTEB's holdings have an average duration of 5.8 years, putting the fund in intermediate-term territory, with an average stated maturity of 13.3 years. In other words, the longer the Federal Reserve goes without raising interest rates and the more Treasury yields decline, the more VTEB stands to benefit.

"Longer maturity bonds generally offer higher returns, but of course, with higher risk as well. Right now, we actually see superior risk adjusted returns in a 1 to 5 year or 1 to 10 year ladder," added Schmidt.

Investors looking for lower duration and short maturities with municipal bonds can consider the Vanguard Short-Term Tax-Exempt Bond ETF (VTES). That ETF debuted in March and follows the S&P 0-7 Year National AMT-Free Municipal Bond Index, meaning its holdings have maturities ranging from one month to seven years. The average stated maturity of the 966 bonds residing in VTES is 3.1 years, according to issuer data.

Another point in favor of munis, whether accessed by VTEB or VTES, is that the beneficial tax treatment offered by the asset class — federal and state deductions — isn't likely to change anytime soon.

"Major tax reforms tend to happen once in a generation, and they tend to need one party to control both the White House and both chambers of Congress. And even then, a big tax code change needs to be their priority. So, the earliest this could possibly happen again would be after the 2024 election, so call it 2025," noted Michael Zezas, global head of fixed income and thematic research for Morgan Stanley.

ETFTRENDS.COM

by TOM LYDON

JUNE 26, 2023

SIFMA US Municipal Bonds Statistics

SIFMA Research tracks issuance, trading, and outstanding data for the U.S. municipal bond market. Issuance data is broken out by bond type, bid type, capital type, tax type, coupon type and callable status and includes average maturity. Trading volume data shows total and average daily volume and has customer bought/customer sold/dealer trade breakouts. Outstanding data includes holders' statistics. Data is downloadable by monthly, quarterly and annual statistics including trend analysis.

YTD statistics include:

Issuance (as of May) $137.3 billion, -23.9% Y/Y
Trading (as of May) $12.1 billion ADV, -13.1% Y/Y
Outstanding (as of 1Q23) $4.0 trillion, -0.8% Y/Y

Download xls

June 12, 2023

S&P U.S. Charter Schools Sector Fiscal 2022 Medians: Schools Hold Strong Amid Rising Costs

View the S&P report.

14 Jun, 2023

Fitch: Labor Inflation Remains an Uphill Battle for U.S. Life Plan Communities

Fitch Ratings-New York/Austin-12 June 2023: Persistently high wage inflation remains a major credit risk for U.S. life plan communities (LPC) and skilled nursing facilities (SNFs) given the very tight labor environment, according to Fitch Ratings in its latest Labor Dashboard for the sector.

LPC and SNF payrolls remain well below pre-pandemic levels. “High fee increases at LPCs will help alleviate wage pressures, but this practice is not sustainable over the longer term to maintain profit margins,” said Director Richard Park. “LPCs and communities with a significant SNF component will have to execute on productivity enhancements, cost savings and manage skilled nursing admissions to successfully operate through the current reality of tight staffing conditions and higher unit labor costs.”

SNF staff shortages are improving but remain a major challenge as over 16% of nursing homes are reporting a shortage of nurses and aides. The number of quits in the healthcare and social assistance sector remains high compared to recent averages.

“The tight labor market continues to be in favor of workers in search of higher wages and better work environments,” said Park.

Fitch’s latest ‘Life Plan Communities Labor Dashboard: June 2023’ is available at ‘www.fitchratings.com’.

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Additional information is available on www.fitchratings.com

[S&P U.S. Not-For-Profit Health Care Rating Actions, May 2023.]

S&P Global Ratings maintained 31 ratings without revising the outlooks, took three positive rating actions, and revised four outlooks unfavorably and one outlook favorably without changing the ratings in the U.S. not-for-profit health care sector in May. Two of the three upgrades related to our assessment of the combined credit strength of Advocate Aurora Health and Atrium Health (with the combined organization now known as Advocate Health) that resulted in an upgrade on Atrium Health and its related credit, Wake Forest Baptist. Of note, this was the first month since October 2021 where we did not lower any ratings.

We removed Sparrow Obligated Group from CreditWatch (where it had been placed with developing implications) based on its merger with the University of Michigan. There were three new sale issuances in the month, with all ratings and outlooks unchanged.

The 12 rating actions consist of the following:

- Three upgrades on two health systems and one stand-alone hospital;
- Four unfavorable outlook revisions on three health systems in the 'A' category, (two to negative from stable and one to negative from positive) and one stand-alone hospital in the 'AA' category (to negative from stable); and
- One favorable outlook revision, to positive from stable on a stand-alone hospital in Georgia.

Continue reading.

13 Jun, 2023

Opioid Settlement Payouts to Localities Made Public for First Time.

Documents have been obtained showing the exact dollar amounts—down to the cent—that local governments have been allocated in 2022 and 2023 to battle the ongoing opioid crisis.

This story was first published by KFF Health News. Read the original article here.

Thousands of local governments nationwide are receiving settlement money from companies that made, sold, or distributed opioid painkillers, like Johnson & Johnson, AmerisourceBergen, and Walmart. The companies are shelling out more than $50 billion total in settlements from national lawsuits. But finding out the precise amount each city or county is receiving has been nearly impossible because the firm administering the settlement hasn't made the information public.

Until now.

After more than a month of communications with state attorneys general, private lawyers working on the settlement, and the settlement administrators, KFF Health News has obtained documents showing the exact dollar amounts—down to the cent—that local governments were allocated for 2022 and 2023. More than 200 spreadsheets detail the amounts paid by four of the companies involved in national settlements. (Several other opioid-related companies will start making payments later this year.)

Continue reading.

Route Fifty

By Aneri Pattani,
KFF Health News

June 16, 2023

Today's Challenges to Wastewater Treatment and Sludge Management: Burns & Levinson

As a consequence of the efforts by EPA and state environmental authorities throughout New England and beyond to update wastewater treatment requirements, including management of the sludge produced, significant questions and concerns about the direction and impacts of the regulatory changes have emerged. Today, wastewater treatment plants ("WWTPs) face particularly onerous challenges in the decades-long process of removing nutrients and other contaminants of concern in wastewater before it is discharged to inland rivers or coastal waters.

WWTPs were initially built as early as the 1890s to address primary treatment (removal of solids), later upgraded to secondary treatment (for bacterial decomposition), and, since the 1980s, for tertiary treatment (for nutrient removal). Large regional and small municipal facilities were improved at each step to meet the challenge. In the 1990s and early 2000s, EPA and state regulatory authorities established necessary but aggressively low concentrations for these elements (nitrogen for coastal waters, phosphorous for inland rivers) before treated wastewater may be discharged. In answering these challenges, WWTPs have relied largely on chemical, sometimes biological, treatment to take up and absorb the nutrients into sewage sludge solids.

In every aspect of our lives, we rely daily on the proper treatment of wastewater from our homes, businesses, and industries to protect our rivers and coastal estuaries, as well as our health. Historically, New England's responsibility for properly treating wastewater and managing and disposing of sludge fell to large and small urban industrial cities. Since the 1970s, intrastate regional authorities have emerged to serve many large cities and adjacent communities. Established in the late 1800s and early 1900s, WWTPs have been repeatedly modified, enlarged, and improved to treat contaminants in wastewater with increasingly sophisticated treatment technologies. In the 1960s through the 1970s, the federal Construction Grants Program covered as much as 90% of the cost to construct new or substantially upgrade existing wastewater treatment plants throughout New England, recognizing the importance of this critical infrastructure to protect public health and the environment.

The crucial primary stage in the wastewater treatment process is the removal of solids contained in the wastewater collected from the community and entering the WWTP. For much of that history, the collected solids (sludge) were dumped in landfills or the ocean offshore. Currently, offshore disposal of sludge is prohibited to avoid degradation of the coastal environment. Landfill disposal is now often restricted to "cake," a regrettable euphemism for 90% dewatered sludge.

Both sludge and cake contain high concentrations of the nutrients removed in the wastewater treatment process, which cause eutrophication, stimulating aquatic plant and algae growth, which die off to consume oxygen in the waters, particularly in slow-flowing rivers and coastal ponds. Today in New England, the nutrient-rich sludge produced by WWTPs is landfilled (preferably as cake), incinerated in specialized facilities, or used for agricultural land application to enhance crop growth. In some areas of the country, sludge is disposed of in man-made vegetated lagoons to extract nutrients from the sludge.

In New England, the growing challenge for WWTPs, particularly those which also have on-site sludge incinerators and are located along rivers with restricted flow, is caused by nutrients being effectively recycled between the WWTP and sludge dewatering and incineration, requiring more chemical treatment for its removal and producing more and more sludge for incineration in each cycle. Essentially, the nutrients, which are not "destroyed" by incineration, remain trapped and recycled in a virtually closed loop.

Adding to this challenge for WWTPs is the shrinking availability of incinerator capacity in New England and growing limitations on the agricultural use of sludge. This results from two factors: more stringent federal regulation of sludge incineration and local and state prohibitions on agricultural land application of sludge. Available sludge incinerator capacity has dropped in response to enhanced air pollution control regulations adopted in the last decade, leading to the closure of smaller incinerators and adding to the already daunting challenge of siting new incinerators.

In addition, the current focus on the so-called "forever chemicals," such as PFAS (per – and polyfluorinated substances) used in coatings and consumer products to resist heat or stains, is impacting the use of sludge in agriculture. The growing concern about the potential health impacts of PFAS uptake into the food chain has resulted in Maine recently banning the application of nutrient-rich sludge in agriculture, while farm communities in Western Massachusetts are grappling with similar concerns.

These challenges facing municipal and regional WWTPs, sludge incinerators, farm communities, and even consumers require thorough consideration by regulators, regulated facilities, and all of us. While these challenges may be daunting, the current framework and efficacy of wastewater treatment and sludge management in New England, which has responded to the ever-changing regulatory requirements, cannot be left to the rule of unintended consequences.

Burns & Levinson LLP – Sean O. Coffey

June 15 2023

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3 Simple Steps to Improve Digital Government.

COMMENTARY | A customer-centric approach to digital government can help agencies connect more individuals and families with critical services and strengthen the bonds of trust between government and those they serve.

The pandemic accelerated the growth of digital government, bringing health care, education and even court services online. For many people, though, digital interactions with state and local agencies remain low.

A recent survey conducted by the Deloitte Center for Government Insights found that most people in America still choose to interact with government in analog modes, including through call centers and in-person visits. In fact, just 23% of respondents said they regularly use digital channels to interact with government agencies, citing obstacles and challenges they've experienced when trying to access online services. At the same time, the survey identified several opportunities for agencies to make digital government services more attractive to constituents.

Barriers to Adoption and Reasons for Optimism

The survey found several reasons why digital government isn't yet widely adopted, including:

Continue reading.

Route Fifty

By Michele Causey,
Managing director, Deloitte Consulting LLP

JUNE 16, 2023

Three Cybersecurity Lessons That Business Can Learn From Local Government.

Businesses can learn a lot from mayors about cybersecurity, especially as city managers have suffered a record number of cyber attacks and have learned a lot of lessons the hard way. Baltimore, Maryland was hit with a severe ransomware attack in 2019, for example, but rather than going into panic, they went into incident response mode, took systems offline to contain the attack, and worked to restore services without paying the ransom.

Newly released research finds that these attacks happen much more than most people are aware, and that they have robust, adverse effects on municipalities. Using municipal bonds to measure the economic consequences, the results show that a 1% increase in the county-level cyberattacks covered by the media leads to an increase in offering yields ranging from 3.7 to 5.9 basis points, depending on the level of attack exposure. When evaluating these estimates at the average annual issuance amount of $235 million per county, that implies $13 million in additional annual interest costs per county.

It is not uncommon to see cyberattacks in the headlines in today's digital age. What often remains out of sight, however, is the financial impact on municipalities and their access to financing, according to this research of mine with Professor Christian Lundblad at University of North Carolina Chapel-Hill, Professors Christodoulos Louca and Eleni Kalotychou at Cyprus University of Technology, and PhD candidate Lefteris Andreadis.

Continue reading.

Forbes

By: Christos Makridis

Jun 14, 2023

Municipal Bonds: Bullish Signs for the Hospital Sector.

Financial pressures on hospitals are easing after a challenging 2022, presenting an opportunity for muni-bond investors.

In Brief

- While general obligation bonds receive most of the headlines, revenue bonds represent a much larger portion of the municipal bond market.
- The hospital sector is a large slice of the revenue-bond market and represents 13% of the overall muni market, as represented by the Bloomberg Municipal Bond Index.
- Hospital muni bonds typically provide more yield than other areas in the municipal-bond market, so the sector can deliver attractive long-term returns when performing well.
- Based upon our positive credit outlook and the sector's relatively higher yields, we are bullish about the outlook for the performance of the hospital sector for the remainder of 2023.

Continue reading.

Lord Abbett

By Pranav Sharma, Kari T. Gauster, Nicholas Bragdon

June 14, 2023

Municipal Credit Conditions Have Peaked, but Fundamentals Remain Strong.

Monthly state income tax collections sank in April, indicating the municipal market credit cycle has likely peaked. Yet the decline – which follows record high tax collections in the previous April – will, in our view, slow dramatically and can be well managed by most state and local governments that have amassed ample reserves. While security selectivity is critical, we expect a recession and state and local budget cuts to fuel outsize fear, creating attractive investment opportunities.

Income tax collections shrink

Almost all states saw income tax revenue shrink from April 2022, but the contraction was particularly noteworthy in Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, and California. A drop in collections was widely anticipated amid a cooling economy and capital markets, yet the actual figures were worse than expected in several states, including California and New York. Both states are now forecasting current-year or out-year budget deficits after enjoying large surpluses in recent years.

Yet it is important to put the recent slump in context. We believe current declines are driven less by a deteriorating economy, and more by a return to normal trends following unsustainable revenue growth in recent years. State revenues surged a record 20% in 2021 followed by nearly 14% growth in real terms early in 2022, with April 2022 collections representing a high-water mark for much of the sector.Footnote1 Figure 1 shows April 2023 collections shifted lower, bringing most states more in line with fiscal year 2019 and 2021 results.

Continue reading.

by David Hammer, Tom Schuette of PIMCO, 6/16/23

Municipals Set Up for a Summer Rebound.

May update

- Munis posted negative total returns but outperformed comparable Treasuries in May.
- Bank portfolio liquidations have been less disruptive than initially feared.
- Better valuations and improving supply and demand dynamics should spur summer strength.

Market overview Municipal bonds posted negative total returns in May amid continuing heightened volatility. Interest rates rose throughout most of the month as banking concerns abated, economic data exceeded expectations, comments from the Federal Reserve turned more hawkish, and debt ceiling negotiations remained contentious to the very end. The Bloomberg Municipal Bond Index returned -0.75%, bringing the year-to-date total return to 1.62%. The asset class underperformed comparable Treasuries in the intermediate part of the curve but outperformed in both the front end and long end. Shorter-duration (i.e., less sensitive to interest rate changes) and triple-B-rated bonds performed best.

Fund flows remained consistently negative but were counterbalanced by manageable primary and secondary supply. The issuance was in line with historical expectations at $31 billion, 2% below the five-year average, and outpaced reinvestment income from maturities, calls, and coupons by $3 billion. As a result, deals were oversubscribed by 4.3 times on average, slightly above the year-t--date average of 4.0 times. At the same time, anticipated bank portfolio liquidations were less disruptive than initially feared. Selling was orderly and resulted in only a negligible month-ove--month increase in daily bid-wanted. Lower-coupon bonds with shorter maturities made up the bulk of activity.

Continue reading.

by Peter Hayes, James Schwartz, Sean Carney of BlackRock, 6/15/23

The Risk of a US Recession Is Rising. Here’s What That Means for States’ Credit Outlook.

- **State credit quality is less favorable, Conning report says**
- **Texas gets top ranking this year, surpassing Florida**

The rising possibility of a recession threatens US states’ credit quality, according to a new report.

As economic conditions soften the state’s credit picture is less favorable, said Conning & Co. in its annual report analyzing the credit health of all 50 states released on Tuesday. The investment firm lowered the municipal sector’s outlook to “declining” from stable.

“The inflation that supports sales-tax revenues will likely wane, and personal income taxes will probably decline with the labor market worsening,” Karel Citroen, head of municipal research at Conning, a Hartford, Connecticut-based firm that manages over $7 billion of municipal bonds for clients, wrote in the report.

States have benefited significantly from robust tax collections and the unprecedented inflow of hundreds of billions of dollars from federal pandemic aid, pushing their financial reserves to all-time highs, and increasing pension, as well as other post-employment benefit contributions in 2022. Balances in rainy-day funds hit all-time highs in 37 states and their combined savings reached a record $134.5 billion by the end of fiscal 2022, according to data from the National Association of State Budget Officers.

The federal government provided nearly $200 billion in direct aid to states under the $1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan legislation, which boosted the fiscal strength of states and offset some of the tax-revenue shortfalls that plagued major cities as the shift to remote work turned residents away from urban centers.

However, tighter Federal Reserve monetary policy and tapering Covid-19 aid may reduce tax-revenue growth and could diminish state credit quality during the upcoming fiscal year, according to Conning.

“States in most cases have a constitutional obligation to balance their budget when they are being put together,” Citroen said in an interview. “But when revenues fall short of expectations, it’s difficult to cut expenditures on the fly, so states might have to tap into their reserves.”

State Creditworthiness

According to Conning’s report, Texas received the highest credit quality ranking this year and unseated Florida for the No. 1 ranking.

“Texas is a perfect example of a state that really diversified over the last 10 years away from natural resources and was able to attract tech and health care firms,” Citroen said.

Texas outperformed in GDP per capita, the report said, adding that the Lone Star State and Florida, now second, benefited from strong economies and population growth. South Dakota, Tennessee and Idaho rounded out the top five states for credit quality.

Utah, which held the highest ranking for the three years prior to 2022, fell to its lowest rank since 2015, due in part to rising home prices. California slipped 14 spots to No. 42 from last year’s rankings on tax-revenue declines.

Some states that benefited from migration during the Covid-era are now staring down significant infrastructure spending and pension obligations that could present challenges to their fiscal strength in the event of a recession.

“It’s good when people move to an area because it brings in more tax collections as people spend and buy homes. But it drives up home prices and at some point the local municipality or the state needs to provide additional services as well,” Citroen said.

Bloomberg CityLab

By Maxwell Adler

June 13, 2023

S&P Cyber Risk Insights: Recession Pressures Could Expose More U.S. Public Finance Issuers To Cyber Attacks

Key Takeaways

- Challenging macroeconomic factors such as rising inflation may leave many U.S. public finance issuers with fewer resources to maintain adequate cyber security protections, potentially raising their vulnerability to attacks.
- Substantive and rising cyber security insurance premiums, coupled with additional security requirements, will further challenge issuers' ability to maintain coverage during a recession.
- Recessionary pressures may accelerate reductions in cyber security insurance coverage, compounding waning coverage levels due to high claims volumes in the past few years.

Continue reading.

6 Jun, 2023

S&P U.S. Public Finance Rating Activity, May 2023

View the S&P Rating Activity.

June 6, 2023

S&P Global Ratings Definitions.

View the S&P Ratings Definitions.

9 Jun, 2023

US Public Transit Systems Face Credit Downgrades as Riders Stay Away.

- **S&P downgraded San Francisco's BART to A+ from AA last week**
- **Downgrades could lead to higher borrowing costs for operators**

US public transit systems have faced a slew of challenges from trying to bring riders back after a pandemic-induced slump to struggling with financial shortfalls. The latest hurdle will be trying to avoid credit-rating downgrades that will make borrowing more expensive.

California's Bay Area Rapid Transit District had its credit rating lowered two-notches to A+ by S&P Global Ratings last week. That revision also cited a negative outlook on its score, indicating future downgrades may be likely.

It's one of several public-transit agencies put on notice by S&P, including the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency and DC's Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority. Both S&P and Moody's Investors Service have negative outlooks on the public-transit sector broadly.

Continue reading.

Bloomberg CityLab

By Skylar Woodhouse

June 6, 2023

Hey, Budding Accountants: Governments Need You

A shortage of accountants and auditors has left dozens of municipalities without credit ratings, and new financial reporting requirements are likely to make things worse. There are ways to tackle this skill set supply chain problem.

S&P Global Ratings recently withdrew its credit ratings on 64 local governments after they failed to file financial updates on time because of staff shortages and delayed audits. Nearly 150 such municipalities are now on credit watch for tardy financial filings. Professional-association leaders warn that accounting staff shortages are popping up nationwide, impairing financial reporting at the same time that Congress has been pushing for more transparency in financial data, which will require even more staff work.

Historically, graduates with an accounting degree or a CPA certificate could always count on getting a job in the public sector as a secure, albeit unglamorous, career path. Meanwhile, accounting firms were always happy to fill their off-season job calendars with state and local government audits.

So what's changed in the supply chain for governmental accountants? Has life in the private sector become so attractive that all students gravitate to for-profit enterprises and high-powered corporate auditing at the expense of the public-sector workforce? Is it just about pay, as state and local governments fall farther behind in the competition for talent? Or is something else going on?

Continue reading.

governing.com

by Girard Miller

June 6, 2023

Fitch: Success of Smaller Colleges' Enrollment Strategies Not Guaranteed

Fitch Ratings-New York/Chicago-08 June 2023: Proactive strategic investments that create sustainable student pipelines can improve the long-term viability of smaller U.S. colleges, Fitch Rating says. However, addressing enrollment declines before reserves and other resources are depleted is key, as investments in new programs will stretch budgets in the short- to medium-term until colleges can see revenue-generating results, which generally lag by several years depending on factors such as capacity and accreditation. Strategies like tuition resets, scholarship aid and direct or pre-approved admissions are tools to attract students, but the challenge is supporting affordability while maintaining fiscal balance, particularly in an inflationary cost environment.

Debt and liquidity metrics for smaller private colleges were strong over the pandemic due in part to stimulus funds, strong investment returns and limited borrowing. However, we expect medians to return to pre-pandemic levels now that relief funds are exhausted and markets have declined from highs in 2021. Even with robust cash flow, smaller private colleges are generating 1.3x debt service coverage, lower than 2018-2021 annual median coverage levels.

[Continue reading.](#)

[Fitch: Summer Months Crucial for North American Airports as Possible Recession Looms](#)

Fitch Ratings-Austin-07 June 2023: The summer months could be a catalyst for a return to growth for North American airports before a potential economic downturn takes hold in the latter half of the year, according to Fitch Ratings.

Following a strong start to 2023, passenger traffic has flattened in recent months due to a combination of supply chain constraints, delayed aircraft deliveries, pilot and crew shortages, staffing issues and permanent losses in the business travel segment. Still, U.S. airport ratings remain on solid footing. 'The blended business/leisure traveler will help companies pumping the brakes on corporate travel,' said Senior Director Jeffrey Lack. 'Employers' push to get more workers back to the office could lead to sustained improvement to the business segment.'

Looking ahead, domestic leisure airports are most at risk to see growth soften given the resurgence of international travel with the elimination of COVID-19 restrictions in foreign countries. Conversely, international gateway airports, such as SFO, LAX, JFK and ORD will likely have the most to gain as recovery ensues. Canadian airports also stand to gain given the full border opening and the relatively slower recovery in 2022.

Many airports, including IAH, SEA, and DEN are expecting double-digit growth in traffic this summer from last summer, according to Airlines for America. One impediment to growth at international gateway airports could be the unprecedented surge in demand for travel documents that has created a growing backlog, with passport times now taking nine to 13 weeks. Demand for passports has surged by at least 30% this year, as 500,000 applications come in weekly.

The FAA acknowledged the potential strain on the aviation industry this summer and has relaxed "use it or lose it" policies for takeoff and landing slots from mid-May to mid-September at the three major airports serving NYC and to DCA in Washington, DC. Airlines will likely fly fewer routes this summer, but with larger planes, netting a positive increase in capacity.

Looking past the busy summer travel months, macro headwinds from a potential economic downturn could weaken demand. Airline cost pressures from labor rate increases under new contracts could also cause a softening in demand to the extent there is a full pass through to average ticket prices. With traffic at most airports now close to or exceeding pre-pandemic levels, non-airline revenues have solidly rebounded, led by strong growth in parking and rental cars.

Partially due to the three rounds of federal stimulus, some airports have liquidity balances at or greater than pre-pandemic levels and some airports still retain federal relief funds to utilize over the next year. Debt service coverage ratio levels are normalizing under the cost recovery frameworks and leverage remains consistent with current rating levels.

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Fitch: Wage Growth Levels Off as Job Openings Remain High for U.S. NFP Hospitals

Fitch Ratings-Austin-12 June 2023: Payroll growth is slowing for U.S. not-for-profit hospitals with no near-term relief in sight for high labor inflation, according to Fitch Ratings' latest labor dashboard.

Average hourly earnings (AHE) wage growth for hospital and ambulatory healthcare employees remains well below recent highs as of April 2023. This sign that labor inflationary pressures are easing is positive, but wage growth for hospitals is still well above pre-pandemic averages.

Healthcare and social assistance job declined somewhat in April 2023, but job openings and quits rates are still high. "Hospitals are reducing non-clinical staff positions after experiencing material operating losses starting in early 2022," said Director Richard Park. "Commercial rate increases will help alleviate profitability pressures but will not cover wage inflation from the past two years on their own." The number of quits in the healthcare and social assistance sector also remains high compared to before the pandemic.

One plus of late is the continued improvement of nursing facility staff shortages. Facilities reported nurse and aid shortages for April well below the January 2022 peak. "Sustained staffing improvements at nursing homes should help improve length of stay/discharge challenges at hospitals," said Park.

The full dashboard is available at 'www.fitchratings.com'.

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Fitch: Labor Inflation Remains an Uphill Battle for U.S. Life Plan Communities

Fitch Ratings-New York/Austin-12 June 2023: Persistently high wage inflation remains a major credit risk for U.S. life plan communities (LPC) and skilled nursing facilities (SNFs) given the very tight labor environment, according to Fitch Ratings in its latest Labor Dashboard for the sector.

LPC and SNF payrolls remain well below pre-pandemic levels. “High fee increases at LPCs will help alleviate wage pressures, but this practice is not sustainable over the longer term to maintain profit margins,” said Director Richard Park. “LPCs and communities with a significant SNF component will have to execute on productivity enhancements, cost savings and manage skilled nursing admissions to successfully operate through the current reality of tight staffing conditions and higher unit labor costs.”

SNF staff shortages are improving but remain a major challenge as over 16% of nursing homes are reporting a shortage of nurses and aides. The number of quits in the healthcare and social assistance sector remains high compared to recent averages.

“The tight labor market continues to be in favor of workers in search of higher wages and better work environments,” said Park.

Fitch’s latest ‘Life Plan Communities Labor Dashboard: June 2023’ is available at ‘www.fitchratings.com’.

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Fitch Ratings Updates U.S. Public Finance Prepaid Energy Transaction Rating Criteria.

Fitch Ratings-New York/Austin-13 June 2023: Fitch Ratings has published the following report: "U.S. Public Finance Prepaid Energy Transaction Rating Criteria." This report updates and replaces the prior report published on June 10, 2022.

Primary revisions to the criteria include a clarification of Fitch's use of counterparty credit assessments in its analysis and a di minimis update of Fitch's stressed gas price.

The key criteria elements remain consistent with those of the prior report, and there is no impact on outstanding ratings. The previous version of the criteria has been retired.

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What State and Local Leaders Need to Know About the Federal Government's Regional Tech Hubs Competition.

Last week, the Economic Development Administration (EDA) posted a Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) for the Regional Technology and Innovation Hubs (Tech Hubs) program. In doing so, the EDA has invited regional consortia across the country to apply for federal funding awards to accelerate the scale-up of their advanced industries as part of a new wave of place-based economic development.

The NOFO is the first of two for the Tech Hubs program, and launches the $500 million competition as a down payment on an authorized—but not yet fully funded—$10 billion initiative to transform the nation's industrial geography.

Envisioned by Brookings Metro and the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation in 2019 and structured by last year's CHIPS and Science Act, the Tech Hubs program represents a key part of the nation’s new push to build global economic leadership by unlocking development in new places. It shows that, at last, the nation is urgently investing in the creation of good jobs in more places.

Continue reading.

The Brookings Institution

by Mark Muro, Joseph Parilla, and Martha Ross

Tuesday, May 16, 2023

To Enhance Community Services and Empower Workers, Local Governments are Building their Own Gig Work Platforms.

Despite historically low unemployment, too many workers in America are effectively sidelined or forced to accept work on the wrong terms. While there is no single solution to this multifaceted problem, an important part of addressing it lies in rethinking gig economy work, much of which is found on digital platforms such as Uber and DoorDash. This kind of work and the app-based way of finding it have become core features of our economy.

But this growing and poorly understood corner of America’s labor market and service economy is now at a turning point. Many public officials, worker advocates, and others are understandably skeptical about gig economy work and how it can benefit communities—not just the companies and consumers relying on contracted workers.

Yet gig workers are meeting many critical needs, whether as helping hands at home, transporting people and goods, or delivering other skilled tasks in flexible ways. Now, two years after the American Rescue Plan Act’s passage, that law’s historic federal aid is flowing to states and localities, many of which are using the funds to develop locally driven innovations that invest creatively in their low-income workforce. This presents an opportunity to drive change that would benefit millions of people in need of gig work services as well as the workers (who are disproportionately women and people of color) who deliver them.

Continue reading.

The Brookings Institution

by Xavier de Souza Briggs and Wingham Rowan

Tuesday, May 9, 2023

CDFA's Modernizing Agricultural and Manufacturing Bonds Act Introduced in U.S. House of Representatives.

View the CDFA Press Release.

CDFA | Jun. 6

[A New Map Could Mean Less Money to Expand Broadband for Some States.]

The revised map that shows where there is little to no internet service in the U.S. comes as the feds are about to distribute nearly $42.5 in broadband funding.

In three weeks, the federal government will dole out billions from the infrastructure act to each state to expand broadband service.

To make sure the nearly $42.5 billion goes to where it's needed most, places with either no or poor internet access will be prioritized using a map from the Federal Communications Commission.

The FCC has been scrambling for months now to refine its data in a move that Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel described as "another step forward in its iterative effort to develop the best and most accurate broadband maps ever built in the United States."

Continue reading.

ROUTE FIFTY

by KERY MURAKAMI

JUNE 9, 2023

Quick Thoughts: Positioning for a Timely Opportunity in Munis

As markets continue to respond to an uncertain macroeconomic environment, the current fundamentals in the municipal bond market are creating an investment opportunity to capture strong after-tax total returns according to Stephen Dover, Head of Franklin Templeton Institute.

Municipal bonds are displaying unusually strong fundamentals. The backdrop of local fiscal conditions is solid, contributing to the strength of muni bonds in the current environment. State and local governments have been able to replenish cash reserves as a result of three things: large capital inflows from the Federal level throughout the pandemic, tax receipts that have exceeded pre-pandemic levels and moderate spending. There has been less municipal bond issuance compared to the pre-pandemic period, creating a scarcity of muni bonds.

Some unexpected areas are creating headwinds for muni bond valuations:

Continue reading.

Franklin Templeton

June 07, 2023

Long-Dated Municipal Bonds: A Winning Opportunity for High-Net-Worth Investors

Municipal bonds have long been prized by investors with higher incomes and higher tax brackets thanks to the fact that they can offer tax-free income. The vast bulk of the muni sector is free from Federal taxes and, depending on where the bond is issued, state taxes as well. As such, munis form a major building block of many high-net-worth (HNW) portfolios.

And investors in this category may have an opportunity at the long-end of the spectrum.

With their current high yields and potential for tax changes on the horizon, long-dated bonds may offer HNW individuals and families a wonderful win, especially when compared to Treasuries. Adding a dose of them makes perfect sense today.

Long Bonds Take a Hit

When it comes to fixed income, the middle or intermediate bonds are often considered the sweet spot offering the perfect blend of duration risk and current yield. However, for high-net-worth families looking at the muni space, they may want to consider the long end of the spectrum.

Continue reading.

dividend.com

by Aaron Levitt

Jun 07, 2023

How Good An Investment Are Municipal Bonds?

Municipal bonds, informally referred to as "munis," are debt obligations of local, county, states, cities, counties and other governmental entities. The issuers use the proceeds of bond offerings to fund their day-to-day operations and to finance capital projects such as building schools, libraries, parks, highways, bridges and sewer systems. As detailed below, most municipal bonds are exempt from income taxes, making them especially attractive to individual investors in high tax brackets.

Types Of Municipal Bonds

General Obligation (GO) bonds are not backed by revenue from a specific project. Their interest may be paid from the issuer's general funds or from property taxes earmarked for that purpose. The issuer may pledge to raise property taxes as needed to satisfy debt service on its bonds.

Revenue bonds are supported by revenue from a specific project such as a toll bridge, airport, hospital or utility. They generally pay higher interest rates than GOs because the associated interest payments depend on a single project, rather than the issuer's full faith and credit. Industrial Revenue Bonds (IRBs) are a subcategory of revenue bonds issued on behalf of private-sector companies.

Continue reading.

Forbes

by Martin Fridson

Jun 7, 2023

Bonds Are Back. Where Vanguard's Bond Boss Sees Value Now.

After a lousy year for bonds in 2022, the outlook is better. So much better that Sara Devereux, global head of the fixed-income group at Vanguard, has taken to sporting a button around the office declaring, "Bonds Are Back."

"I haven't seen this kind of opportunity in a long time, after a decade of yields at the zero lower bound," says Devereux, whose unit has more than $2 trillion in assets under management.

Vanguard is the world's second-largest asset manager, with $7.7 trillion in assets under management. In bonds it is best known for index funds. But it is also one of the biggest providers of U.S. active bond funds, with $890 billion in assets, and Devereux is helping lead the charge in active management.

Continue reading.

Barron's

By Lauren Foster

Updated June 8, 2023

Franklin Templeton: Higher Credit Quality in Munis.

Jennifer Johnston, Franklin Templeton director of municipal bond research, discusses where to find value in the municipal bond market with Romaine Bostick and Scarlet Fu on "Bloomberg Markets: The Close."

Watch video.

Bloomberg Markets: The Close

June 7th, 2023

Municipal Bond ETFs – Expect More from Your Munis

ETFs and mutual funds have become an increasingly popular means of gaining exposure to municipal bonds. These funds offer investors convenient, diversified access to broad and targeted municipal markets. VanEck's municipal income ETFs offer investors the ability to exercise control over their portfolio yield, duration, and credit exposure at different points in the interest rate cycle.

Target Exposures, Tax-Exempt Income and Low Cost Muni ETFs

The indices underlying each ETF target specific maturity ranges or credit exposures, resulting in distinct performance yield and duration characteristics.

Continue reading.

VANECK

JUNE 10, 2023

SIFMA US Municipal Bonds Statistics.

SIFMA Research tracks issuance, trading, and outstanding data for the U.S. municipal bond market. Issuance data is broken out by bond type, bid type, capital type, tax type, coupon type and callable status and includes average maturity. Trading volume data shows total and average daily volume and has customer bought/customer sold/dealer trade breakouts. Outstanding data includes holders' statistics. Data is downloadable by monthly, quarterly and annual statistics including trend analysis.

YTD statistics include:

- Issuance (as of May) $137.3 billion, -23.9% Y/Y
  Trading (as of May) $12.1 billion ADV, -13.1% Y/Y
  Outstanding (as of 4Q22) $4.0 trillion, -1.4% Y/Y

Download xls

June 1, 2023

Burned by BABs, Issuers Look for a Way Out: Orrick

Between April 2009 and December 31, 2010, state and local governments borrowed more than $181 billion through the issuance of 2,275 separate issues of Build America Bonds, which were authorized under the federal American Recovery Reinvestment Act of 2009 ("ARRA"). Under ARRA, the U.S. Treasury was supposed to provide cash subsidy payments equal to 35 percent of interest payable on outstanding BABs for the life of the bonds.

The promise of BABs subsidy payments in full was short-lived because of a debt ceiling fight – this one in 2011 between the 112th Congress and the Obama Administration which resulted in the Budget Control Act of 2011 (the "BCA") and the implementation of automatic spending reductions ("sequestration") beginning in March 2013.

Since sequestration took effect on March 1, 2013, BABs subsidy payments have been reduced year over year, with reductions ranging from a high of 8.7 percent in 2013 to a low of 5.7 percent for federal fiscal years 2021 through 2030. Under current law, BABs subsidy payments are subject to sequestration through federal fiscal year 2030 unless Congress takes action to modify or eliminate the sequester.

In addition to this partial sequestration imposed by the BCA, the Statutory Pay-As-You-Go Act of 2010 ("PAYGO") can impose mandatory spending cuts based on legislation that increases the federal budget deficit. In 2022, it was reported that due to COVID-19 relief legislation (which did not include a waiver of the PAYGO reductions), there was the potential for 100% sequestration of BABs subsidies beginning in January 2023. Fortunately, the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023, enacted in December of 2022, provides a reprieve from PAYGO sequestration through federal fiscal year 2025.

The prospect of a total elimination of BAB's subsidy payments, combined with uncertainty about the debt ceiling and the ability of Congress and the Biden Administration to resolve the current political logjam, has triggered renewed interest by the public finance community in BABs refundings. Many issuers simply want to get out of BABs altogether at this point.

For issuers that are thinking about "breaking up" with their BABs, important considerations include:

- **Redemption Provisions:** For BABs issued with 10-year par calls, it is straightforward to redeem and refund BABs, and many BABs have been refunded for savings over the past few years with traditional tax-exempt bonds.But many outstanding BABs were issued without a 10-year par call, leaving other redemption provisions as options.

    Make-whole Call provisions. A make-whole call is a common redemption provision for taxable bonds, including BABs, that requires a payment by the issuer to the bondholder based on the net present value of future coupon payments, thereby putting the bondholder in the same position they would have been if the bonds were not redeemed.The present value calculation for make-whole calls is usually based on a spread against Treasuries—the higher the spread against Treasuries, the higher the discount rate and therefore the smaller the redemption price.

    As a broad market observation, it has generally not been possible to tax-exempt refund BABs through a make-whole call and achieve savings. However, as the spread between taxable and tax-exempt rates increases, there may be opportunities for savings depending on market conditions. In addition, some issuers may be interested in redeeming their BABs despite some dissavings to avoid the risk of future increases in sequestration.

    Extraordinary Call Provisions. In addition to make-whole calls, most BABs included extraordinary redemption provisions ("ERP"), which generally provide for a more issuer-favorable redemption price if specified conditions have occurred resulting in negative affects on the BABs subsidy.The particular conditions for exercise of ERPs vary between the bond documents for different issues of BABs.

    For issuers looking to exercise the ERP for their BABs, it is important to closely review the language to determine whether the conditions have been met. Views may differ as to whether the ERP conditions have been met as a result of sequestration, and current bondholders may object to the exercise of an ERP if the issuer undertakes a refunding of BABs using the ERP. It is necessary to consider the potential impact of such an objection on the ability to issue the refunding bonds, including whether litigation might lead to a larger redemption price that would reduce the savings on the transaction and potentially affect the ability to issue the refunding bonds. As another consideration, exercising an ERP under conditions where bondholders object might lead to a negative reputation among taxable bond investors.

- **Budget and Debt Policy Considerations:** Retiring BABs through a refunding and issuance of tax-exempt bonds will result in the loss of the federal interest subsidy.Issuers will need to evaluate the loss of the subsidy in their refunding savings analysis under any applicable debt policy or budgetary procedures for the issuance of any refunding bonds, but may be able to take sequestration into account in reducing the estimated value of those subsidy payment.It may be the case that there are savings from refunding the BABs even taking into account the lost subsidy payments.
- **Refunding Bond Issuance Authority:** Issuers of revenue bonds should consult with counsel and closely review the provisions of their bond documents to evaluate whether the issuance of tax-exempt refunding bonds to redeem BABs qualifies as an issuance of refunding bonds or possibly triggers any additional bonds tests or has other covenant implications.

As a best practice, issuers should be sure to consult with Bond Counsel and other finance team members to fully assess the legal, financial and market considerations of any refunding transaction and financial benefits of any refunding transaction, and especially any transaction calling the bonds using an ERP.

by Christine Reynolds and John Stanley

May.24.2023

Should We Rethink Reserves? - GFOA Publication

GFOA's best practice "Fund Balance Guidelines for the General Fund" is one of GFOA's most often cited standards. However, GFOA's consulting work with local governments has revealed that there are many opportunities for reserve optimization beyond the guidance provided in the best practice. This paper brings what we have learned together with university research to describe new opportunities for local governments to get the best value from their reserve strategies.

DOWNLOAD

Publication date: May 2023

U.S. Public Sector Cyber Risk Is Mainstream Now, Says S&P Seminar.

Key Takeaways

- The provision of essential services and the sensitive information held by local government organizations, utilities, and health services make them prime targets for cyberattacks.
- Cyber risk management should therefore be a priority for the U.S. Public Finance sector (and private companies), but it often remains underfunded and insufficient.
- Cyber risk mitigation should be integrated into organizational planning, particularly given the complexity of balancing risks across very large systems and organizations within those system.

Continue reading.

1 Jun, 2023

Cybersecurity Standards Gain Ground in Counties.

More counties are embracing voluntary cybersecurity frameworks to evaluate their risk and better protect their assets, a recent report shows.

County governments are reducing their cybersecurity risk levels by embracing voluntary standards, including those developed by the federal government, according to a report released last week.

Research from the National Association of Counties (NACo) and Accenture found that 50% of counties use the controls outlined in the National Institute of Standards and Technology's (NIST) Security and Privacy Controls for Information Systems and Organizations special publication.

Meanwhile, almost 30% use either a bespoke state or county-specific framework, a cybersecurity maturity model certification program or the 27001 Maturity Model developed by the International Organization for Standardization and the International Electrotechnical Commission. Just over 20% said they do not use a standardized cybersecurity framework, while 18% said they do not know.

Continue reading.

Route Fifty

By Chris Teale

JUNE 2, 2023

Las Vegas Ballpark Pitch Revives Debate on Public Funding for Sports Stadiums.

CARSON CITY, NEV. — Gov. Joe Lombardo wants to help build Major League Baseball's smallest ballpark — arguing that the worst team in baseball can boost Las Vegas, a city striving to call itself a sports mecca.

Nationwide debate about public funding for private sports clubs has been revived with the Oakland Athletics ballpark proposal. The issue pits Nevada's powerful tourism industry, including trade unions, against a growing chorus of mostly progressive groups that, throughout the country, are raising concerns about use of tax dollars to finance sports stadiums but could otherwise fund government services or schools.

The debate over relocating the team from California to Nevada echoes others around the country, where politicians have approved large sums of taxpayer money going to sports clubs in Buffalo, New York; Atlanta, Georgia; and Nashville, Tennessee. In Tempe, Arizona, though, voters rejected a $2.3 billion proposal that would have included a new arena for the NHL's Arizona Coyotes.

Continue reading.

Associated Press

June 04, 2023

Parametric's Patel Expects Heavy Inflows Into Munis.

Parametric Managing Director Nisha Patel discusses the outlook for the muni market with Romaine Bostick and Scarlet Fu on “Bloomberg Markets: The Close.”

Watch video.

Muni MomentBloomberg Markets: The Close

May 31st, 2023

Maximizing Returns With Tobacco Bonds: Benefits, Risks and Investment Strategies

When most investors think of municipal bonds, general obligation or GO bonds tend to be the first thing that pops into their heads. And for good reason. These bonds issued by state and local governments form the backbone and bulk of the municipal bond sector. Cash flow and interest payments are driven by tax revenues.

But there is more than one type of bond in muni land and some may be lucrative for investors. In this case, it’s the tobacco settlement bonds.

With their natural inflation protection, high yields and tax-free status, tobacco bonds could make for an interesting portfolio addition for investors. And thanks to the growth of municipal bond ETFs and mutual funds, getting exposure is easier than ever.

Continue reading.

dividend.com

by Aaron Levitt

May 31, 2023

An Overview Of U.S. State Budgets And Municipal Bonds.

Summary

- California just released its mid-May budget update, which tells a story of further revenue slowing and an increased budget deficit.
- States report monthly cash flows—and combined with economic data—have expected the robust revenue growth of the last few years to stabilize, slow and potentially retreat.
- While the forecast looks cloudy, state and local governments have largely planned well for a rainy

day.

Continue reading.

Seeking Alpha

May 23, 2023

Franklin Templeton Investments

Municipal Bond Issuers on Edge as Debt Ceiling Deadline Nears.

City and state governments fear potential surge in cost of financing

A Utah city's plan to issue about $15 million in bonds to fund a new parking structure has officials fixated on the fast-approaching deadline to raise the U.S. debt ceiling. The fear: A default could upend the bond market.

"The cost will skyrocket for us, and financing could become unattainable," said Mark Shepherd, mayor of Clearfield, about 30 miles north of Salt Lake City.

A surge in borrowing costs could result in local projects in Clearfield and elsewhere being left unfinished, said Shepherd, who is also chair of a National League of Cities committee on federal advocacy.

Continue reading.

The Wall Street Journal

By Brenda León and Heather Gillers

Updated May 26, 2023 5:27 pm ET

Fitch Places Muni Ratings Tied to U.S. Sovereign on Rating Watch Negative.

Fitch Ratings – San Francisco – 26 May 2023: Following Fitch Rating's placement of the United States' 'AAA'/'F1+' Foreign and Local Currency Issuer Default Ratings (IDRs) on Rating Watch Negative (RWN), Fitch has placed on RWN the 'AAA' ratings of certain categories of debt that are directly tied to the creditworthiness of the U.S. or its related entities.

Categories of debt with ratings that are affected include:

–Pre-refunded bonds with repayments that are wholly dependent on 'AAA' rated U.S. government and agency obligations held in escrow;

–Municipal housing bonds that are primarily secured by mortgage-backed securities issued by Ginnie Mae, Fannie Mae and/or Freddie Mac.

Continue reading.

What the U.S. Credit Rating Moves Mean for Muni Bonds.

After Fitch Ratings put the U.S. government's debt on watch for a negative downgrade Wednesday, Fitch analysts have been busy working out the implications for the $4 trillion muni bond market.

While the credit-rating firm believes Republicans and Democrats will reach a federal spending compromise before any Treasury bills default, Fitch analysts are wary of how a spending deal could hit the revenues of state and local governments.

"We're certainly watching very closely," said Doug Offerman, a senior director at the firm's public finance states group. Local governments rely directly on federal funding for healthcare, education and transportation. With federal spending amounting to a third of gross national product, any big change will affect local economies. "It's a big footprint," Offerman said.

Continue reading.

Barron's

By Bill Alpert

May 26, 2023

Puerto Rican Muni Bond ETF Launches.

First-of-its-kind fund focuses on U.S. territory bonds.

X-Square Capital, a Puerto Rico-based advisory firm, debuted its Triple Tax-Exempt Municipal Bond ETF (ZTAX), which it says is the first bond fund focusing on triple-tax-exempt muni bonds from U.S. territories.

The fund, with an expense ratio of 1.1%, launched on May 19 and invests in muni bonds issued by U.S. territories, with typical allocation ranges being 65%-80% Puerto Rico, 10%-25% U.S. Virgin Islands and 5%-10% Guam. While other funds hold Puerto Rican bonds, this is the first fund to fully focus on bonds from U.S. territories.

Its price has slipped to $25 since it launched last week at $25.95.

Part of the bond's appeal stems from a 125-year-old law giving Puerto Ricans U.S. citizenship, and establishing that income from bonds issued by Puerto Rico would be exempt from local, state and federal taxes.

As yields rose in 2022, muni funds experienced record outflows of $122 billion. They also had their worst year since 1981, with the Bloomberg Municipal Bond Index dropping 8.5%, with high yield munis doing worse still, losing 13%.

This year may present an improved scenario, with expectations for a pause in interest rate increases. A looming recession may also bode well for the asset class, because muni bonds have historically gained in recessions.

Declining inflation may also boost fixed income assets.

The bonds were central to the debt crisis and bankruptcy that Puerto Rico underwent starting in 2015, when it announced it would be unable to pay its $123 billion debt, declaring bankruptcy in 2017 after the widespread damage to the island from hurricanes Irma and Maria.

Puerto Rico's economy is still suffering compared to the mainland U.S., with average incomes a fraction of the poorest U.S. state; however, the unemployment rate has fallen significantly and now stands at 6%, higher than the U.S. average but lower than much of the last decade when it was about twice the national average.

With the restructuring having concluded, the "post restructuring," bonds held by the fund are a bet on the future of Puerto Rico differing from its past decade.

etf.com

by Gabe Alpert

May 24, 2023

Reviewed by: Lisa Barr

Edited by: Ron Day

Municipal Bond Performance on Track for Worst May Since 1986.

- **Elevated rates, debt ceiling and SVB bonds dampened returns**
- **Investors optimistic about seasonal summer upswing ahead**

This month is on track to be the worst May in recent history for municipal bonds amid the elevated interest-rate environment and Treasury volatility caused by fear of a US default.

Municipal bonds lost 1.38% so far in May, according to data compiled by Bloomberg. Barring a major rally, that puts this month on track for the worst May performance since 1986, when bonds lost 1.63%. On average, munis gained 0.9% in May over the last decade, the strongest month of returns, buoyed by expectations of summer rallies.

Investors say the unusual weakness reflects a range of factors — chief among them an uptick of issuance after weeks of low supply that kept demand high, as well as renewed fears of additional rate hikes that dampened the performance of all types of fixed income. And even more alarming are concerns over US default as investors in state and local government debt tend to be risk averse. Fitch Ratings warned Wednesday that the US's AAA rating is under threat as the White House and Congressional Republicans try to reach an agreement.

Continue reading.

Bloomberg Markets

By Nic Querolo

May 26, 2023

[Money in Munis in 2023 (Bloomberg Audio)]

Eric Kazatsky, Senior US Municipal Strategist with Bloomberg Intelligence, joins us to discuss the municipal bond market. Hosted by Kriti Gupta and Madison Mills.

Listen to audio.

Bloomberg

May 26, 2023

Cities Face Mounting Financial Pressures.

On top of the familiar problems—pensions, inflation, pandemic aid ending—officials are also trying to prepare for two potentially devastating scenarios: a recession or the U.S. defaulting on its loans.

As big cities try to regain a steady financial footing after the pandemic, some familiar but stubborn problems threaten to knock them off balance, a panel of municipal finance experts warned this week.

"We're in a moment of inflection right now," David Schleicher, a Yale law professor, said during a virtual gathering on municipal distress held by the Volcker Alliance. "We've been living through this period of flush state and local budgets, and we're about to see a real turn."

While the economy has proved resilient in many places, it has had an uneven effect on cities. The pressures facing municipalities include the imminent end of federal pandemic aid, uncertainty around the economic condition of downtowns, inflation, and increased demand for social services and other city services.

Continue reading.

ROUTE FIFTY

by DANIEL C. VOCK

MAY 19, 2023

Fitch: Strong Financial Profiles and Loan Oversight Support CDFI Credit

Fitch Ratings-New York/San Francisco-17 May 2023: Strong loan portfolio management and financial profiles support community development financial institutions' (CDFIs) credit ratings amid growing economic headwinds, Fitch Ratings says. CDFIs play an important role in providing affordable financing in the current environment of high interest rates and reduced credit supply, supporting low-income and low-wealth communities by providing capital to individuals, businesses, and organizations that historically have not had access to mainstream sources of credit.

Like other social lending institutions, CDFIs generally exhibit solid demand, low loan delinquencies and losses, conservative risk management, and strong financial profiles. This is reflected in the high investment grade ratings currently assigned to CDFIs. CDFIs keep loans on balance sheet and typically provide active oversight of their loan portfolios, with early and frequent follow-ups for delinquent loans and other loss mitigation strategies to minimize loan defaults and losses.

While CDFIs' modest delinquency rates are slightly higher than those of banks, charge-off levels are comparable, despite the portfolios' perceived higher risk and lower credit quality. The median 90+ day delinquency rate among CDFIs was 1.30% between 2017 and 2021, compared to 1.06% for banks. Furthermore, the median net-charge off rate among CDFIs was 0.48% between 2017 and 2021, similar to 0.50% for banks during the same time period, according to the FDIC and Opportunity Finance Network, the industry trade group for CDFIs. Fitch forecasts a mild recession beginning in the second half of the year, and while loan performance may deteriorate, loan losses are expected to remain well within Fitch's stressed rating assumptions.

Continue reading.

Fitch: Financial Conditions, Debt Limit, CRE Are Key Credit Risks

Fitch Ratings-New York-18 May 2023: Tightening financial conditions, an increased focus on office real estate valuations and political risks from wrangling over the US federal debt limit are among the key credit risks highlighted in Fitch Ratings' Risk Headquarters report for 2Q23.

Since the last quarter, the key risks we highlighted regarding financial instability related to the rising costs of capital were reflected in some of the largest bank failures in US history and the swift takeover of Credit Suisse by UBS following rapid deposit outflows. While further systemic contagion risk has been mitigated through prompt government and regulator support measures, the longer-term effects on financing costs, especially for smaller and regional banks, and credit conditions in the wider economy remain highly uncertain.

The new pressures faced by US community and regional banks have also renewed investor concerns regarding commercial real estate, specifically offices, which are facing a combination of secular challenges from changing work patterns, cyclical pressures from a lacklustre economic outlook and tightening financing conditions.

Our key risks have been updated since the last quarter. Risks related to the cost of capital and financial instability, inflation, and geopolitics, policy and governance are still significant. Fitch expects broader risks to investment and consumption to persist as financial conditions continue to tighten and inflation remains above central bank targets. Political risks are also largely unchanged, with heightened focus on the US federal debt limit as the "x-date" approaches in June or July. Geopolitical risks pertaining to the Russia-Ukraine war, tensions over the Taiwan Strait and US-Chinese geopolitical competition remain.

China Macro has been removed from the key risks. Uncertainty over the Chinese economy's recovery in 2023 has been reduced significantly with the end of Zero-Covid and a rapid consumption-led jump in growth in the first quarter.

'Risk Headquarters – May 2023' is available at fitchratings.com.

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S&P U.S. Mortgage Revenue Bond Program Rating Actions In Line With Expectations After Application Of Updated Criteria.

Key Takeaways

- We reviewed all sector ratings within scope following the release of our "Mortgage Revenue Bond Program" criteria, published Oct. 10, 2022.
- Overall, the extent and magnitude of rating actions aligned with our expectations, although the direction of rating actions was more uniformly positive than expected.
- Rating changes were limited to one notch.
- Application of the criteria resulted in minimal rating actions in the sector, and we expect continued rating stability under the new framework.

Continue reading.

18 May, 2023

Senior-Living Debt Defaults Far Outpace the Rest of Government Debt Market.

- **About 7% of outstanding senior-living bonds in payment default**
- **With business model changing, new projects are riskier**

One sector is an outlier when it comes to the traditionally-tiny default rates in the $4 trillion municipal bond market.

Roughly 7% of the $43 billion in outstanding senior-living bonds, or about $3.2 billion, is in default on a payment, according to data compiled by Bloomberg. That compares to a rate of less than 1% for all state and local government debt.

Health care has been slammed by a shortage of caregivers and higher wage and supply costs, even as the pandemic pushed occupancy rates down. Hundreds of nursing homes have closed since the beginning of the pandemic as they cope with those pressures, along with government reimbursements that fall short of covering costs — and the fallout is expected to continue.

Continue reading.

Bloomberg Markets

By Lauren Coleman-Lochner

May 22, 2023

Fitch: Labor Demand Shows Clear Signs of Cooling, but Slow Pace Continues

Fitch Ratings-New York-16 May 2023: Despite unemployment being at a 54-year low, the labor market will weaken as aggregate demand stagnates in response to higher interest rates and tightening credit conditions, exacerbated by stress in the banking sector, according to Fitch Ratings.

“Labor demand still exceeds supply, but this imbalance is declining, now at approximately 2.3 percent of the labor force in first-quarter 2023 compared with 3.2 percent last quarter,” said Olu Sonola, Fitch Head of U.S. Regional Economics. “Job openings have also declined by 1.6 million from peak levels. Wage growth year-over-year has decelerated significantly since last quarter in a number of states.”

The labor market remains relatively tight, even though the job openings to unemployed ratio is now down to 1.6 from the peak of 2.0 in March 2022. Thirty-five states have non-farm payrolls at or above pre-pandemic levels in first-quarter 2023.

Employment levels now exceed pre-pandemic levels in all but fifteen states, while the unemployment rate is below pre-pandemic levels in 30 states. Slower recovery in leisure and hospitality is a drag on Nevada, Oregon, and Hawaii, and several other states with large cities due primarily to the slow return to office trends, such as New York, California and Illinois.

Western and Midwestern states dominate with very high labor utilization. Mississippi, West Virginia, New Mexico, and South Carolina continue to show structural weakness in utilization. New Jersey is the only state with a year-over-year change in employment-to-population ratio of over 1.0 percentage point.

For more information, a special report titled “U.S. States — Labor Market Quarterly Tracker — 1Q23” is available at www.fitchratings.com.

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Fitch: Ongoing Disclosures Help Mitigate CA, Other Public Finance Delayed Audits

Fitch Ratings-Chicago/New York-17 May 2023: Delays in the release of California's GAAP-based audited financial statements are not a near-term credit concern given ample state financial disclosures, Fitch Ratings says. However, severely delayed audits can trigger negative rating pressure on U.S public finance issuers when alternative disclosures are insufficient. Fitch relies on financial statements and other relevant information to support its analysis and ratings decisions. A failure to provide fiscal data in a timely manner can lead to a negative rating action or even a rating withdrawal if the information available is not sufficient to support the rating analysis.

The state of California (AA/ Stable) has fallen behind in issuing GAAP-based audited financial statements but continues to provide timely financial disclosures, including monthly cash reports and detailed budget and revenue forecasts. Through FY18, the state released its Annual Comprehensive Financial Report (ACFR) by March 31, nine months after the end of the fiscal year and somewhat late compared to other states.

The state transitioned to a new financial accounting system, "Fi$Cal", during FY2019 and since then the release of the annual audit has become progressively later. FY19 results were released in October 2020, FY20 in February 2022, and FY21 in late March 2023. There is no current date for the release of the FY22 ACFR. Despite these delays, California continues to provide transparency in its financial operations through an abundance of robust and timely budgetary and revenue information.

GAAP-based ACFRs are an objective and important source that Fitch and other market participants typically rely on to understand a government's financial performance. The ACFR provides a set of financial statements that comply with accounting requirements established by the Governmental Accounting Standards Board (GASB) and audited by an independent auditor using generally accepted auditing standards. The ACFR presents an official account of a government's financial condition for the last fiscal year, comparing it to prior fiscal years, and includes management discussion and analysis of the results.

Habitually delayed publication of an ACFR beyond 270 days past the end of the fiscal year can be an indication of management weakness. Fitch has downgraded and/or withdrawn ratings on certain entities with chronically late financial statements. Fitch downgraded the Issuer Default Rating (IDR) of Manhattan, Kansas to 'AA' from 'AA+' on May 18, 2020, due in part to the city's repeated delays in publishing audits. Fitch withdrew the rating on Manteca Finance Authority, CA's sewer revenue bonds on April 12, 2023, because of the system's continuing inability to provide reliable financial information. Conversely, Fitch upgraded the IDR on Northport, Alabama to 'AA+' from 'AA' on March 17, 2023, noting improved budget management practices as evidenced by the steps taken to ensure the timely filing of its financial audits following a short period when such filings had been delayed.

The median audit timeline for municipal governmental bond sectors has grown from of 147 days in 2009 to 164 in 2020, according to a 2022 report from the University of Illinois, Chicago and Merritt Research Services. Pandemic disruptions, including steep declines in state and local government employment in 2020, have likely contributed to longer audit timeframes. State and local government employment has since recovered, although it is still down slightly relative to 2019 averages, with

Fitch expecting a mild recession beginning later this year.

In some states, the state auditor either conducts or signs off on the local government's audit, which typically takes more time than audits by a private firm. When financial audits are delayed, Fitch typically relies on other fiscal disclosures including unaudited actuals and monthly budget reports showing the performance of both revenues and expenditures. This additional transparency is key in Fitch's ability to perform its forward-looking credit analysis and to continue to assess an issuer's creditworthiness.

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Did Your Town Make This List of Best-Performing Cities?

The Milken Institute is out with its annual report ranking the economic performance of more than 400 metropolitan areas. Here's what it takes to be a booming city.

A new report ranking the economic performance of hundreds of cities found that booming high-tech sectors are driving gross domestic product growth in large and small cities alike, but that growth comes at the cost of affordable housing.

On Wednesday, the Milken Institute, an economic think tank, released its 2023 Best Performing Cities Index. Published annually since 1999, the report aims to measure cities' economic performance based on metrics such as labor market conditions, tech industry growth, and access to housing and broadband. This year's index primarily uses data from 2021, representing the first full year of recovery after the onset of the pandemic.

Continue reading.

ROUTE FIFTY

by MOLLY BOLAN

MAY 18, 2023

[Cryptocurrency: Fairy Tale or Future]

The late 2022 FTX scandal seems like a plausible end to the era of blockchain mania, so 2023 is a good time to look back and ask ourselves, "What can we learn from crypto thus far?" After all, local governments will face increasing pressure to adopt new technologies, not just blockchain/cryptocurrency.

LEARN MORE.

Muni Bonds: Recession Potential Warrants Second Look

Recessionary pressures on the economy continue to mount, as the Fed tries to toe the line between raising interest rates to combat inflation and maintaining economic growth. In the meantime, muni bonds present investors with a prime fixed income option.

Given rising rates, fixed income investors have yield top of mind. At the same time, they also need quality exposure, given the threat of recession. Both can be addressed via muni bonds.

"Should the U.S. economy fall into a recession, high yield municipals may fare better than their taxable counterparts," private asset manager Lord Abbett noted. "Over the long term, municipal bonds historically have experienced a fraction of the default rates of similarly rated corporate bonds."

The aforementioned blog post, in particular, looked at periods of recession and how muni bonds fared.

"Focusing specifically on recessionary periods, municipal fundamentals have historically outperformed corporates: during the past five economic contractions in the United States, municipal bonds' credit ratings have been much more stable, and default rates have been much lower relative to corporate bonds," the asset manager added.

2 Cost-Effective Muni Bonds ETFs

Not sure where to start with getting municipal bond exposure? One fund to consider, especially for the cost-conscious investor, is the Vanguard Tax-Exempt Bond ETF (VTEB).

With a 0.05% expense ratio, the fund offers low-cost exposure to municipal debt. Comparable funds have an average expense ratio of 0.68%, based on Morningstar data.

VTEB tracks the Standard & Poor's National AMT-Free Municipal Bond Index, which measures the performance of the investment-grade segment of the U.S. municipal bond market. This index includes muni bonds from primarily state or local governments, or agencies exempt from U.S. federal income taxes and the federal alternative minimum tax (AMT).

Another option launched just months ago is the Vanguard Short-Term Tax-Exempt Bond ETF (VTES). The fund, with its similarly low 0.06% expense ratio, seeks to track the S&P 0–7 Year National AMT-Free Municipal Bond Index, which is designed to meld two benefits of municipal bond exposure: tax efficiency and tax-exempt yield.

VTES' benchmark includes bonds with maturities ranging from 0–1 years as well as 5–7 years. As such, investors get the risk-mitigating benefits of short-term exposure while also obtaining more yield, common with longer-duration bonds.

Given this balance, VTES may best suit investors with an investment horizon of two to four years. Additionally, it could work for high net worth clients looking for tax-exempt income.

"VTES is designed for tax-sensitive investors who have a preference for taking on less interest rate risk than the overall municipal market," said Jeff Johnson, head of fixed income product at Vanguard, in an interview with VettaFi.

ETFTRENDS.COM

by BEN HERNANDEZ

MAY 19, 2023

Tax-Free Income on Sale: Buying Municipal Bonds at a Discount with Closed-End Funds

There's nothing better than getting a high yield, except if that high yield comes tax free. And right now, investors have the opportunity to engage in such a transaction.

Despite their steadfastness and stability, municipal bonds have continued to trade sideways – and lower – in the wake of the Fed's pace of interest rate hikes. Munis are prized by many investors for their high credit quality and their ability to provide federal, and in some instances state/local, tax benefits. Now could be one of the best times to add the bonds variety to a portfolio.

However, there is a way to buy munis at both a discount and a higher yield. Closed-end funds are some of the biggest buyers of muni bonds, and right now, their discounts to net asset values (NAVs) are at some of the highest levels not seen in over a decade. With tax-free yields closer to 8%, investors looking to juice their income have a rare opportunity in the sector.

Continue reading.

dividend.com

by Aaron Levitt

May 16, 2023

Why Muni Mutual Fund and ETF Flows Are Diverging.

Pat Luby, CreditSights senior municipal strategist, discusses the divergence between muni mutual funds and muni ETF flows with Vonnie Quinn and Romaine Bostick on "Bloomberg Markets: The Close."

Watch video.

Bloomberg Markets: The Close

May 17th, 2023

How to Target the Sweet Spot of the Muni Yield Curve.

The muni bond market's yield curve is inverted in the short end but positively sloped and steep in the intermediate part, providing attractive roll yield for those who target these maturities.

What is Roll Yield?

Roll yield is a term used to describe the increase in price that an investor can receive as a bond's maturity ages. When a bond gets closer to its final maturity, its yield typically decreases, causing an increase in its price. This price appreciation is known as roll yield and is a desirable feature for investors, especially when targeting intermediate-term bonds with wider yield differentials between maturities. This strategy can potentially generate alpha and enhance an investor's total return.

How Can I Use Roll Yield to Boost Return?

The muni yield curve is an important indicator of the health of the municipal bond market and the broader economy. The muni yield curve has recently become inverted in the short end, meaning that yields of some longer-dated municipal bonds are lower than those of shorter-term bonds. However, the intermediate part of the curve remains positively sloped and steep, providing attractive roll yield for investors who target these maturities. Steepness refers to the degree of absolute difference between yields of different maturities.

Continue reading.

etftrends.com

May 20, 2023

Cities Stare Down Huge Budget Gaps.

Growing expenses and lagging downtown recoveries are straining city finances as federal pandemic relief funds run out.

Many city governments are suddenly confronting bad budget news, as years of federal coronavirus aid starts to run out, expenses climb and local economies continue to adjust to post-pandemic conditions.

For now, talk of big budget gaps and subsequent service cuts is limited to a few headline-grabbing localities. But experts warn that other cities face comparable pressure and likely will face similar situations soon.

In New York City, Mayor Eric Adams called for broad cuts to services, such as schools and libraries, in order to address an anticipated shortfall of $2.9 billion next year. Sheng Thao, Oakland, California's new mayor, faces what city officials say is the largest general fund deficit in the city's history, with a projected shortfall of up to $345 million. And Milwaukee could face cuts to police, firefighters and libraries when federal aid dries up next year, officials say, because of rising pension costs and dwindling state aid.

Continue reading.

Route Fifty

By Daniel C. Vock

May 9, 2023

Astute Treasury Management Strategies as Inflation Cools.

State and local financiers now face interest rate markets that anticipate decelerating inflation and a weaker economy. Public treasurers and debt managers need fresh ideas, agility and prudent strategies.

As if they didn't already have enough on their plates, public-sector financiers are facing a fresh challenge: With its recent escalation of the short-term "Fed Funds" interest rate, the Federal Reserve has now engineered what's known as a fully inverted yield curve. That's when market interest rates are highest on shorter-maturity U.S. Treasury debt instruments and descend sequentially as maturities increase. It's now downward-sloping for most maturities from three months going out to 10 years.

It's the exact opposite of what's considered a normal yield curve, because ordinarily investors require additional interest compensation for the illiquidity of tying up their money longer term, plus a yield premium to compensate for interest rate risk on longer-term paper — what's known as duration risk.

Astute state and local government treasurers and financial managers must now take into account the dynamic nature of the inverted yield curve scenario and adjust their strategies accordingly. Oversight committees and governing boards should be scheduling study sessions to get up to speed.

Continue reading.

governing.com

by Girard Miller

May 9, 2023

UBS: Regional Banking Crisis Fails to Rattle Munis

Banks are significant owners of municipal bonds. Therefore, the recent high-profile regional bank failures of Silicon Valley Bank (SVB), Signature, and First Republic have raised concerns about the forced selling of their municipal portfolios and potential implications for the market as whole. Thus far, the impact to the muni market has been muted.

For context, the size of the SVB muni portfolio is USD 7.4bn, according to their most recent 10-K. At the same time, market participants expect its muni portfolios to be sold in an orderly manner over the next few weeks rather than an abrupt sale. That said, about 85% of the portfolio consists of longer-dated bonds with low coupons between 1.5%–3.0%, according to our data. However, there is limited appetite for market discount bonds from the dominant investor base for munis (private clients) given the unfavorable tax treatment imposed upon disposition or maturity of the bonds (*see* Education note: tax implications on discount munis, 17 February 2023). By contrast, we think institutional-based buyers (banks and insurance companies) that are less sensitive to the tax consequences are apt to seek buying opportunities in the low coupon space.

Signature Bank had a very modest amount of muni holdings (USD 249mn) and the disposal should have no or very limited impact on the market, in our view.

More recently, First Republic Bank was sold to JPMorgan and their entire muni portfolio was obtained by JPMorgan. Should JPMorgan want to reduce their muni holdings, we also expect them to do so in an orderly fashion over time and without disrupting the market as a whole.

Tight supply remains a tailwind

The municipal market has been starved for issuance thus far this year (down 25% y/y through April) and would be able to digest SVB's municipal portfolio with ease, in our view, if not for the low coupon long duration structure. As a point of reference, the size of SVB's muni portfolio is a little more than one week of average new issuance supply in 2023. In the next 30 days, funds available for reinvestment exceeds expected new issuance by USD 13.5bn, thus the inflow of available bonds should not have a major impact on the overall market. We are also heading into redemption season, when reinvestment proceeds typically outpace issuance by a large majority and provide a healthy tailwind to municipals in the months of June–August.

Overall, the stress on regional banks thus far has had a muted impact on the broader municipal market. Banks account for about 15% of municipal bond holdings, most of which is concentrated in the large systemically important banks which are in strong financial health.

by UBS Editorial Team 09 May 2023

Main contributors – Ted Galgano, Kathleen McNamara, Sudip Mukherjee

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Republican States Move to Block Giant Asset Manager's ESG Push for Utility Companies.

A group of Republican-led states have filed a motion with a federal regulator to block BlackRock, the largest asset manager in the world, from imposing sustainable investing practices on utility companies.

The states, led by Indiana Attorney General Todd Rokita (R), appealed to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) to keep BlackRock from laying down environmental, social and governmental (ESG) investing priorities on utility companies, continuing a GOP crusade against what it argues is “woke” investing.

The states, including Utah, Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Ohio, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas and West Virginia, filed the motion against the investment company on Wednesday, asking the FERC to not give it blanket authorization to buy more than $10 million in voting stakes in a utility company if it imposes ESG priorities.

Continue reading.

THE HILL

BY STEPHEN NEUKAM

05/10/23

JPMorgan Targeted by Republican States Over Accusations of Religious Bias.

Nation’s largest bank rebuts claims of GOP attorneys general and treasurers, who say the bank mistreats people of faith

WASHINGTON—JPMorgan Chase has become the target of a campaign by Republican state officials seeking to expose what they see as religious discrimination in the bank’s business practices.

Nineteen Republican state attorneys general sent a letter this month addressed to JPMorgan Chief Executive Jamie Dimon, accusing the nation’s largest bank of a “pattern of discrimination” and of denying customers banking services because of political or religious affiliations. In March, 14 Republican state treasurers wrote a similar letter to Mr. Dimon, making the same accusations.

The letters said JPMorgan terminated client accounts due to religious beliefs—which the bank denies—and they also demanded the bank respond to detailed survey questions on issues of concern to conservatives. The survey probes policies around speech freedoms, for example, in a nod to conservatives who believe employees of faith should feel free to express disagreement with workplace priorities such as diversity or climate initiatives they view as progressive.

Continue reading.

The Wall Street Journal

By Jathon Sapsford

May 13, 2023

[Paxton and Normangee ISD Announce Settlement with UBS to Compensate School District Over State Pro-Energy Law.]

Attorney General Paxton and Normangee Independent School District ("Normangee ISD") announced a settlement with UBS in the amount of $850,000. The settlement resulted from the company's inability to underwrite Normangee ISD's bonds under the terms of a Texas law known as "SB 13," which stipulates the terms on which certain companies can do business with state governmental entities.

"UBS's actions in this case were costly, and it is critical that they compensate Normangee ISD to recover losses. That's exactly what this settlement accomplishes," said Attorney General Paxton. "I remain committed to combatting the corporate ESG investment agenda, shielding taxpayers from the extra costs that come with it by shifting the burden to banks, and protecting Texas energy companies."

SB 13 requires financial companies who contract with Texas governments to certify that they do not boycott energy companies. UBS certified that it does not boycott energy companies when it entered into a contract to underwrite $18.6 million in bonds to be issued by Normangee ISD.

But the Texas Comptroller placed UBS and several other financial services firms on a list of energy boycotters in August 2022, and the Attorney General's Public Finance Division concurred in that determination, thus disapproving the underwriting contract with Normangee ISD. Through no fault of its own, Normangee ISD then had to re-bid the contract at a higher interest rate, causing it financial harm. Attorney General Paxton then negotiated the settlement with UBS on Normangee ISD's behalf.

May 12, 2023 | Press Release

[S&P Cyber Risk Insights: Ongoing Preparedness Is Key To U.S. Power Utilities Keeping Attackers In The Dark]

Key Takeaways

- Electric utilities remain attractive targets for malicious actors attempting to access proprietary customer data or cause economic and social disruptions or for financial gain.
- Although we view a utility's compliance with the North American Electric Reliability Corp.'s cyber standards as providing a high degree of protection, we nevertheless believe management teams must continually update practices to address evolving risks.
- To date, cyberattacks and physical attacks have not led to any rating actions in the power utility sector, partly due to utilities' sound risk management practices.
- We believe a successful attack would harm a utility's finances and reputation, which could adversely pressure ratings.

Continue reading.

11 May, 2023

Fitch: EPA Memo Ramps Up Cyber Regulations for Water Utilities

Fitch Ratings-Austin/New York-11 May 2023: The US Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) requirement that all public water systems incorporate cyber risk and resiliency in their periodic reviews will add an increased regulatory and financial burden, which could be onerous for smaller systems and systems with minimal existing cyber infrastructure, Fitch Ratings says. The requirement could have a significant effect on water utilities’ capex budgets, and margins would be pressured if systems are unable or unwilling to pass on the added costs to customers through rate increases.

The EPA’s memorandum, which became effective immediately on March 3, 2023, requires states to incorporate a review of cyber resilience in its regular period audits of public water systems (sanitary surveys). Sanitary surveys identify deficiencies that could affect safe water supply, and the EPA is including cybersecurity as a potential deficiency.

States may now be required to evaluate cybersecurity practices and controls as part of the regulatory requirement to review public water systems’ equipment and operations to ensure water supply or safety. A utility must address and correct any cybersecurity deficiency identified by the state. Significant deficiencies could include absence of a practice or control or presence of a vulnerability that has a high risk of being exploited. Should deficiencies not be remedied and result in a breach, Fitch would consider the magnitude of the impact on both finances and operations. Deficiencies may negatively affect our view of management and governance and potentially result in negative rating action if a breach results in weakened financial metrics or supply disruption.

The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency is able to help states with risk assessments, but it is not a dedicated resource and ultimately the responsibility will likely fall on states to interpret cyber resilience and remedies, leading to varying approaches.

Given that there was little federal cyber regulation for the sector prior to this memorandum, many utilities will likely have deficiencies cited in sanitary surveys. Water utility operational technology can be quite old and may not be compatible with needed cybersecurity upgrades or software enhancements. We expect water utilities could incur significant costs in the medium term to update systems and upgrade infrastructure to improve cybersecurity.

In the absence of new robust federal appropriation, we expect utilities will pass on costs to customers through rate hikes, where feasible. Smaller utilities with weaker cybersecurity practices and technology may be less able to fully pass on what could be considerable costs, as its customer base could be less able to bear a jump in rates. As a result, margins could suffer, liquidity and leverage could weaken, and negative rating pressure could build.

The EPA points to a few broad resources that are available to help utilities with remediation, but these resources have other funding mandates besides cybersecurity and will only provide some of the resources needed. These include the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund loan fund, EPA’s Midsize and Large Drinking Water System Infrastructure Resilience and Sustainability Program, and USDA Rural Utilities Service Water and Environmental Programs loans.

America’s Water Infrastructure Act of 2018 (AWIA) requires water systems serving over 3,300 people to assess the risk and resilience of computer systems, but does not provide for any formal review of utilities. The EPA memo, on the other hand, applies to all public water systems. Assessments and emergency response plans under the AWIA may be used to support states’ cyber resilience assessments.

In April, Missouri, Arkansas and Iowa filed a petition to have the EPA cybersecurity mandates reviewed in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit. These states have concerns with the financial burden presented by the new requirement and argue that EPA does not have authority to expand the scope of existing regulations without Congressional action.

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The above article originally appeared as a post on the Fitch Wire credit market commentary page. The original article can be accessed at www.fitchratings.com. All opinions expressed are those of Fitch Ratings.

Public Sector Weighs Procurement Outsourcing.

Facing a shrinking workforce and a largely paper-based procurement processes, more state and local agencies are pushing routine purchasing tasks to third parties.

State and local government procurement shops face increasing pressure to streamline processes, reduce costs and comply with evolving cybersecurity and privacy regulations. As a result, more are turning to outsourcing, according to the report, "2023 ISG Provider Lens Procurement BPO, Transformation and Software Platforms," published by Information Services Group last month.

A few factors are behind that trend, according to Nathan Frey, head of ISG's U.S. public-sector business. They include a need to support a dwindling post-pandemic workforce, an urgent push to digitize largely paper-based procurement processes and greater acceptance of outsourcing by government overall.

Continue reading.

Route Fifty

By Stephanie Kanowitz,
Contributor, GCN

May 12, 2023

Commuters Ditched Public Transit for Work From Home. Now There's a Crisis.

- **Without help, agencies warn of higher fares, service cuts**
- **Top transit systems see total $6.6 billion shortfall by 2026**

The post-pandemic reality for America's public transportation is bleak. Work from home has solidly set in, leaving transit agencies that rely on fare-box revenue facing a fiscal cliff.

As pandemic aid dwindles, the nation's biggest transit systems face a roughly $6.6 billion shortfall through fiscal year 2026, according to a Bloomberg tally of the top eight US transportation agencies based on passenger trips. Rising labor costs and inflation are hitting as farebox revenue stagnates after ridership collapsed. Those eight agencies serve regions that combined contribute about $6 trillion annually to the national economy.

Local officials are pressing for help. Last month, the California Transit Association asked the state for $5.15 billion over the next five fiscal years. Without more money, transit officials across the country warn that the public can expect steep ticket price increases and drastic cuts to train and bus schedules, while long-planned expansion projects are on the chopping block. That pleading worked for New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority when state lawmakers recently approved a massive bailout.

Continue reading.

Bloomberg CityLab

By Skylar Woodhouse

May 9, 2023

Green Bonds are Ready For a Comeback.

The bond market sneezed in 2022, and green bonds caught the same cold. Fortunately, according to some analysts, green bonds are in the position to rebound this year. In the case of municipal green bonds, that provides new opportunities for cities to make climate-resilient investments in their future, and corporate citizens are among those to reap the benefits.

What are green bonds?

Assets in global sustainable and green bonds reached $516 billion at the end of 2022, an elevenfold increase over the past decade, according to a recent analysis from Morningstar. Verizon, one of the largest corporate green bond issuers in the U.S., made headlines this week with its fifth billion-dollar green bond since 2019.

So, what are green bonds anyway, and why do they matter in the world of finance? As with any bond, green bonds are issued by companies and governments as a way to raise money. Investors purchase the bond, and they're paid back later with interest. But in the case of green and sustainability-linked bonds, the funds are specifically earmarked for projects that positively benefit people and the environment.

Continue reading.

Triple Pundit

by Tina Casey

May 10, 2023

Why Are We Allowing the Private Sector to Take Over Our Public Works?

The Inflation Reduction Act will reshape the physical and economic landscape of the United States over the next decade, including in ways that might surprise a lot of people.

Anyone keen to understand how should look at Brookfield Renewable Partners' recent investment of up to $2 billion in Scout Clean Energy and Standard Solar. B.R.P. is a vehicle of Brookfield Asset Management, a leading global asset management firm, with around $800 billion of assets under management, and it purchased two American developers and owner-operators of wind and solar power-generating facilities. This took place six weeks after President Biden signed the I.R.A. into law.

The I.R.A. will help accelerate the growing private ownership of U.S. infrastructure and, in particular, its concentration among a handful of global asset managers like Brookfield. This is taking the United States into risky territory. The consequences for the public at large, whose well-being depends on the quality and cost of a host of infrastructure-based services, from energy to transportation, are unlikely to be positive.

Continue reading.

The New York Times

By Brett Christophers

May 8, 2023

Munis May Be on the Cusp of a $100B Reinvestment Surge: Bloomberg

The $4 trillion municipal-bond market is on the cusp of a seasonal surge in reinvestment dollars, with more than $100 billion of debt set to mature over the next few months. Shruti Singh reports on "Bloomberg Markets: The Close."

Watch video.

Bloomberg Markets: The Close

May 12th, 2023

Muni Market Update (Bloomberg Audio)

Joe Mysak, columnist with Bloomberg News, joins to talk about the muni bond market. Hosted by Paul Sweeney and Madison Mills.

Listen to audio.

Bloomberg Markets

May 12, 2023

How the Flight Into Money Markets Is Impacting Munis.

James Camp, Eagle Asset Management managing director of strategic income, discusses how the flight of cash into money markets has affected the municipal bond market with Romaine Bostick and Scarlet Fu on "Bloomberg Markets: The Close."

Watch video.

Muni MomentBloomberg Markets: The Close

May 10th, 2023

NASBO Summaries of Fiscal Year 2024 Proposed State Budgets.

View the state budget summaries.

Slowing US State Revenues Put Spotlight on Record Rainy Day Funds.

- **Tax receipts ease as states post best credit quality in years**
- **Post-pandemic rebound, federal aid helped states' finances**

Record reserve funds built by US states in the past two years are likely to be needed as tax receipts slow, federal pandemic aid dwindles and the economy heads toward a recession.

California already is projecting a massive deficit for next year and Illinois posted a "stunning" $1.84 billion drop in April receipts from a year ago. The National Association of State Budget Officers says most states are planning for softer revenue growth or slight declines for fiscal 2023 and 2024, after double-digit percentage increases for two consecutive years.

Overall states' tax revenue growth is poised to decrease to between 0% and 5% from as high as 20% in each of the last two years, Nicholas Samuels, a senior vice president for Moody's Investors Service, said in an emailed statement Wednesday.

Continue reading.

Bloomberg Politics

By Shruti Singh

May 4, 2023

S&P: Reliable Funding Continues To Support Stable GARVEE Sector View Amid Stubborn Construction Cost Inflation

Key Takeaways

- With most grant anticipation revenue vehicle (GARVEE) ratings in the 'AA' category, S&P Global Ratings views the federal-grant-secured transportation sector as stable, reflecting our expectation of reliable funding and continued strong support for transportation infrastructure investment across all levels of government.
- Funding from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA; also known as the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law) in federal fiscal 2022 totaled $58.2 billion for the Federal-Aid Highway Program and $13.4 billion for transit formula grant programs sourced from the Highway Trust Fund. Based on estimates of outlays, the fund is projected to be exhausted in 2026.
- Construction project cost inflation and labor shortages continue to erode the anticipated benefits of IIJA funding, with overall construction input prices 38.2% higher in March 2023 than in January 2020 and down just 0.9% from last year.
- Our AA+/A-1+/Stable U.S. sovereign credit rating is linked to both stand-alone GARVEE ratings and those backstopped GARVEE ratings that benefit from an additional pledged security such as state gas taxes.
- Our analysis of key financial metrics for fiscal 2022 shows that GARVEE programs have very strong maximum annual debt service coverage that we do not expect will materially erode as states and regional transportation agencies potentially issue more debt to maintain and expand investment in roads and transit.

Continue reading.

27 Apr, 2023

S&P U.S. Not-For-Profit Health Care Rating Actions, April 2023.

S&P Global Ratings maintained 20 ratings without revising the outlooks, took seven negative and one positive rating actions, and revised two outlooks unfavorably and two outlooks favorably without changing the ratings in the U.S. not-for-profit health care sector in April.

Included in the seven negative rating actions was Beverly Community Hospital, Calif. that was downgraded, placed on CreditWatch with negative implications, and subsequently downgraded again after it filed for bankruptcy and missed a payment to the trustee on its series 2017 bonds. In addition (and excluding any corresponding rating action), we removed two issuers from CreditWatch and placed a third on CreditWatch with negative implications. There were six new sale issuances in the month, with five ratings and outlooks unchanged, and one issuer that had a corresponding upgrade.

Continue reading.

4 May, 2023

S&P U.S. Municipal Water And Sewer Utilities Rating Actions, First Quarter 2023.

Overview

S&P Global Ratings performed 16 rating actions, 29 outlook revisions, and 14 CreditWatch actions within the U.S. municipal water and sewer utilities sector in first-quarter 2023. Seventy-four ratings were maintained with no outlook revisions. While one rating was removed from CreditWatch, we placed 13 on CreditWatch with negative implications.

Continue reading.

2 May, 2023

Evolution of State of the Art Airports and the Role of Public Private Partnerships: Squire Patton Boggs

Walking through LaGuardia Airport in 2023, you might forget that just a few years ago the terminals were woefully out of date. Featuring leaky roofs and cramped waiting areas, the Wall Street Journal commented that the old terminal B at LaGuardia was “possibly the worst major airport in the world.” To combat its woeful reputation, in 2015, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey (the “Port Authority”) unveiled a Vision Plan for its redevelopment that included two new state-of-the-art terminals and significant public and private cooperation. Eight years and $8 billion later, LaGuardia now gleams as a beacon of modernity. In 2023, LaGuardia Airport’s Terminal B was named the world’s best new terminal and achieved the highest global 5-Star Airport Terminal Rating from Skytrax, the international transport rating organization.

LaGuardia’s transformation is just one of several new airport “glow ups” that are largely the product of the industry’s growing embrace of public private partnerships (also known as “P3s”). For instance, LaGuardia’s Terminal B, commenced in June 2016 and completed in January 2022, was part of a P3 between the Port Authority and LaGuardia Gateway Partners (“LGP”) through a Design-Build-Finance-Operate-Maintain model. The $4 billion Terminal B included 35 gates, two island concourses and dual pedestrian sky bridges, and was financed through a mix of approximately $2.5 billion special facilities revenue bonds issued by New York State Transportation Development Corp. (“TDC”), $1.5 billion in Port Authority funds and $200 million in equity from LGP. LaGuardia’s Terminal C, which replaced Delta Air Lines’ (“Delta”) existing C and D Terminals, broke ground in

July 2017 and was opened in June 2022 through a P3 between the Port Authority and Delta. Terminal C included 37 gates across four concourses and the largest Delta Sky Club within the airline's system. Terminal C's $4 billion price tag was financed through approximately $2.89 billion in TDC's special facilities revenue bonds, $500 million from the Port Authority and the remainder financed by Delta. In addition, the Kansas City International Airport recently unveiled a new, 40-gate terminal featuring a modern environment with dedicated arrival and departure levels, covered parking in an adjacent garage, moving walkways and consolidated security checkpoints. This $1.5 billion project is the result of a design-build joint venture team including The Weitz Company and Clarkson Construction Company. In addition, there are several P3s that are currently under construction including, the Los Angeles International Airport Automated People Mover Project ("LAX APM") and the ongoing transformation of JFK Terminal 1, Terminal 4 and Terminal 6.

Continue reading.

Squire Patton Boggs – Alethia N. Nancoo, Catherine Z. Romanchek, Taylor L. Klavan and Jessica Ice

May 4 2023

Using Public-Private Partnerships For Social Infrastructure.

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) have emerged as a popular mechanism for funding and developing infrastructure projects around the world. In recent years, these partnerships have extended beyond traditional transportation and utility projects to encompass social infrastructure. This trend reflects the growing recognition that social infrastructure, including schools, hospitals and community centers, play a critical role in promoting economic development and improving quality of life. By leveraging the resources of both the public and private sectors, PPPs can help to optimize the provision of social infrastructure while reducing the burden on public budgets.

During my time as the CEO of a public-private partnership (P3) development firm and national policy advisor on P3s, I've seen firsthand how public-private partnerships can help improve social infrastructure, but I've also seen instances where it may not be the best solution.

PPPs involve the collaboration between the public and private sectors to build and operate infrastructure projects. The public sector retains ownership and control of the assets, while the private sector provides financing, construction and/or management services. PPPs can be structured in a variety of ways, including build-operate-transfer (BOT), build-own-operate (BOO) and design-build-finance-operate (DBFO). In any case, the partnerships are typically established through a competitive bidding process to ensure accountability and the best value for taxpayers.

Continue reading.

Forbes

by Dee Brown

May 5, 2023

Muni Market Update (Bloomberg Audio)

Joe Mysak, editor of the Muni Market Brief, joins the program to discuss everything going on in the municipal bond market. Hosted by Paul Sweeney and Matt Miller.

Listen to audio.

May 05, 2023

S&P: U.S. States' Fiscal 2024 Budgets Expected To Weather Economic Uncertainty

Key Takeaways

- Even with our expectation of slower revenue growth, most fiscal 2024 U.S. states' budgets are structurally balanced, in our view, with minimal use of reserves.
- Strong reserve levels position states to address the projected shallow recession in fiscal 2024.
- Tax relief and other budget priorities demonstrate competition for future growth amid slowing demographic trends.

Continue reading.

27 Apr, 2023

Traditional Municipal Bond Concepts and New ESG Concepts Collide in a Village Outside of Chicago: McNeese

The world of municipal bonds tends to be conservative in nature and slow to change. The ESG movement (environmental, social, governance) presents a new way of looking at things that can cause confusion and even shock when it bumps up against traditional concepts. This was the case in the municipality of Bolingbrook, an Illinois village 36 miles southwest of Chicago.

A municipality's ability to incur debt generally is governed by state law. The security pledged by the municipality in support of the debt will vary, but commonly will fit within one of the following categories:

General Obligation Bonds. Often issued to finance general capital projects such as roads, bridges and public buildings, general obligation bonds are backed by a pledge by the municipality of its "full faith and credit" and a pledge of its taxing power. In an event of default, bondholders may ask a court to force the municipality to use its general funds, or to raise its real estate taxes, in an amount sufficient to pay the bonds.

Limited Tax or Revenue Bonds. Often issued to finance specific commercial or industrial development, such as a shopping mall or public utility infrastructure, limited tax or revenue bonds are secured by a pledge of only the revenues derived from a specific tax or revenue source. In an event of default, bondholders are limited to seeking repayment from the tax or revenue stream that was pledged by the municipality.

As an outgrowth over concerns about climate change and the general environmental health of the planet, the securities business, which is always concerned with risk, wants environmental risks to be analyzed and disclosed in connection with the sale of securities. Many investors are concerned not only with these risks but also with whether the issuer of securities is using the proceeds of the securities to undertake environmentally beneficial projects. For other investors, socially responsible investing has become a key component of their portfolios. These concerns have resulted in the development, first in Europe and now in the United States, of "ESG" concepts – investing with an eye toward environmental, social and governance impacts.

A full discussion and analysis of ESG is beyond the scope of this article. But, a few key points to keep in mind: first, ESG is not specifically defined – efforts to do so are ongoing, including by securities regulators. In the meantime, many concepts, some sound and some less so, have found their way under the ESG umbrella. Second, ESG has become a political football. From the right are claims that ESG is just an excuse for advancing progressive goals and will result in lower returns for investors. From the left are claims that the right is smearing ESG as a means to avoid favored industries being held to account for the environmental impacts of their businesses. Third, as amorphous as the environmental concepts are, the social and governance concepts are even more so.

With the understanding that ESG remains in flux, let's look at what happened to Bolingbrook. In 2005, the Village issued it $47,715,937.70 Sales Tax Revenue Bonds, Series 2005 (the "2005 Bonds"). The 2005 Bonds were issued to finance a commercial and retail development featuring well-known retail and commercial stores. While the Village has issued general obligation bonds over the years, and carried a very high "AA" credit rating from S&P on those bonds, the Village issued the 2005 Bonds as limited tax revenue bonds, secured solely by the sales tax revenues generated by the stores located in the development. The 2005 Bonds were not backed by the Village's full faith and credit, and did not carry a rating from S&P or any other rating agency.

The 2005 Bonds were clearly marketed and sold as limited obligations with a higher degree of investment risk. The Limited Offering Memorandum dated December 14, 2005, pursuant to which the 2005 Bonds were sold, states in several places that the 2005 Bonds are limited obligations of the Village payable only from the specific home rule sales tax revenues pledged to secure the 2005 Bonds, and that neither the full faith and credit nor the general taxing power of the Village is pledged for the payment of the 2005 Bonds. It goes on to state that the 2005 Bondholders do not have the right to compel the exercise of any taxing power of the Village, other than the pledge of the home rule sales tax.

The project did not generate the anticipated level of sales tax revenues to pay debt service on the 2005 Bonds. As a result, the Village defaulted on the payment of the 2005 Bonds. The Village did not default on its general obligation bonds, which continued to be paid as and when due.

On January 26, 2023, S&P, in response to the 2005 Bonds default, downgraded the Village's rating on its general obligation bonds by seven notches, from "AA" to "BBB-". Why would S&P dramatically downgrade the Village's general obligation bonds, when the Village had not defaulted on their payment and had no legal obligation make up the difference on the amounts owed on the 2005 Bonds?

From the viewpoint of traditional municipal bond concepts, however, this downgrade doesn't make sense. The 2005 Bonds were sold with a structure under which the debt was payable solely from one source – the sales tax revenue. The risk was obvious and well-disclosed to potential purchasers that that if the sales tax revenues were insufficient, the debt service would not be paid. The Village has no legal obligation to use other revenues to pay this debt. S&P does not claim that the Village has a legal obligation to do so.

S&P's justification for the downgrade lies in its ESG approach, specifically, the governance component. S&P noted in its report accompanying the downgrade that "the lack of action from the village to address the default … is a risk management, culture, and oversight weakness under governance risk in our environmental, social, and governance framework." S&P further stated in the case of such a determination, it will cap the issuer's rating at BBB-.

S&P also emphasized in its report that the Village's "financial profile remains very strong, supported by strong annual operating surpluses backed by a very strong fund balance and liquidity position. Additionally, the village has an overall growing tax base that is benefiting from its location in the Chicagoland metropolitan statistical area (MSA)." In other words, the Village is a rich municipality which can afford to make the payment from non-sales tax revenues, therefore it should make it even though it is not legally required to do so. S&P also criticized the Village for "taking on a financing that it would not support in the event of a default."

S&P's downgrade determination raises many questions and concerns for other municipalities that have issued limited tax revenue bonds in addition to their general obligation bonds. Are additional disclosures now required when such municipalities issue general obligation bonds? And, for that matter, what would such a disclosure look like?

We may soon see offering documents that contain a statement similar to the following: "In addition to its general obligation debt, the issuer from time to time issues limited obligation debt. It is possible that, at some point in the future, the issuer's general obligation bonds may be downgraded because of a payment problem with the limited obligation debt. This may be particularly true if the issuer holds a substantial rainy day fund and is otherwise doing well financially." As nonsensical as this may sound, recall that the Village's rosy financial picture was cited as a contributing factor for the downgrade.

Finally, from a very basic viewpoint, it is worth questioning what really is "good management" by a municipality. For Bolingbrook, "good management" (at least in S&P's view) meant paying debts that the Village was not legally obligated to pay. However, is it reasonable for a governing body elected by (and accountable to) the citizenry to use those citizens' tax dollars to pay limited obligation debt intended to benefit retail and commercial stores? And, for that matter, is it reasonable to expect an employee to recommend that such a non-required payment be made?

If "good management" is instead defined to mean proper stewardship of the public coffers, we think many municipalities would choose to follow Bolingbrook's approach.

by Timothy J. Horstmann and David Unkovic

27 April 2023

McNees Wallace & Nurick

Charter School Debt Seen as Insulated From Looming Recession.

- **Bonds backed by tourism, project revenues more susceptible**
- **No first-time payment defaults among charters year to date**

With angst about the health of the economy rising, portfolio managers are focusing on sectors that are shielded from a broad market downturn.

In general, municipal bonds tend to attract buyers in times of economic uncertainty as investors flock to haven assets. Still, some sectors within the $4 trillion market, like those tied to tourism, are more susceptible to slowdowns in spending. With that in mind, charter school and higher education debt should be near the top of investors' lists for those willing to inch down the credit spectrum, according to portfolio managers.

"The predominant funding source for charter schools is state aid," said Yaffa Rattner, head of municipal credit at Hilltop Securities Inc. "As long as the states remain relatively liquid and their budgets are stable, there isn't significant pressure on them to reduce funding."

Continue reading.

Bloomberg Markets

By Nic Querolo

April 24, 2023

Already-Lagging Junk Hospital Bonds Face Looming Medicaid Test.

- **High-yield muni index rallied 3.4% while hospital debt up 0.5%**
- **Millions likely to lose coverage in Medicaid enrollment change**

The already battered health-care industry faces another blow as Medicaid changes threaten to add more pressure on an industry still struggling to recover from the coronavirus pandemic.

The Bloomberg High-Yield Hospital Index is the worst-performing sector of the junk-rated corner of the $4 trillion muni market so far this year. The benchmark, which includes bonds sold by hospitals and retirement communities in addition to nursing and assisted-living facilities, has inched up just 0.5% this year, after a 14% loss in 2022. That's a drastic under-performance compared to the broader high-yield muni index, which has rallied 3.4% this year.

The hospital and health-care sectors continue to endure negative operating margins on higher cost of goods, labor shortages and strained patient volumes. That pressure is reflected in junk bonds as well as debt higher up on the rating spectrum, with Bank of America Corp. research earlier this month attributing the widening of BBB spreads largely to hospitals. Three rating companies, Moody's Investors Service, S&P Global Ratings and Fitch Ratings, have negative or equivalent outlooks on the not-for-profit hospital sector.

Continue reading.

Bloomberg Markets

By Shruti Singh and Lauren Coleman-Lochner

April 26, 2023

S&P U.S. Not-For-Profit Health Care Rating Actions, March And First Quarter 2023.

S&P Global Ratings maintained 24 ratings without revising the outlooks, took eight negative and two positive rating actions, and revised six outlooks unfavorably and one outlook favorably without changing the ratings in the U.S. not-for-profit health care sector in March.

Included in the eight negative rating actions was one issuer that was downgraded and placed on CreditWatch Negative. There were four new issuances in the month, with three ratings and outlooks unchanged and one rating lowered.

The 17 rating actions consist of the following:

- Eight downgrades on two health care systems and six stand-alone hospitals, five of which are now in the 'BBB' and speculative grade categories;
- Two upgrades due to the application of multiple revenue stream and guarantee criteria;
- Six unfavorable outlook revisions divided evenly between stand-alone hospitals and health care systems, also mostly in the 'BBB' and speculative grade categories. Five outlooks were revised to negative from stable, and one to stable from positive; and
- One favorable outlook revision to positive from stable on a stand-alone hospital in Maryland (Mercy Health Services).

Continue reading.

25 Apr, 2023

Fitch Ratings Updates Public Sector, Revenue-Supported Entities Rating Criteria; Adds CDFI Guidance

Fitch Ratings-New York-27 April 2023: Fitch Ratings has updated the Public Sector, Revenue-Supported Entities Rating Criteria report (the Revenue Master Criteria.

Principal among the updates is the inclusion of a new appendix providing additional clarity, transparency and guidance for assessing U.S. Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) within the methodological framework of the Revenue Master Criteria. Specifically, the appendix introduces and/or expands on the following aspects of Fitch's approach to assigning ratings to CDFIs:

–The key rating drivers; revenue defensibility, operating risk, and financial profile;
–Individual assessments for evaluating each key rating driver;
–A more detailed rating positioning table that aligns financial profile with business risk;
–Detailed key metrics and ratios for determining assessments and ratings.

CDFIs that fall within the scope of the Revenue Master Criteria are typically organizations classified as tax-exempt by the Internal Revenue Service under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code (e.g., not-for-profit CDFI loan funds) but which are not covered by sector-specific criteria.

The remaining updates to the criteria are mostly clarifying and editorial in nature. None of the revisions, including the new CDFI appendix, will have an impact on existing ratings.

The updated criteria report replaces the criteria report of the same name dated Feb. 23, 2021 and is available at www.fitchratings.com. The previous version of the criteria has been retired.

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Additional information is available on www.fitchratings.com

[S&P: Advisory Firms Pitch Community Banks on Interest Rate Risk Management Services]

Advisory firms are pitching their services to small financial institutions seeking to manage interest rate risk on their balance sheets.

Amid the recent bank turmoil, more clients are hedging their portfolios against duration, in part because the cost of duration hedging has come down, advisers said in interviews. Hedging against duration is a strategy to reduce a portfolio's interest rate risk, as the longer a bond's duration is, the more sensitive it is to rate changes. Other steps to consider are pledging collateral to federal agencies to generate liquidity and building bond portfolios with laddered maturities, the advisers added.

Yet while lending institutions of all sizes face similar challenges, small banks often lack the tools to navigate the uncertain environment as well as bigger competitors, Derivative Path Inc. Head of Balance Sheet Strategy Isaac Wheeler said in an interview.

"I think community banks kind of drew the short straw," Wheeler said. "Even for our clients that do a good job of managing interest rate risk and have active hedging programs, they're not always as active as maybe a really large institution would be, just because they don't have the internal resources or the bandwidth to manage the hedging programs."

Minimizing rate risk

Banks should aim to build a laddered portfolio, composed of fixed-income securities with different maturity dates, Charles McQueen, president and CEO of McQueen Financial Advisors II Inc. said. The advisory firm launched new outsourced chief investment officer management services at the end of March to help clients manage their investment portfolios, providing guidance on governance, investment, spending, board education, setting long-term targets and portfolio review.

While a laddered portfolio might sacrifice some yield, it will be safer in the long run, McQueen said. Financial institutions that opt to sell securities should get multiple bids from brokerage firms of varying specialties and disciplines first. The problem, he added, is that many financial institutions are not well-versed in the sales process.

“They’re just going to one broker who might not even specialize in the type of product they’re trying to sell and they’re getting terrible bids,” McQueen said.

After Silicon Valley Bank’s demise, banks are as hesitant as ever to make significant investments in bonds. Silicon Valley had high levels of uninsured deposits and deployed many of the funds into the bond market when interest rates were low. The value of the bonds the bank purchased came under pressure after interest rates rose significantly. The underwater portfolio reduced the bank’s access to liquidity when deposit outflows accelerated, and concerns about Silicon Valley’s ability to meet customer demands for cash culminated in a run and the second-largest bank failure in US history.

Counterintuitive as it may seem, banks should buy longer-duration bonds while rates are up, Artisan Advisors LLC founder and managing partner Jeff Voss said in an interview. Banks that lock in asset yields on the funding cost side as Fed rate hikes continue can position themselves to take advantage when rates come back down, Voss said.

Additionally, banks can create liquidity sources in their bond portfolio by pledging collateral value to institutions like the Federal Home Loan Bank or the Federal Reserve, Voss said.

“If nothing else,” he added, “they’ve got that set aside in a time of need.”

Banks can also use derivatives to synthetically shorten the duration of fixed-rate assets such as municipal bonds or mortgage-backed securities, providing a benefit if interest rates rise, Chatham Financial Corp. managing director Todd Cuppia said in an interview.

“The bank could use a pay-fixed interest rate swap to hedge the market value sensitivity of fixed-rate assets,” Cuppia said. “As interest rates rise, the fixed-rate bonds will decline in value, while the pay-fixed swap increases in value.”

Other risks

Beyond bond portfolio risks, another concern for banks might be the falling value of long-duration, fixed-rate lending portfolios, both Voss and Wheeler said.

“I guarantee you if they’re doing fixed-rate lending, the value of those portfolios is falling considerably,” Voss said.

Perception risks can also crop up in moments of crisis in the broader industry, Darling Consulting Group Inc. President and CEO Matt Pieniazek said in an interview. Banks must clearly communicate why unrealized losses and security sales are not a sign of weakness, he added.

“Given what I call the March Madness in banking that took place last month, you’d better have a good story,” Pieniazek said.

by Alex Graf

28 Apr, 2023

[Muni Outlook for 2023 (Bloomberg Audio)]

Eric Kazatsky, Senior Municipal Strategist with Bloomberg Intelligence, joins the program to discuss everything going on in the municipal bond market. Hosted by Paul Sweeney and Matt Miller.

Listen to audio.

Apr 28, 2023

Why Muni Managers Are So Bullish.

"Credit quality right now is the strongest I have ever seen it," Tom Kozlik, Hilltop Securities head of public policy and municipal strategy, says on "Bloomberg Markets: The Close."

Watch video.

Bloomberg Markets: The Close

April 26th, 2023, 12:48 PM PDT

High-Yield Muni Bonds: Risk With Plenty of Tax-Free Rewards.

Historically, the municipal bond market has been a steady-eddy performer for many investors. Thanks to the fact that they are free from Federal taxes, and in some instances state and local taxes as well, munis are often seen as a way for higher income or high-tax-bracket investors to get much-needed income. Add in their relatively low default rates and it's easy to see why munis form the backbone of many investors' taxable accounts.

But not all munis are "boring" and steady-eddy; some can even add a bit of spice to portfolios.

High-yield or junk municipal bonds are just such a security. Featuring low correlation to other bonds and tax-equivalent yields close to 9%, the rewards may outweigh the risks. For investors, adding a swath of high-yield munis to a portfolio could make a ton of sense.

The Other Side of the Tracks

Most investors are familiar with investment-grade municipal bonds, and the bulk of the $4 trillion municipal bond market sits firmly in this category. Munis are issued by state and local governments to run their day-to-day operations, raise money for essential services or build a non-revenue generating project like a park or painting a mural downtown. These are general obligation bonds (GOs) and, once issued, they go into the state or local government's coffers. And because GOs are backed by taxes – and the state/local government's ability to raise those taxes – many munis fall under the investment-grade banner.

But not all munis are investment grade. Some carry more risk and fall within the high-yield or junk category. For starters, not all local governments have stable finances – be it from poor economic conditions or too much issued debt overall, cities and local governments could have lower credit ratings.

The other form of high-yield muni debt, and also the largest category, is so-called revenue-backed and project bonds. These are projects that have “an element of essential service that is financially independent from the city, county or state they serve,” as defined by investment manager and muni specialist Nuveen. For example, a sports stadium, a public hospital, or light-rail system.

These munis and their potential for repayment are driven by the revenues generated by the project. Tobacco settlement bonds often fall under the high-yield category as well. Because of this, project bonds will often have lower credit ratings than the underlying state/local issuer. Thus, they pay higher yields.

Some Risk, But Plenty of Rewards

As expected, project-tied and high-yield munis have a higher default rate than their tax-backed investment-grade cousins. According to Moody’s, 6.94% of all high-yield municipal bonds defaulted within ten years of their issuance between 1970 and 2021. This contrasts to only 0.9% of investment-grade municipal bonds during that time. The kicker is that the default rate for high-yield munis is much less than corporate junk bonds. Nearly 30% of corporate junk bonds defaulted during the same time period.

On the back of lower defaults versus regular junk bonds, you get a similar yield profile. Historically, high-yield munis have offered a similar tax-equivalent yield to those of junks bonds, particularly for those investors in higher tax brackets. For someone in the highest tax bracket, the 5.45% current yield on high-yield munis is roughly equal to the 9% on regular junk bonds.

Secondly, high-yield munis offer low correlation to junk bonds and other high-yield debt securities. According to Nuveen, high-yield munis have just a 0.5 correlation to junk bonds, a 0.42 correlation to the broader investment-grade bond market, and only a 0.34 correlation to mortgage-backed bonds. As for stocks, they have just a 0.28 correlation to the S&P 500. These low correlations provide plenty of diversification benefits.

Finally, high-yield munis have been pretty good on the total returns front as well. Over the last decade, the sector has managed to produce a 6.54% annual return for someone in the 32% tax bracket. That’s not too shabby for a fixed income investment.

Adding a Dose of High-Yield Munis

Now, there is one caveat with regards to high-yield munis, and that is the so-called alternative minimum tax (AMT). Some high-yield munis will qualify for the tax system, with 2017 tax rules raising the AMT threshold to $1,079,800 for 2023 for married couples filing jointly. As a result, that higher threshold leaves regular investors immune to AMT.

With the benefits, high-yield munis could be a great portfolio addition. Just like regular munis, buying individual bonds can be a daunting task. So, funds and ETFs are the answer.

For index fund seekers, the SPDR Nuveen Bloomberg Barclays High Yield Municipal Bond ETF (HYMB) and VanEck Vectors High Yield Municipal Index ETF (HYD) are the two of largest funds in the category and offer exposure to hundreds of different high-yield muni bonds. With yields north of 5% and low costs, they could be all investors need.

However, the high-yield space is one area in which active management really makes a difference. Analyzing the revenue trends that affect payment of these bonds can unearth opportunities. Funds like the Lord Abbett High Yield Municipal Bond Fund (HYMAX) or PIMCO High Yield Municipal Bond Fund (PHMIX) could make sector-beating options for fixed income investors.

All in all, high-yield munis represent an under-utilized bond variety that can be used to boost income on an after-tax basis. While there is risk, the rewards are numerous.

dividend.com

by Aaron Levitt

Apr 26, 2023

Closed-End Bond Funds Are Selling at Steep Discounts. Moves to Make Now.

Leverage helps on the way up, but hurts on the way down, amplifying both gains and losses. That's what closed-end bond fund investors learned the hard way in 2022.

Last year, Barron'swarned of the "debt time bomb" inside such funds as interest rates rose. Bond prices move inversely with rates, and leverage made things worse, with the market prices of some levered bond closed-ends such as Pioneer Municipal High Income Opportunities (ticker: MIO) falling by almost 40% last year. (The funds typically trade at premiums or discounts to their underlying net asset values.)

Many bond strategists now think we are close to peak interest rates, which should presage an upturn for leveraged closed-end bond funds. Not only will their leveraged portfolios amplify gains as rates stabilize—and fall during a likely recession—but their leverage costs will decline.

Continue reading.

Barron's

By Lewis Braham

April 26, 2023

When to Consider Munis From Outside Your Home State.

A major benefit of municipal bonds, or "munis," is that the interest they pay is generally exempt from federal income taxes. They're also generally exempt from state income taxes if the issuer is from the investor's home state. That may seem like a compelling argument for sticking with in-state munis. However, many muni investors may benefit by diversifying outside of their home state, even if it results in a higher state tax bill. We've identified five factors when it could make sense to consider munis from other states. After considering all five, we think that muni investors in all states, with the exception of two high-tax states—California and New York—could benefit from investing in a national, not state-specific, portfolio of muni bonds. Even investors in California who are not in a high state tax bracket could achieve higher after-tax yields by diversifying nationally.

1. You live in a state with low or no state income tax

If you live in a state with low or no state income tax, you will likely benefit from diversifying your muni portfolio with munis from issuers outside your home state. The map below shows the maximum marginal income tax rate by state for married taxpayers filing jointly.

Continue reading.

by Cooper Howard of Charles Schwab, 4/28/23

advisorperspectives.com

Wall Street Boosts States' Credit Scores as Recession Worries Cloud Outlook.

- **Upgrades from Illinois to New Jersey show how US aid helped**
- **Analysts say a deep economic contraction would darken outlook**

The flood of US pandemic aid that flowed into state treasuries helped balance budgets and raise bond ratings. Now the question is whether a recession will halt states' financial progress.

"If we have a very deep and sustained recession, we might see the credit quality or the ratings being adjusted," said Dora Lee, director of research for Belle Haven Investments. "If we have a pretty mild recession, it is highly unlikely that these upgrades will be reversed."

Illinois, Massachusetts and New Jersey this year have garnered higher credit scores from rating companies, including brighter outlooks for the states as well. The upgrades also helped shrink bond yield spreads in the primary and secondary municipal markets, signaling investor perception of state debt is improving.

Continue reading.

Bloomberg CityLab

By Skylar Woodhouse

April 19, 2023

How an Auditor Shortage Could Hurt Local Governments.

Fewer auditors have led to a lag in financial reporting and is threatening to translate into more costs for governments.

Welcome back to Route Fifty's Public Finance Update! I'm Liz Farmer and this week I'm writing about a new, potentially harmful development regarding the staffing shortages in public finance.

It's no surprise to anyone at this point that local governments are struggling to find workers. But finance departments are especially hard-hit when it comes to brain drain. A National Association of State Treasurers study found that 60% of public finance workers are over 45 while less than 20% are younger than 35.

The private sector is facing similar issues. According to the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA), the accounting profession has an acute shortage of workers as the population of graduates with accounting degrees has declined over the years.

Continue reading.

Route Fifty

by Liz Farmer

April 18, 2023

Accountant Shortage Leaves Some US Cities Without Credit Ratings.

- **S&P withdrew ratings on 64 local governments, utility systems**
- **Missing ratings are worrisome with economic headwinds ahead**

The municipality of Marion had planned to finance a new $10 million firehouse with a bond deal later this year, but that project and others are on pause because the city north of Columbus, Ohio, doesn't have a credit rating.

It was among the 64 local governments and utility systems that S&P Global Ratings withdrew ratings for this month for failing to file financial information on time. In March, the company put Marion and 148 other entities on a negative credit watch.

The withdrawal is "catastrophic," said Miranda Meginness, Marion's auditor. "It's hard for us to figure out how to go forward."

A growing shortage of accountants has exacerbated issues for Marion and plagued dozens of cities and counties across the US. Marion saw its general obligation debt rating downgraded two notches in June and has struggled to file its financials on time. Other municipalities have recently seen their bond ratings deteriorate or disappear, threatening their ability to finance projects and borrow at affordable interest rates.

Continue reading.

Bloomberg Business

By Nic Querolo

April 21, 2023

S&P: Not-For-Profit Utilities' Broadband Investments Require Enhanced Risk Management

Key Takeaways

- U.S. public power and electric cooperative utilities operating a competitive broadband business

- generally maintain ‘A’ category ratings, in line with the broader sector’s modal rating category.
- Key broadband operating risks include competing with incumbent providers, technological obsolescence, and limited revenue raising flexibility, which can lead to cash infusions and weaken a utility’s finances.
- We expect federal funding will jump-start broadband service to underserved areas, but credit quality could be pressured if broadband investment needed to complement federal funding weakens financial performance.
- Robust financial profiles and strong risk management practices can offset risks posed by broadband investment and support credit quality.

Continue reading.

17 Apr, 2023

S&P U.S. Charter Schools Rating Actions, First-Quarter 2023.

View the rating actions.

18 Apr, 2023

S&P U.S. Higher Education Rating Actions, First-Quarter 2023.

View the rating actions.

18 Apr, 2023

S&P U.S. Not-For-Profit Health Care Outstanding Ratings And Outlooks As Of March 31, 2023.

View the ratings and outlooks.

19 Apr, 2023

Cities Look to Solve the ConstructionLabor Shortage.

Under a new program with the Labor Department, a dozen cities will work with federal experts to come up with plans to find much-needed infrastructure workers.

With the need for infrastructure workers about to explode as cities and states begin spending the billions of dollars allocated in recent federal laws, an association representing the nation’s cities is trying to deal with the existing shortage of workers in the industry.

The National League of Cities estimates that the U.S. has a shortage of 1 million construction workers. So in a partnership with the U.S. Department of Labor, the group is launching what's called the Good Jobs, Great Cities Academy in an effort to find the workers needed to maintain the roads, bridges, buildings and water lines that will be built with the funds.

NLC and the Labor Department will pick 12 cities to work with federal experts from various agencies to come up with plans to find these workers.

Continue reading.

ROUTE FIFTY

BY KERY MURAKAMI

APRIL 21, 2023

MSRB First Quarter 2023 Municipal Securities Market Summary.

MSRB quarterly market summaries discuss key developments in yields, trading volume, new issuance, and mutual fund flows in the municipal bond market.

Read More.

Publication date: 04/20/2023

New Federal Program to Help Cities Plan 'Thriving Neighborhoods'.

The U.S. Department of Transportation announced an award of $21 million for 64 communities to coordinate transit, mobility, and land-use plans and navigate infrastructure funding opportunities.

In Brief:

- The Thriving Communities Program provides technical assistance to urban, rural and tribal communities for transportation and land-use planning.
- The Department of Transportation announced 64 communities will receive support in the first year.
- $21 million will be distributed to four teams of "capacity builder" organizations, including planning consultants, transportation experts and environmental nonprofits.

Continue reading.

governing.com

by Jared Brey

April 21, 2023

Long-Term Municipal Bonds May Yield Up to 5% After Taxes. How to Invest.

Municipal bonds, along with the entire fixed-income world, faltered last year as the Federal Reserve raised interest rates aggressively to fight inflation. But munis, up around 2% on average this year, are recovering. Some analysts think there's still value in the space, especially in longer-dated bonds.

"The real opportunity is beyond 10 years," says Duane McAllister, co-head of the muni team at Baird Advisors, referring to bonds maturing in 10 to 30 years.

Munis hold appeal for investors in high tax brackets, since their interest is exempt from federal taxation and may be exempt from state or local taxes, if you live in a state that issues the bonds. For example, a AAA-rated muni yielding 3.5% would have a tax-equivalent yield of 5.22% at a 33% federal rate for a head-of-household filer, according to Bankrate. At a 28% tax rate, the yield falls to 4.86%.

Continue reading.

Barron's

By Lawrence C. Strauss

April 20, 2023

Compass Point Upgrades MBIA Stock to 'Buy' Rating: Positive Turning Point for Bond Insurer

Compass Point, a financial services firm based in Washington DC, has recently upgraded &MBIA (NYSE:MBI) stock from a "neutral" rating to a "buy" rating in a report released last Friday. This move has generated a great deal of buzz within the investment community as it represents an important turning point in the company's prospects.

For those unfamiliar with MBIA, it is one of the largest bond insurers in the United States, providing financial guarantees for municipal and government-issued bonds. The company has gone through a number of challenging years and suffered significant losses during the 2008 financial crisis. However, recent developments have provided reason for optimism among investors.

The upgrade by Compass Point reflects improvements in MBIA's balance sheet, which had been under pressure due to legacy issues from prior business activities. Under new management, MBIA has worked hard to address these challenges and streamline operations while also diversifying its revenue streams.

In addition to addressing legacy issues, MBIA has made strategic investments that are already paying off. For instance, the company acquired Athena Art Finance Corporation last year which provides specialty financing solutions for high-value art collections. This acquisition has not only added another source of revenue but also better positioned MBIA within the competitive finance industry.

Investors have taken notice of these positive developments and appear confident that they will continue to drive growth for MBIA going forward. Shares of the company have steadily appreciated since February when its Q4 2020 earnings report was released, showing improved profitability and return on equity.

While there are still challenges ahead for MBIA as it continues to navigate complex legal issues related to past business practices, Compass Point's upgrade suggests that investors believe these risks are manageable and outweighed by potential rewards.

Overall, with favorable market conditions coupled with strategic management decisions and operational improvements made by MBIA executives over recent years — this latest development suggests that things are looking up for what was once a beleaguered bond insurer. Investors will want to stay tuned to see how things play out in months and years ahead as MBIA continues to rebuild its reputation and navigate the complex world of finance.

beststocks.com

by Elaine Mendonça

April 22, 2023

Long-Term Municipal Bonds May Yield Up to 5% After Taxes. How to Invest.

Municipal bonds, along with the entire fixed-income world, faltered last year as the Federal Reserve raised interest rates aggressively to fight inflation. But munis, up around 2% on average this year, are recovering. Some analysts think there's still value in the space, especially in longer-dated bonds.

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Continue reading.

Barron's

By Lawrence C. Strauss

April 20, 2023

Fitch: Recessionary Pressure to Intensify for U.S. Public Finance

Fitch Ratings-New York-13 April 2023: Positive rating momentum continued last quarter for U.S. public finance, though Fitch Ratings' latest quarterly rating actions recap says inflation, labor shortages and higher capital costs point to increased pressure overall in the coming months.

Fitch upgraded 38 U.S. public finance ratings and downgraded 12 in first-quarter 2023 (1Q23), continuing a similar trajectory from 4Q22 (43 upgrades and 18 downgrades). However, aggressive Federal Reserve monetary policy tightening likely means a mild recession in the near future while recent banking sector concerns add to the potential for contraction. This is creating a ripple effect for state and local government ratings, according to Arlene Bohner, Fitch's head of U.S. public finance.

'With a handful of states already reporting revenue declines, fiscal pressure could escalate if economic conditions deteriorate rapidly, though most states are well-positioned to absorb a moderate economic downturn,' said Bohner. Despite a 'deteriorating' sector outlook for 2023, states and local government ratings will remain stable.

The same cannot be said for not-for-profit hospitals (two upgrades, eight downgrades in 1Q23). Healthcare providers remain under considerable pressure, particularly with respect to labor, inflation, and equity market volatility, with elevated downgrades and negative outlook actions in the coming quarters likely. The outlook is more balanced for life plan communities (one upgrade, no downgrades in 1Q23) with limited coronavirus outbreaks and favorable demographic trends allowing for stable to improving occupancy across most communities. More fiscal pain also awaits higher education (six upgrades, four downgrades in 1Q23) due largely to inflation, labor and wage pressure and generally soft enrollment, which could further erode operating margins.

Fitch's 'U.S. Public Finance Rating Actions Report and Sector Updates: First-Quarter 2023' report is available at 'www.fitchratings.com'.

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Additional information is available on www.fitchratings.com

S&P U.S. State Ratings And Outlooks: Current List

View the Current List.

14 Apr, 2023

Fitch U.S. Public Finance Rating Actions Report and Sector Updates: First-Quarter 2023

Upgrades Outpaced Downgrades Positive rating momentum continued in 1Q23 for the U.S. Public Finance sector despite high inflation, persistent labor shortages and elevated costs of capital. In 1Q23, Fitch Ratings upgraded 38 U.S. Public Finance ratings and downgraded 12 compared to 43 and 18, respectively, in 4Q22. Upgrades represented approximately 4.5% of rating activity this past quarter, while downgrades represented approximately 1.5%. Six of eight USPF Sector Outlooks are deteriorating', with the remaining two at Neutral, relative to 2022. Fitch's Rating Outlooks Remain Stable Despite a largely deteriorating sector outlook, the distribution of Rating Outlooks continues to reflect credit stability. Stable Rating Outlooks represented 91.2% of the portfolio. Positive Rating Outlooks/Watches represented 5.5% of the portfolio and Negative Rating Outlook/Watches represented 3.4% as of 1Q23 quarter end. While an expected economic slowdown in 2023 will weaken the macro conditions facing U.S. states and local governments, Fitch anticipates overall credit quality will remain stable and strong given prudent efforts in recent years to bolster financial resilience. In the Not-For-Profit Hospital sector, healthcare providers remain under considerable pressure, particularly with respect to labor challenges, general inflation, and equity market volatility and limited coronavirus outbreaks and favorable demographic trends allowed for stable to improving occupancy across most Life Plan Communities. Despite deceleration in home prices, healthy residential real estate markets generally translated into consistent demand for LPCs.

ACCESS REPORT

Thu 13 Apr, 2023 – 1:21 PM ET

Of Standing and Stonewalling: Chester, Pennsylvania Bankruptcy Sheds New Light on Chapter 9 Eligibility Requirements - Cadwalader

On March 14, 2023, Judge Ashely M. Chan of the U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania (the "***Court***") ruled that the City of Chester, Pennsylvania (the "***City***" or "***Chester***") was eligible for municipal bankruptcy relief under Chapter 9 of the Bankruptcy Code, specifically overruling objections that challenged Chester's authority under state law to file for Chapter 9 relief and whether the City negotiated with its creditors in good faith.1 The decision provides useful insight into some of the finer points of Chapter 9 eligibility and, like prior decisions concerning Chapter 9 eligibility, it confirms that Section 109(c)'s "good faith" negotiation requirement is a flexible standard left to the discretion of the court and that the court may consider the conduct of creditors in prepetition negotiations.

BACKGROUND

Chester is the oldest city in Pennsylvania. The City is located near Philadelphia and has a population of around 30,000 residents. Following the loss of its manufacturing base, the City suffered a steep decrease in revenues and population. Over time, the City accumulated multi-million dollar deficits, which in 1995 led to its designation as a "distressed city" under Pennsylvania's comprehensive state law for dealing with municipal distress – the Municipalities Financial Recovery Act, generally referred to as "***Act 47***." Under Act 47, if a municipality is determined to be in financial distress, then the Pennsylvania Secretary of Community and Economic Development (the "***Secretary***") must appoint a coordinator to prepare and administer a plan designed to relieve the municipality's financial distress.2

Despite decades of state supervision under Act 47, the City's financial situation continued to deteriorate, and in April 2020, the Governor of Pennsylvania declared a fiscal emergency for the

City.3 Following the declaration of such a fiscal emergency, Act 47 authorizes the Governor to direct the Secretary to file a petition in state court to appoint a receiver for the distressed municipality. On June 1, 2020, the Secretary petitioned a state court for appointment of a receiver for the City, and on June 22, 2020, the court appointed Michael Doweary (the "***Receiver***") as receiver. Thereafter, the Receiver took various cost-saving measures, but those efforts were unable to improve the City's financial situation.

The Receiver also undertook negotiations with the City's major creditor constituencies in an effort to obtain debt relief for the City. At the time of the Receiver's appointment, the City's capital structure included two major bond issuances, consisting of (i) two series of "2017 Bonds" issued directly by the City, secured by certain casino and other revenues, and held entirely by a single financial firm – Preston Hollow Community Capital ("***Preston Hollow***") – and (ii) one series of unsecured "2021 Notes" issued by the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission on behalf of the City, and held by a more disparate group of bondholders. The City also had significant liabilities to both its current and former employees, including (i) current employees subject to collective bargaining agreements and represented by various unions, and (ii) retired employees entitled to benefits from the City's underfunded pension funds, but not benefiting from any centralized or organized representation (the "***Retirees***"). Between 2020 and 2022, the Receiver attempted to negotiate concessions from various creditors (including the bondholders and unions), but was not able to reach an agreement with any of these constituencies.

Given the City's deteriorating financial condition and the Receiver's failure to obtain concessions from key creditors, the Receiver ultimately filed a Chapter 9 petition in the Court on November 10, 2022. Before filing the Chapter 9 petition, the Receiver obtained the requisite written authorization from the Secretary. Two major objections were filed to the City's eligibility for Chapter 9 relief, one by the City's mayor and City Council (the "***Elected Officials***"), and one by bondholder Preston Hollow. The Elected Officials argued that the City lacked authority under state law to file for Chapter 9 relief, while Preston Hollow claimed that the City did not negotiate in good faith with its creditors prior to filing for bankruptcy.

Continue reading.

Cadwalader Wickersham & Taft LLP – Ivan Loncar , Casey Servais, Lary Stromfeld , Thomas Curtin and Marc Veilleux

April 13 2023

S&P U.S. Not-For-Profit Senior Living Sector Exhibits Stability Despite Rising Pressures.

Key Takeaways

- In the U.S. long-term care sector, ratings are largely stable, although industry and macroeconomic challenges remain key risks.
- Effective and strong management teams were a significant differentiating factor across rated issuers.
- Rating pressure, where present, primarily consisted of multiple factors, including inconsistent occupancy levels, operating losses, and weakening balance-sheet trends.

[Continue reading.](#)

11 Apr, 2023

[Fitch: End of Continuous Medicaid Enrollment Negative for NFP Hospitals](#)

Fitch Ratings-New York-12 April 2023: The expiration of the Medicaid continuous enrollment provision will be mildly dilutive to not-for-profit (NFP) hospitals' payor mixes and add to operating pressures, Fitch Ratings says. Revenue erosion could be particularly acute for hospitals with higher Medicaid patient levels and could affect credit quality over time.

States recently began shedding Medicaid rolls following the expiration of automatic enrollment on March 31. The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) estimates that up to 15 million people, or 17.4% of current beneficiaries, could lose coverage over the next twelve months, either due to loss of eligibility or administrative hurdles despite still being eligible. Increased administrative churn with renewed eligibility determination following the hiatus of the last three years will result in some losing coverage temporarily until they reenroll or secure other health insurance.

An increase in the uninsured population would be an additional negative factor weighing on hospital operations, further constricting margins that have been pressured over the last year as a result of increased expenses due to higher labor costs and generationally elevated inflation. Liquidity remains generally robust, providing a significant cushion to allow hospitals to manage higher costs, but market volatility has reduced unrestricted liquidity levels from sector highs in 2021, and deteriorating operating conditions will be felt more acutely in 2023 as a result.

We anticipate that there will be a renewed credit divide among hospitals with the reduction in Medicaid coverage. The number of those who become uninsured will vary by state and depend upon Medicaid policies, enrollment outreach and individual healthcare options. Hospitals in the 10 states that have not expanded Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act (ACA) may see heighted pressures with their uninsured population. Hospitals that are true safety net hospitals, with Medicaid and self-pay composing more than 30% of their payor base, are also likely to see greater revenue erosion. Hospitals with a greater percentage of Medicaid patients tend to have thinner margins, and an increase in uninsured patients would disproportionally pressure operating results.

Continuous enrollment has been supportive of NFP hospitals by reducing the uninsured population. Medicaid enrollment grew significantly compared with pre-pandemic enrollment, adding 15.5 million people between February 2020 and December 2021, with the uninsured rate dropping to a historic low of 8%, according to DHHS. Hospitals received reimbursement for patients that would otherwise likely have fallen under charity care (no reimbursement). The program also eased the administrative burden of hospitals having to facilitate Medicaid enrollment for some patients.

The Families First Coronavirus Response Act instituted continuous Medicaid enrollment at the height of COVID-19 and tied it to higher Medicaid rates the federal government paid to states during the public health emergency (PHE). States were not permitted to drop existing Medicaid enrollees who might become ineligible while receiving the enhanced federal medical assistance percentage (FMAP). The Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2023, de-linked continuous enrollment from the PHE, and enhanced federal Medicaid funds will be phased out between April 1 and Dec. 31, 2023.

States are subject to outreach and reporting requirements as they determine who is still eligible while they continue to receive enhanced FMAP. States will have 12 months to determine current eligibility and two additional months to complete outstanding actions.

[Fitch: Labor Picture Continues to Brighten for U.S. NFP Hospitals]

Fitch Ratings-Austin-11 April 2023: Some more rays of light are emerging for U.S. not-for-profit (NFP) hospitals on the labor front, according to the latest sector dashboard from Fitch Ratings.

“Hospital and ambulatory healthcare services payrolls have risen for 14 and 26 consecutive months, respectively, as of last month. Hospital and ambulatory healthcare services monthly job additions are also up an average of 15,150 and 24,300 per month, respectively, between March 2022 to February 2023. These statistics point to the potential of alleviating labor market pressure,” according to Fitch Ratings Director Richard Park.

The improving picture also extends to nursing facilities, which have been plagued by severe staff shortages the last several months. While still high, nursing facilities reported shortages of 17.3% and 17.7% of nurses and aides, respectively, through the end of February. These figures are well below the peak in January 2022, when 28.3% and 29.8% of nursing facilities reported shortages of nurses and aides, respectively. ‘Sustained staffing improvements at nursing homes should help improve length of stay/discharge challenges at hospitals,’ said Park.

That said, quits rate are still high. The number of quits in the healthcare and social assistance sector were at 2.7% as of February 2023, compared with the 1.6% average from 2010 to 2019. Hospitals will have to invest in cost effective care solutions and develop enhanced business models that incorporate flexible staffing to adapt to labor costs that have been reset to a permanently higher level,” said Park.

Fitch’s latest “Hospitals and Healthcare Systems Labor Dashboard: April 2023” is available at www.fitchratings.com.

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Fitch Hospitals and Healthcare Systems Labor Dashboard: April 2023

Year Over Year Average Hourly Earnings Growth Down: Average hourly earnings growth of hospital employees slowed to 4. 7% yoy in February 2023, down from a recent high of 8.4% in June 2022. Average hourly earnings growth of ambulatory healthcare services employees slowed to 3.8% yoy in February 2023 from a recent high of 6.3% in January 2022. Hospital/Ambulatory Payrolls Continue to Rise: Hospital and ambulatory healthcare services payrolls have risen for 14 and 26 consecutive months, respectively, as of March 2023, resulting in hospital and ambulatory healthcare services payrolls being 1% and 5.9% above the February 2020 level. Hospital and ambulatory healthcare services monthly job additions have averaged +15,150 and +24,300 per month, respectively, over the twelve month period from April 2022 – March 2023 compared to -2,010 and +20,350 per month over the twelve month period from April 2021 – March 2022. Lower average hourly earnings growth, continued payroll additions and an uptick in the health care and social assistance unemployment rate (from 2.1% as of December 2022 to 2.4% as of March 2023) point to the potential of alleviating labor market pressure. Job Openings Rate Declines From Peak: The healthcare and social assistance sector's job openings rate has lowered from a peak of 9.3% as of March 2022 to 7.4% as of February 2023.

ACCESS REPORT

Tue 11 Apr, 2023

Schools Find Power in Numbers.

Across the country, school districts are joining together to negotiate lower premiums for insurance, goods and services.

Between a shortage of bus drivers and the small number of buses that the Old Rochester Regional School District employs in Mattapoisett, Massachusetts, if a bus driver calls in sick for the afternoon sports program, one of the teams loses their ride to a game.

"We have to have the conversation: Well, which team hasn't missed a game?" said Howie Barber, assistant superintendent of finance and operations.

So, to save money and increase the number of buses and drivers in the fleet, next year Barber will bid with other towns in his district on more than 20 buses—up from the six to eight buses his district currently operates. It requires getting over the mindset that each elementary school represents its own organization, he said.

Continue reading.

ROUTE FIFTY

By Rachel Gottlieb

APRIL 10, 2023

Gas, Guns, and Governments: Financial Costs of Anti-ESG Policies

As interest from investors in funds with environmental, social, and governance (ESG) policies has grown, so has a backlash from some politicians. Laws curtailing public sector activity with funds that take ESG-friendly actions have been proposed or passed in 17 states. One of them is Texas, where the state and political subdivisions raise about $50 billion in financing from the municipal bond market every year, placing it among the top three states in that market.

The Texas state legislature in September 2021 barred any of the state's municipalities from contracting with banks that restrict funding of oil and gas or firearms companies. The laws led to the abrupt exit of five of the largest municipal bond underwriters from Texas; these underwriters had accounted for a bit more than a quarter of all the competitive bids for municipal bond underwriting in Texas. The issuers previously reliant on the targeted banks were more likely to rely on negotiated borrowing instead of holding an auction, and received worse pricing after the implementation of the law.

As a result, we estimate that Texas issuers will incur $300-$500 million in additional interest on the $31.8 billion borrowed during the first eight months following the implementation of the law.

Continue reading.

The Brookings Institution

by Daniel Garrett and Ivan T. Ivanov

Wednesday, April 12, 2023

Does ESG Matter in Public Finance? It Depends ...

Culture wars over environmental, social and governance factors used by pension fiduciaries are in the spotlight, but it's the municipal bond arena where long-term analysis must trump short-term symbolic politics. Sustainability actually matters to investors.

In case you've tuned it out, there's a battle underway between proponents of "sustainability" analysis of corporate business practices and those who favor "drill, baby, drill" and "anti-woke" free market profitability metrics and political slogans. The debate worked its way up to Capitol Hill, where Congress passed and President Biden vetoed a bill to stifle retirement account fiduciaries' consideration of environmental, social and governance (ESG) factors in their funds' investments.

At the state level, meanwhile, a number of oil-rich states have put corporate proponents of ESG-informed investing in a penalty box by blackballing them from plum municipal bond underwriting business. On the political front, it's another chapter in the ongoing battle over symbolic politics.

For pension funds, the argument for ESG investing has always been that it provides a long-term lens through which the future profitability and even sustainability of companies can be viewed, so that short-term financial performance and profits are not assumed to be perpetual. If you believe that fossil fuel industries will eventually be curtailed or replaced by green energy sources, then it's a reasonable concern that the residual value of an oil company might be impaired and thus less investment-worthy. But that doesn't sit well with political leaders in states where fossil fuel industries produce jobs, royalty income and a lot of tax revenues. So the primary focus has generally been driven by petroleum economics, with mostly symbolic focus on social and governance ideology.

Continue reading.

governing.com

by Girard Miller

April 11, 2023

Muni Demand Keeps Sliding as Rate Uncertainty Shakes Confidence.

- **Week ending April 5 saw $92 million of fund withdrawals**
- **Munis posted their worst performance since 1980 in 2022**

Investors have been pulling money out of municipal bond funds even though the asset class delivered strong returns in March.

Muni funds have seen eight straight weeks of withdrawals, with $92 million of outflows for the week ending April 5, according to Refinitiv Lipper US Fund Flows data. The exodus is unusual because retail investors tend to flee when returns are weak, but munis delivered a 2.2% return last month — the strongest performance for the month of March since 2008, according to data compiled by Bloomberg.

Portfolio managers say interest-rate uncertainty and banking turmoil have some investors on the sidelines. The Federal Reserve has been aggressively raising rates this past year to curb inflation, but recent bank failures may lead the central bank to pump the brakes on rate hikes to stabilize the financial system.

Continue reading.

Bloomberg Markets

By Nic Querolo and Skylar Woodhouse

April 12, 2023

Public-School Jobs Are Approaching Their Pre-Pandemic Peak.

- **Local education added 12,000 jobs in March to 7.93 million**
- **Latest increase in payrolls was smallest since September**

US local-government education payrolls inched closer to their pre-pandemic peak in March, extending a rebound that's trailed the broader economy's recovery.

Localities added education jobs for a sixth straight month, with a gain of 12,000 to around 7.93 million, according to Bureau of Labor Statistics data released Friday. While the latest jump was the smallest since September, it brings employment to within about 1.6% of February 2020 levels. Meanwhile, private-sector payrolls have surpassed their pre-pandemic mark by 2.7%.

The pandemic dealt an abrupt and brutal hit to the education workforce, amounting to hundreds of thousands of positions. Cities and towns have struggled to lure back educators tempted by higher pay in the private sector, or by jobs offering the option of working from home. A silver lining may be that the gradual pace of the rebound, at a time when many municipalities are fiscally healthy, could cushion against job losses should a recession hit.

Continue reading.

Bloomberg Markets

By Nic Querolo

April 10, 2023

States Awarded $6.5B to Help Remove Lead Pipes.

After shortchanging the states with the most lead pipes last year, funding was tweaked to get the money to where it was needed most.

When the Environmental Protection Agency handed out money last year to remove dangerous lead pipes, Illinois didn’t get its fair share.

Although Illinois has the second most lead service lines in the nation, it received significantly less funding than California, which has a fraction of the number of lead pipes. With about 730,000, Illinois received just $52.4 million. By comparison, California received $122.5 million to remove about 65,000 lead pipes, according to the EPA.

But the distribution of funds was evened out last week when the EPA distributed more than $6.5 billion in Drinking Water State Revolving Fund dollars. This time, states that previously felt they were being shorted are getting a much larger share of the funding.

Continue reading.

ROUTE FIFTY

by Kery Murakami

APR 11, 2023

Muni Bonds Poised to Do Really Well: Neuberger's Iselin

Jamie Iselin, Neuberger Berman’s head of municipal fixed income, explains why he thinks muni bonds are attractive right now on “Bloomberg Markets: The Close.”

Watch video.

Bloomberg Markets: The Close

April 12th, 2023

Munis in Focus for April (Bloomberg Audio)

Joe Mysak, editor of the Muni Market Brief, joins the program to discuss everything going on in the municipal bond market. Hosted by Kriti Gupta and Jess Menton.

Listen to audio.

Apr 14, 2023

As States Plan for Next Year's Budget, the Economy Flashes Mixed Signals.

Even with rising inflation and worries about a looming recession, most state budgets are doing better than expected. But there are signs that the slowdown policymakers keep planning for is getting closer.

Welcome back to Route Fifty's Public Finance Update! I'm Liz Farmer, back from vacation, and this week I'm doing a state budgets update.

With just a few months left in most states' fiscal year and a looming deadline to pass next year's budget, the spring months can be a bit of a juggling act for lawmakers if the current year's revenues aren't lining up with expectations.

The key word here is expectations. And many states have dialed them down compared with what they experienced in fiscal 2022.

"These last few years have been very unique—it's unprecedented to see double-digit revenue growth for two straight years," said Brian Sigritz, director of state fiscal studies for the National Association of State Budget Officers (NASBO). "Some of that was economic strength, and some of it was due to the federal funding flowing to states and households. States weren't assuming that level of growth would continue."

Continue reading.

Route Fifty

By Liz Farmer

APRIL 4, 2023

S&P 'AAA' Rated U.S. Counties: Current List

View the Current List.

5 Apr, 2023

S&P 'AAA' Rated U.S. Municipalities: Current List

View the Current List.

5 Apr, 2023

Fitch: US Water Utilities' Debt Would Increase Under Proposed PFAS Rule

Fitch Ratings-New York/Austin-03 April 2023: The US Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) recently proposed rule setting limits on per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in drinking water would increase public water utilities' debt burden as a result of the added costs of compliance, Fitch Ratings says. The strong rate flexibility and capacity for additional debt exhibited by water systems is expected to limit the impact on credit quality, but will depend on the final scope of rule. EPA expects to finalize the rule by the end of this year.

The proposed National Primary Drinking Water Regulation (NPDWR) outlines maximum contaminant levels for six PFAS and would require utilities to monitor PFAS levels in drinking water systems, notify the public and reduce levels to comply with the regulated standard. The proposed limit is essentially the equivalent of non-detectable levels.

As with other sector-wide issues, we would assess the credit impact of this rule on utilities on a case by case basis, considering each system's capital budget, debt profile, preparedness, and rate flexibility. Technology risk is not a concern as the treatment technology is well known.

Some of our rated issuers are already addressing PFAS given state regulations. States such as Massachusetts and California have implemented their own PFAS limits that are not as stringent as the proposed rule, and affected utilities have started, and in some cases even completed, treatment to meet those standards. Other utilities have disclosed that they do not have any detectable PFAS in their water supply.

The enormous costs involved in PFAS remediation will be a primary consideration as utilities submit feedback to the EPA; the public comment period currently closes May 30, 2023. The EPA estimates that between 3,400 and 6,300 public water systems will need to reduce PFAS under the proposed rule, and that annual costs would total between $772 million and $1.2 billion, including capital and operational expenses. Once the rule is finalized, water systems would have three years to comply.

The costs of compliance will likely drive utilities to incur additional debt. While water utilities are expected to pass on higher operating and capital costs to customers through rate increases, those facing significant capital spending requirements or serving limited customer bases/service areas may be unable to immediately recoup upfront costs, leading to higher debt levels.

However, rating actions are likely to be limited, as Fitch's water utility ratings reflect a stress scenario that already incorporates a 10% increase in capital spending. This level of stress should encompass anticipated spending for most systems under the rule and the compliance timeline as currently proposed. Systems with significantly higher PFAS exposure and related spending requirements will be at higher risk for negative rating action.

Federal or other government grants will also help offset costs for some systems. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) provides up to $10 billion to address contaminants, including $4 billion through drinking water state revolving funds, $5 billion through EPA's Emerging Contaminants in Small or Disadvantaged Communities Grant Program, and $1 billion through clean water state revolving funds.

It is unclear if the costs of reducing PFAS levels will be shared by other entities. Some states and local governments have sued companies that used PFAS in an attempt to hold them accountable for clean up costs.

The market has anticipated increased regulation, including a federal PFAS rule. Fitch has a deteriorating sector outlook for US water and sewer utilities for 2023 that reflects economic and business conditions, including anticipated higher costs of compliance with environmental regulations, that create a more challenging operating environment relative to 2022. We note that more stringent regulatory requirements and shorter deadlines could cause further pressure, and based on the proposed limits and the three-year compliance timeline, the NPDWR would contribute to a sustained deteriorating outlook.

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Utilities Pursue Pipeline Sales as Natural-Gas Bans Catch On.

Possible sales come as regulators debate fossil fuels' future in home heating and cooking

Two of the country's largest utility companies are weighing potential sales of parts of their natural-gas pipeline networks as efforts to phase out in-home gas use accelerate.

Dominion Energy Inc. is considering selling its gas-distribution companies serving North Carolina, Ohio and parts of the Western U.S., according to people familiar with the matter. Combined, the assets could be worth as much as $13 billion, some of the people said, though they are unlikely to be sold all together.

Meanwhile, National Grid PLC is exploring a possible sale of part of its pipeline network serving the Northeast as lawmakers there look to curtail fossil-fuel use, according to people familiar with the matter. One option under discussion at the British utility company is to sell a minority interest in the network, some of the people said.

Continue reading.

The Wall Street Journal

By Katherine Blunt, Laura Cooper and Jimmy Vielkind

April 6, 2023

Fitch Rtgs Updates U.S. Public Finance Not-For-Profit Life Plan Community Rating Criteria.

Fitch Ratings-New York-05 April 2023: Fitch Ratings has published revised "U.S. Public Finance Not-For-Profit Life Plan Community Rating Criteria." The revised criteria represent minor editorial updates and clarifications to the existing version dated April 2022 . No ratings are affected.

The full report is available at www.fitchratings.com.

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Hospitals Face ‘Make-or-Break Year’ After Bleak 2022, Fitch Says.

- **Last year was worst for nonprofit operations, firm says**
- **With less cash on hand, higher expenses, uncertainties remain**

Last year is shaping up to be the worst year ever for the finances of US nonprofit hospitals — and 2023 isn’t looking much better, according to Fitch Ratings.

“2023 is going to be the make-or-break year” for stemming financial declines, senior director Kevin Holloran said during a presentation Wednesday on the challenges facing nonprofit hospitals.

Those trials include labor costs and shortages, inflation, a higher cost of capital, investment losses and the end of billions in federal pandemic funds. While the need for expensive traveling nurses has declined, basic wages have jumped.

Continue reading.

Bloomberg Business

By Lauren Coleman-Lochner

April 6, 2023 at 11:21 AM PDT

Muni Issuance Low Amid Strong Demand: Thornburg's Lando

Thornburg Investment Management Portfolio Manager Eve Lando says municipal bond issuance has been a bit lower than expected amid demand that is “quite strong.” She speaks with Katie Greifeld and Romaine Bostick on “Bloomberg Markets: The Close.”

Watch video.

Bloomberg Markets: The Close

April 5th, 2023

Muni Closed-End Funds Yield Over 4%, Now at Big Discount to Portfolio Values.

Closed-end municipal bond funds are trading at unusually wide discounts to their net asset value and now offer yields of 4% or more.

The sector recently traded at an average discount of 11% to net asset value, or NAV, compared with a long-term average of about 4%, according to Matisse Capital.

Leading funds ranked by size include Nuveen AMT-Free Quality Municipal Income (Ticker NEA), Nuveen Quality Municipal Income Fund (NAD), Nuveen AMT-Free Municipal Credit Income (NVG) and BlackRock Municipal 2030 Target Term (BTT).

Continue reading.

Barron's

By Andrew Bary

April 5, 2023

Muni Money-Market Fund Yields Hit 4%.

Investors can now get a 4% yield on low-risk municipal money-market mutual funds—but that rate may not last because yields in the sector are volatile.

Municipal money-market funds are formerly a hot and now backwater area of the tax-exempt market that offers investors an alternative to the much larger taxable money-market funds.

There are about $130 billion of muni money-market funds, according to Morningstar , against more than $5 trillion of taxable money funds.

The muni total is down from $500 billion prior to the financial crisis. Vanguard, Fidelity, Charles Schwab (ticker: SCHW), and JPMorgan Chase (JPM) are leading players in muni money funds.

Continue reading.

Barron's

By Andrew Bary

April 3, 2023

Municipal CEF Sector Update: A Trio Of Tailwinds

Summary

- Tax-exempt municipal bonds have had a tough ride since 2022; however, the sector enjoys a number of current and upcoming tailwinds.
- These tailwinds include a stabilization and likely increase in net income once the Fed starts to reverse the policy rate, likely further gains in the NAV and historically wide discounts.
- We also highlight what we are doing in our Income Portfolios as well as a number of funds we like.
- I do much more than just articles at Systematic Income: Members get access to model portfolios, regular updates, a chat room, and more.

Continue reading.

Seeking Alpha

Apr. 05, 2023

Are Munis The Antidote To Recessionary Fears?

As lending tightened following the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank and job growth slows, the Fed may finally be seeing the cooling of the economy it set out to orchestrate, according to fixed-income managers at Los Angeles-based Capital Group.

For investors, it's time to reexamine the shifted landscape, they said, and one of the best places to look for some stability is municipal bonds.

Karl Zeile, a portfolio director, and Greg Ortman, an investment director, wrote in a joint publication "Recession Resilience: Municipal Bonds Can Help Shield Portfolios" that while many high-quality bond sectors can do well in a recession relative to equities, municipal bonds have some unique advantages that could make them bright spots in an otherwise dismal investment environment.

Those advantages include distinctive characteristics that provide some resistance to recessionary impact, high current yields and strong post-pandemic fundamentals, all of which act as a buffer if growth continues to slow and recession fears mount.

Zeile wrote that should the U.S. enter a recession, he expected it to have all the hallmarks of a traditional recession. "I would expect equities to experience a correction due to the pressure on earnings," he said. "The job market may weaken, causing a cash crunch for consumers, and economic growth would further contract."

While that sounds unpleasant, those are pains that lead to municipal bond gains. The services supported by municipal revenue bonds tend to be essentials, like water and sewer services, garbage collection and tax collection. Consumers may skip a lot of things, but the essentials are the last to go, providing that recession resistance.

"When recession knocks at the door with a car payment, credit card and a water bill due, everyone wants the ability to take a shower," Ortman said. "People might not dine out at a restaurant, but they will open their wallets for water, electricity and gas to avoid shutoff."

In addition, municipal bond yields are still at or near decade highs, with the yield to worst for the Bloomberg Municipal Bond Index hovering around 3.25% at the end of March, they said, and the likelihood of negative returns even in the wake of market shocks is less than it was a year ago. And, as always, the income on the investment is federally tax-free, and sometimes tax-free at the state level as well.

Add to that the fundamental strength of the municipalities issuing these bonds, and this corner of the fixed income market is unusually flush. The federal government disbursed billions of dollars to tribal, local and state government through the pandemic, and those strong balance sheets buoy the general obligation side of the muni bond market.

Still, not every sector deserves a buy, Zeile and Ortman said. For example, transportation agencies are still reeling from the pandemic and a recession, wherein movement and ridership slows, could spell trouble. Similarly, healthcare and hospitals are still struggling with costs and staffing shortages.

“Even with those considerations, selectivity is possible,” Zeile said. “To skirt some risk and consider credit quality, investigate a multi-state system or an integrated provider versus a single-site, standalone hospital.”

FINANCIAL ADVISOR

by JENNIFER LEA REED

APRIL 7, 2023

S&P U.S. State Ratings And Outlooks: Current List

View the Current List.

31 Mar, 2023

How a Florida Retiree Scored a $3.4 Million Refund for Muni-Bond Investors.

- **Larry Wasserman discovered flaw in key bond issue data point**
- **Incorrect figure caused hundreds to overpay for securities**

Thanks to the persistence of Larry Wasserman, a 78-year-old retired broker who lives in Boca Raton, Florida, about 300 investors who were overcharged for municipal bonds are getting $3.4 million back.

Wasserman, who retired in 2016 after almost five decades, discovered that a key data point known as a factor had been improperly calculated on a bond he had purchased. The figure is a rare feature in muni bonds, and the steps that he had to go through to figure out he had overpaid underscore how opaque the $4 trillion tax-free debt market can be for individual investors.

The former broker made more than 20 calls to the trustee of the bonds and the company that insured them to straighten out the trouble with the factor. He compiled enough information to call regulators, which investigated and determined that he and others had been overcharged.

Continue reading.

Bloomberg

By Martin Z Braun

March 29, 2023

Silicon Valley Bank & Stress Tests: What Can Local Governments Learn?

Though the full story of what, exactly, caused the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) is still coming into focus, it does seem clear that insufficient stress testing played at least some role. A bank stress test determines whether a bank has enough capital to withstand a financial stress or shock. A stress test can address different types of risks, like credit risk, market risk, and liquidity risk.

LEARN MORE

Government Finance Officers of America

Hospitals Hit Troubling Milestone in Most 1Q Defaults Since 2011.

- **Even high-rated systems struggling: Municipal Market Analytics**
- **Many local facilities lack access to capital, FTI says**

Hospitals have hit another unfortunate milestone.

In the worst start to the year in more than a decade, bonds of eight hospitals lapsed into impairment — meaning they experienced covenant issues amounting to a technical or monetary default — compared to just one last year, Municipal Market Analytics data show.

It was the highest first-quarter count of hospital borrowers disclosing a default since 2011, according to MMA's Matt Fabian and Lisa Washburn. Together with seven retirement homes, hospitals made up almost half of the 33 new impairments in the period, MMA said in a note this week.

Continue reading.

Bloomberg

By Lauren Coleman-Lochner

March 31, 2023

Failing Banks and the Need to Protect the Public's Cash.

Letting all depositors off the hook creates a moral hazard, but taxpayer money should be protected. If Congress won't extend full insurance to states and localities, banks should be required to protect those deposits with their own collateral.

The Bank Panic of 2023 started three weeks ago and ran like wildfire through the high-tech business community and the regional bank industry as Silicon Valley Bank, a national leader in lending to startup businesses and venture capitalists, suffered a two-day run on its deposits after announcing megabillion-dollar losses in its bond portfolios. Big depositors yanked $42 billion from the bank in just one day before it was shut down.

Fortunately for SVB's uninsured depositors, federal agencies stepped in over the following weekend to prevent contagion by promising full recovery to that bank's depositors and extending lifelines to others, at the expense of the entire banking industry, whose investors will foot the bill through special assessments to the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. fund that are allowed in special cases of "systemic risk" to the U.S. economy. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen is considering possible emergency measures for smaller banks.

Continue reading.

governing.com

OPINION | March 28, 2023 • Girard Miller

The CHIPS Act Challenge for State and Local Governments.

The federal government has a powerful policy vision for the development of a vibrant U.S. semiconductor industry. How those visions play out is of intense interest.

As an innovative and unusual foray into industrial policy, the $50 billion-plus bipartisan CHIPS and Science Act has been heralded as key to the U.S. in regaining technological leadership, bolstering national security, solving ongoing supply issue problems, and sparking innovation and research. It's all in an effort to revitalize an industry that has "fallen out of balance," in the words of U.S. Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo. As she recently pointed out, "In 1990, the U.S. accounted for 37% of global chip manufacturing capacity. Today, that number is only 12%."

For state and local governments, this is a huge economic development opportunity. The CHIPS bill, New York Gov. Kathy Hochul said in a statement, "will help New York create 21st century jobs and technologies and become a global capital for chip manufacturing."

Economic development hunger is hardly new and the CHIPS Act has sparked tremendous state and local excitement. The federal government's dramatic push for development is an alluring extra. "There's always significant interest in getting companies to come to the state, but now there's a federal lollipop on top," says one CHIPS Act researcher who has carefully studied the department's Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) that was released at the end of February.

Continue reading.

Route Fifty

By Katherine Barrett & Richard Greene

MARCH 28, 2023

Route Fifty State & Local Roundup: Top Counties Return to Pre-Pandemic Populations

Plus: Seattle gig workers get paid sick leave; Chicago and Wisconsin go to the polls; California's insulin experiment hits a bump; Big gaps in electric vehicle ownership; and more news you can use from around the country.

It's Friday, March 31, and we'd like to welcome you to the weekly State and Local Roundup. This week the Census Bureau released the latest population figures from counties nationwide, reflecting a return to pre-pandemic figures in some of the most populous counties following an exodus in 2021.

The population rise is largely owing to immigration, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's Vintage 2022 estimates of population. If it weren't for international migration, many of the largest counties wouldn't have seen population increases. Some are still losing residents to suburbs, exurbs and other regions of the country like the Sunbelt.

More than one-half of all counties (52.5%) grew between 2021 and 2022, according to Census estimates. The largest counties, having populations at or greater than 100,000, mostly experienced population increases (68%); while the smallest counties nationally, those with populations below 10,000, experienced more population loss (60.8%) than gains (38.3%).

Continue reading.

Route Fifty

By Elizabeth Daigneau, Daniel C. Vock and Molly Bolan

MARCH 31, 2023

Federal Infrastructure Bill Paves the Way Toward More Transportation Infrastructure Public-Private Partnerships.

The $1.2 trillion Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) is poised to change how the United States views and implements public-private partnerships (P3s). At a high level, the IIJA encourages public entities to consider P3s and incentivizes private entities to engage in the P3 market by dismantling roadblocks that have prevented the widespread adoption of P3s in the U.S. — including by removing government red-tape, increasing the availability of federal funding, and delivering much needed technical expertise and guidance to successfully execute P3s. In this article, the first in a series, we explore (1) the doubling of private activity bonds, (2) a P3 technical assistance program for government agencies, (3) TIFIA driven value-for-money analyses, (4) the streamlining of important environmental reviews, and (5) the creation of a government reporting feedback loop on P3 projects.

Continue reading.

Troutman Pepper – Christian Michael Riley, Alexander Z. Bulkin, Robert A. Gallagher, Jason C. Spang, Kevin P. Wallace and MK Houston

March 29 2023

Disney Outmaneuvers DeSantis in Clash Over Theme Park District.

Walt Disney Co. pushed through changes limiting the powers of the municipal authority that governs its Florida theme parks ahead of a controversial takeover by representatives of Governor Ron DeSantis.

The changes were quietly approved last month by the outgoing board of the Reedy Creek Improvement District, the entity that provides fire protection, electricity and other services in the resort area. The last-minute changes restrict the powers of the new board members for decades, including their ability to review theme-park expansions and billboard advertising.

While the maneuver is a victory for the world's largest theme-park operator, it extends the clash between Disney and Republicans in the state, who have threatened to sue to reverse the changes.

"Disney has once again overplayed their hand in Florida," Bridget Ziegler, one of the new board members, posted on Twitter, accusing Disney of arrogance. "We won't stand for this and we won't back down."

The company defended the move, saying in a statement: "All agreements signed between Disney and the district were appropriate, and were discussed and approved in open, noticed public forums in compliance with Florida's government in the Sunshine law."

The Orlando Sentinel first reported the new agreement, citing lawyers for the municipal entity, which has been renamed the Central Florida Tourism Oversight District.

The "declaration of restrictive covenants," passed by the old board, is valid in perpetuity or, if that's considered unlawful, until "21 years after the death of the last survivor of the descendants of King Charles III, King of England."

It's the latest twist in the fight between DeSantis and the corporation that kicked off when Disney criticized a law he signed limiting elementary school teachings about gender identity. Disney had controlled the Reedy Creek district since its founding almost 60 years ago.

Bloomberg CityLab

By Felipe Marques

March 30, 2023

[How Disney Dodged Ron DeSantis and Kept Control of Its Florida Land.]()

'Disney didn't do anything secret' in securing key approvals before governor's new board gained oversight

Walt Disney Co. for now has outmaneuvered Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis in the battle for control over the more than 24,000-acre parcel of land near Orlando where Walt Disney World Resort is located.

In February, Disney went before a local board and secured approvals for the next 30 years on zoning, infrastructure and air-rights that the company might need if it chooses to expand Disney World, giving the company an advantage that has become clearer in recent days.

This week, those approvals were criticized by members of a new board that was created by the Republican governor to strip Disney of governing control over the land's special tax district, known as Reedy Creek. Mr. DeSantis, who has been clashing with Disney for more than a year, appointed the new board after the February meeting.

Continue reading.

The Wall Street Journal

By Robbie Whelan and Arian Campo

Updated April 1, 2023 1:48 pm ET

How Will Silicon Valley Bank Collapse Impact Bank Ownership of Munis?

Municipal bonds remain a viable, high-quality source of liquidity for banks, experts say, although they are divided about whether the collapse of two regional banks will curtail or eliminate the sector's ownership of municipal bonds.

Following the collapse of California-based Silicon Valley Bank on March 10 and New York-based Signature Bank (SGBG) on March 12, experts differ on how this will impact their holding of municipal bonds. Some say it will continue unabated, others say it could peter off, yet others believe banks may alter their duration to avoid the pitfalls of SVB and Signature.

"I do not believe banks will broadly reduce their ownership of municipal debt in light of the recent collapses of SVB and Signature Bank (SGBG)," Chris Brigati, managing director of municipal investments at Valley Bank, said.

Bank ownership of municipal bonds amounts to approximately 15% of the $4 trillion market, falling slightly during the COVID 19 pandemic, according to experts.

"I could even make a case for banks to increase their participation at some point," Brigati added.

Market and economic technicals, as well as the inherent benefits of municipals, support bank ownership, he and other experts said.

"Ratios versus Treasuries are presently rich as compared to historical norms," Brigati explained. "I do not foresee any immediate reason for this to change with anticipated near-term supply/demand dynamics."

If and when municipals offer a better relative value dynamic, banks could justifiably increase their engagement above recent norms, according to Brigati.

Cooper Howard, fixed income strategist focused on municipals at Charles Schwab (SCHW), agreed the inherent benefits of municipal bonds will continue to fuel ownership by banks.

"I would expect that banks will continue to be large buyers of municipal bonds because of their tax benefits and high credit quality," Howard said. "The issues in the banking sector didn't change that," he continued, noting the amount banks purchase in the future will chiefly depend mostly on yields relative to comparable securities.

Signature, SVB, and San Francisco-based First Republic – which is also under fiscal stress lately – all hold municipal bonds.

SVB held $7.4 billion of municipal bonds and notes as of Dec. 31, 2022, which were marked as having a fair value of $6.15 billion and ratings of A1 and above, according to its 10-K filing with the Securities & Exchange Commission.

Signature Bank (SGBG) – which in 2015 launched a public finance business – held $247 million of state and municipal securities in 2022, up from $7 million in 2018, according to its recent 10-K.

First Republic carries $19.4 billion of state and municipal securities, up from $8.19 billion in 2018.

But with the feds and large banks coming to the rescue of the banks, a "fire sale" of their municipal portfolios into the market appears unlikely, according to Lisa Washburn, managing director, chief credit officer at Municipal Market Analytics.

Should some banks have an initial "knee-jerk reaction," which Brigati said is unlikely, the underlying fundamental reasons that make ownership of municipal paper within bank portfolios possible continues to offer strong justification for no change to their engagement in the asset class, he said.

"Naturally, the tax-exempt benefits of bank-qualified paper persist in offering a strong draw for banks in particular," Brigati explained. "Additionally, the excellent credit quality, along with the diversification within the asset class offers another reason for continued engagement," he said.

While markets, in general, remain volatile due to banking sector concerns, that shouldn't stem municipal ownership by banks, according to John Miller, head of municipals at Nuveen, and Anders S. Persson, chief investment officer and head of Nuveen global fixed income.

"Some investors believe banks may be forced to sell municipal holdings and use the cash to shore up their balance sheets," the pair said in a March 20 report.

"At this time, we see no credit issues appearing in municipals as an asset class," that would force banks to sell their municipal holdings, they wrote.

"As regulators convene to discuss a way forward for banks in the wake of SVB, attention may be focused on munis, and while it is too soon to advance substantive prognostications, we will be on the lookout for anything that impacts demand for the asset class," Jeff Lipton, managing director and head of municipal credit and market strategy at Oppenheimer & Co., said in a March 17 report.

The 2018 Economic Growth, Regulatory Relief and Consumer Protection Act reclassified municipal bonds as high-quality, liquid assets and provided another vehicle for banks to help meet their liquidity needs, Lipton pointed out.

"While active investment by banks has generally been softer more recently, this buyer class has remained part of the muni liquidity profile," Lipton wrote.

Even with the lower corporate tax rates created by the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, banks have remained a significant holder of municipals – albeit with higher allocations into taxable municipals, Lipton noted.

Going forward, Lipton plans to closely follow bank flows to gauge any meaningful selling pressure.

So far, there is little evidence that ownership of munis by banks – which hold about $540 billion of municipals, $140 billion of that is held by regional banks – will dwindle, according to Eve Lando, portfolio manager and managing director at Thornburg Investment Management.

About half of that exposure is in direct loans, so it shouldn't be part of a sell-off, Lando noted.

"The total muni market is $4 trillion, so in isolation, the large bank numbers are a small fraction of the entire market and unlikely to flood the market," she said in a March 21 report.

"We have seen one or two bid-wanted lists but nothing close to moving the market," Lando added. "Contagion risk is low in the muni market prompted by bank selling."

While others agree there will be little to no change in bank ownership of municipal bonds, they say banks could reduce their investment exposure.

"I do not expect bank ownership of municipal bonds will materially change," Paul Mansour, a veteran New York City municipal bond analyst and current vice chairman of the New Hampshire Municipal Bond Bank.

However, the former head of municipal research at Conning said he expects financial institutions will shorten their duration.

"The ongoing banking crisis was created by a mismatch of short-term deposits secured by longer-term fixed-income securities of all types," he explained.

"Deposits were withdrawn more rapidly than assumed could happen fueled by social media, forcing the banks to unload their fixed-income assets at distressed prices," Mansour said, adding, he also expects the long end of the municipal curve to cheapen as a result.

Peter Delahunt, managing director of municipal securities at New York-based global firm StoneX Group Inc. (SNEX), said deposit growth and loan demand drive a bank's appetite for bonds. The primary mission is to use the deposits to make loans, he explained. Where loan demand is insufficient for investing the deposits, banks will then invest in bonds, Delahunt added.

"Conversely, as funding becomes constrained when deposit growth deteriorates, there is less to invest in bonds and/or loans," he continued.

"So far as this banking crisis leads to deposit deterioration, there will be less investment demand for bonds from the banks, whether tax-exempt or taxable," Delahunt said.

The tax-exempt nature of bond demand will be determined by a bank's tax status – vis-a-vis the tax equivalent alternatives amongst the various fixed income securities, he noted.

"The other narrative is how much loan demand will be squeezed by the Fed's hawkish stance," Delahunt said.

Banks significantly added municipal bonds to their portfolios just after the 2008-2009 financial crisis for two leading reasons: first, they liked the credit quality in the sector and second, there were not as many other investment options at the time, according to Tom Kozlik, managing director and head of public policy and municipal strategy at HilltopSecurities.

"Therefore, there is likely to be a natural reversion in bank investment patterns in the near term, but this was because they added them in the beginning to the middle of last decade," Kozlik explained.

He said if banks reduce their municipal holdings going forward it might not necessarily be related to the current regional banking collapse.

Like others, Kozlik is cautiously watching the banking crisis unfold.

"We do not know if the banking sector issues are going to snowball and/or if the economy is going to face headwinds," he said.

Jon Barasch, long time credit analyst and fixed income specialist in New York, said municipals meet the federal banking regulations pertaining to high quality liquid assets and liquidity coverage ratios to which banks are subject.

Rather than curtailing ownership, he agrees banks could work toward a slight drop in maturity duration given the recent developments.

"Perhaps the bonds banks do choose to own will be shorter in duration than years past," Barasch said, noting the troubled banks owned bonds that featured longer maturities.

Jim Tinker, vice president of Alphaledger, who has more than 15 years in banking and municipal finance, said most banks are on pause in terms of adding to municipal holdings.

"This is mainly the result of deposit declines reducing excess cash, which was underway prior to the closings of Silvergate Bank, Silicon Valley Bank, and Signature Bank (SGBG)," he explained. "With the recent bank closures, I would not be surprised if banks decided to reposition some of their municipal holdings to reduce duration and/or reallocate to increase liquidity," Tinker said.

In the meantime, banking concerns continue to roil the financial markets, with potential impacts on the municipal market, sources said.

Multiple recent rating downgrades of banks, including First Republic, engendered fear among investors and depositors.

The plethora of troubles that felled Credit Suisse last week and ended in a $3 billion takeover of the Swiss bank by its bigger rival UBS on Sunday added an extra dark cloud.

And news reports that the Biden administration was in talks with Warren Buffett, the chairman of Berkshire Hathaway (BRK/A), who famously swooped in with billions to bolster Goldman Sachs (GS) during the 2008 financial crisis, only signaled that the current panic might grow worse still.

Jennifer Johnston, director of research at Franklin Templeton Municipal Bonds, spoke of the uncertainty over the collapse during a March 21 webinar about navigating rates and risk.

With bank ownership at approximately 15% of the $4 trillion municipal industry, she is evaluating the potential for bank selling of municipals.

"That's something we are watching and looking to see how it unravels," she said.

By Christine Albano

BY SOURCEMEDIA | MUNICIPAL | 03/21/23 03:44 PM EDT

Is Participatory Budgeting Coming to a Local Government Near You?

Amid an influx of billions of federal dollars, some think the tool may see an uptick in use.

Welcome back to Route Fifty's Public Finance Update! I'm Elizabeth Daigneau, subbing in for our Public Finance guru Liz Farmer while she's on vacation, and this week, I'm writing about participatory budgeting.

It’s far from a new idea, and you’ve probably been reading about it for years, but participatory budgeting has slowly been growing since it was first introduced in the U.S. in Chicago in 2009. Many anticipate it is about to see a boom as billions of federal dollars continue to pour into local communities.

For the uninitiated, participatory budgeting is a tool that encourages citizens to decide how a portion of taxpayer money should be spent. It has been utilized by school districts in Arizona and Central Falls, R.I.; counties such as King County, Washington; and countless cities. It started in Brazil in 1989, and to date, roughly 7,000 cities around the world have used the tool, including 29 here in the U.S. where residents have collectively allocated $386 million, according to the nonprofit Participatory Budgeting Project.

Continue reading.

Route Fifty

By Elizabeth Daigneau

MARCH 21, 2023

How to Spend Your City’s Money.

In a system known as participatory budgeting, citizens tell the government what to do.

n August, 2021, five Portuguese firefighters were battling a bushfire in the south of the country when a sudden wind drove the blaze up a steep slope beneath them. They had only a few seconds to climb into the cab of their truck before it was surrounded by flames. Once inside, they activated a safety feature that sprayed a cloud of water to cool the cab. The air was dark and smoky, but they used oxygen masks to breathe from cannisters of purified air. They soon managed to drive to a stretch of road where the fire was less fierce, and escaped without serious injuries.

The firefighters came from the municipality of Cascais, a coastal city of two hundred and fifteen thousand people near Lisbon. Their truck, with its cooling-water system and oxygen masks, cost a hundred and sixty thousand euros; before they purchased it, in 2017, they used a vehicle from 1996 that lacked both features. Though the upgrade was a matter of life and death, they couldn’t get funding for it from the national government. Instead, they used a process called participatory budgeting. Each year, the government of Cascais allows citizens to propose, debate, and vote on projects that the public budget will fund. Winning projects receive up to three hundred and fifty thousand euros, and the city guarantees that it will execute them within three years. Since it launched the system, in 2011, Cascais has spent fifty-one million euros implementing hundreds of projects. The city has renovated derelict buildings, constructed high-school science labs and skate parks, improved accessibility at beaches, created green spaces, installed Wi-Fi and charging stations at bus stops, and much more. Collectively, these projects have reshaped the urban landscape: within Cascais, nobody lives farther than five hundred metres from a participatory-budgeting project.

Many cities around the world practice some form of participatory budgeting, but even among those that do, Cascais is an outlier. It spends prodigiously through the system: in Paris, five per cent of the city’s annual investment budget has been allocated to participatory projects in recent years, but in Cascais, more than fifteen per cent of the budget flows through the program, and the percentage can float higher if voter turnout rises. Cascais is surprising in another way: its mayor, Carlos

Carreiras, is both a champion of participatory budgeting and a member of a center-right political party. Participatory budgeting is often considered a tool of the left, but its role in Cascais suggests that it could have a broader appeal; part of the theory behind it is that citizens can be better than officials at knowing how money should be spent.

Continue reading.

The New Yorker

By Nick Romeo

March 24, 2023

Policy Thoughts about Single-Family Mortgage Social Bonds.

DOWNLOAD REPORT

The Urban Institute

by Laurie Goodman & Janneke Ratcliffe

March 24, 2023

Muni Moves in March (Bloomberg Audio)

Joe Mysak, editor of the Muni Market Brief, joins the program to discuss everything going on in the municipal bond market. Hosted by Paul Sweeney and Jennifer Ryan.

Listen to audio.

Mar 24, 2023

The Pros Fail to Meet the Moment With Bond ETFs.

Actively managed fixed-income ETFs stumbled last year and only 40% are beating their benchmarks in 2023.

The pitch for an actively managed bond exchange-traded fund can be compelling, especially when there’s market turmoil and uncertainty: Let a pro handpick bonds that can outperform benchmarks instead of investing in an index-tracking fund on autopilot, but pay less than you would for a mutual fund. Oh, and you can save on taxes, too.

More investors are taking the bait. Last year, active ETFs accounted for 14% of overall ETF flows even though they made up just 4% of assets, according to a report from Bloomberg Intelligence analyst Eric Balchunas, who tracks the data. So far this year, more than 30% of incoming flows are to active ETFs. In addition, since 2021, dozens of such funds have been unveiled, including versions from big names like Vanguard Group and JPMorgan Chase & Co.

But a look at performance — when it mattered most — should stop investors in their tracks. Active fixed-income ETFs were a total flop as bonds were hammered by the Federal Reserve's actions last year and suffered their worst performance on record. Just half of 182 actively managed bond ETFs outperformed their respective indexes, data from Morningstar Inc. shows.

Continue reading.

Bloomberg Opinion

by Alexis Leondis

March 23, 2023

One Year of Rate Hikes Ends Decades of Bond Market Prosperity.

Bonds suffered historic losses after the Fed began raising interest rates in March 2022

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Federal Reserve's interest rate hikes in 1980 sowed the seeds for a long-term rally in bond markets.
- But the same prescription, taken again last year to tame inflation, has hammered bond returns.

In the early 1980s, the Federal Reserve conquered high inflation with economically painful interest rate hikes that, in turn, planted the seeds for a 40-year bull market in fixed-income securities.

The run finally began to end March 17, 2022.

That's the day the Fed, after protecting the U.S. from pandemic calamity by maintaining its benchmark lending rate at a historic low of 0-0.25% for two years, raised rates for the first time since 2018.

Continue reading.

INVESTOPEDIA.COM

By LYLE NIEDENS

Published March 24, 2023

Unpacking Muni Opportunities in a Slowing Economy.

Still shaking off 2022's dismal returns, municipal bond investors now worry about the impact of a potential economic downturn. Gloomy news reports of projected budget gaps for state and local governments only add to their anxieties. But the muni market is more resilient than headlines suggest, and a closer look across sectors can help discern areas of

opportunity from those that require a bit more caution.

Muni Market Resilience Starts at the State Level

Many state and local governments will face fiscal challenges next year, but they inherently have the flexibility to work through them. For example, foreseeing a $22.5 billion deficit due to a slowing economy, California is already strategically delaying funding and shifting spending to close the gap without having to tap into its $36 billion in reserves.

More broadly, the outlook is favorable for most state and local governments, thanks to the record budget revenues and reserves in hand. In fact, the median state reserves-expenditures ratio is currently 25%—well above its roughly 10% over the long run. By contrast, the ratio was just under 12% heading into the global financial crisis of 2008.

Strong fiscal report cards are the linchpin of the muni market's overall appeal. They also explain why muni bonds have weathered economic malaise much better than corporate bonds. In fact, muni bonds have had fewer downgrades, more stable ratings and significantly fewer defaults—near-zero—compared to corporate issues since 1981, which includes five official US recessions (Display).

Continue reading.

ALLIANCE BERNSTEIN

MARCH 22, 2023

Cities' Credit Ratings Are at Risk Because There Aren't Enough Accountants.

- **149 muni ratings on negative watch for disclosure delays: S&P**
- **S&P says staffing challenges have led to late fiscal documents**

Municipalities across the US are at risk of having their credit ratings downgraded or withdrawn by S&P Global Ratings because staffing shortages have delayed financial disclosure documents.

S&P has placed 149 long-term, underlying and program ratings on a negative credit watch this year because the ratings company hasn't received 2021 financial statements from the issuers. That's the most since at least 2018, and materially higher than the prior five-year average of 95 such moves, according to S&P data.

"If we don't have the financials, then bondholders don't have the financials," Jaime Blansit, a rating associate at S&P, said in an interview. "We don't want financial deterioration happening without our knowledge and updating our rating accordingly. Without financials we don't know if the rating is accurate or not."

Continue reading.

Bloomberg CityLab

By Danielle Moran

March 14, 2023

Should We Worry About Municipal Bond Defaults?

When it comes to safety in fixed income, municipal bonds have long proven their mettle as a strong, secure way to generate income and returns. After all, in theory, a state or local town has the ability to raise taxes to help pay for coupon payments and make investors whole. And history suggests just that.

But it isn’t always the case. Municipal bond defaults do happen.

With recession risks rising and new trends emerging, some analysts are predicting we could see a new wave of such events in the staid muni market. So, what should investors do? Is it time to abandon our muni bonds and look toward greener pastures? History is a good guide.

Continue reading.

dividend.com

by Aaron Levitt

Mar 13, 2023

State & Local Roundup: Bank Collapses Add to Worries for State and Local Officials

Plus: Lawmakers want to tighten SNAP work requirements; Conservatives continue DEI assault; A potential labor strike in L.A.; and more news you can use from around the country.

It’s Friday, March 17, and we’d like to welcome you to the weekly State and Local Roundup. This week, a second bank failed and a third narrowly avoided collapse, following the implosion of Silicon Valley Bank last week. The troubles in the banking industry have already caused headaches for state and local officials and could cause even bigger problems down the road.

After the federal government took control of Silicon Valley Bank, New York state regulators and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. on Sunday closed Signature Bank, which suffered from losses associated with cryptocurrency. Major banks agreed Thursday to rescue First Republic Bank with a $30 million package.

Continue reading.

Route Fifty

By Elizabeth Daigneau, Daniel C. Vock and Molly Bolan

MARCH 17, 2023

Muni Investors Fret Over First Republic.

First Republic Bank's tumbling share price has left muni bond holders worried about the bank's large stockpile of state and local government debt.

The bank was downgraded to "junk" by S&P Global Ratings Wednesday and was the worst performer in the S&P 500, according to FactSet. Its stock is down 74.99% month-to-date.

First Republic has been hit after the failures of Silicon Valley Bank on Friday and Signature Bank on Sunday. Cryptobank Silvergate Capital also said earlier this month it would shut down.

First Republic said Sunday it shored up its finances with funding from the Federal Reserve and JPMorgan Chase & Co. Executives at the bank said in a statement that day that First Republic's "capital and liquidity positions are very strong."

San Francisco-based First Republic, which is the 14th largest bank by assets according to the Federal Reserve, had $19.4 billion in municipal bonds on its books as of Dec. 31, according to its most recent filing. In contrast, Cincinnati-based U.S. Bancorp, the 5th biggest bank, has a little over $10 billion.

So far this week, muni debt has gotten a boost as investors have fled to ultra-safe investments. If First Republic sells its munis, a larger-than-usual amount of debt could get dumped into the $4 trillion market, dragging down prices.

But, historically, when banks have unloaded munis under pressure, they've generally been able to do so in an orderly way, said Daniel Solender, partner and director at the investment company Lord Abbett.

Should First Republic need to sell, Mr. Solender said, "it doesn't seem like there's a need to rush any sales."

About $580 billion of outstanding muni debt is held by banks, according to the Federal Reserve. Regional banks own close to $140 billion, according to Barclays PLC. Demand chronically outstrips supply in the muni market, one reason it generally remains calm in the face of turmoil – outside of a really major firesale.

"Silvergate sold $4 billion," said Mikhail Foux, head of municipal strategy at Barclays. "I don't think anybody noticed and nobody even knew."

The Wall Street Journal

By Heather Gillers

Mar 15, 2023
