

Rating Action: Moody's assigns Aa1 to Ohio's Highway G.O. Bonds, Ser. W; outlook stable

14 May 2020

New York, May 14, 2020 -- Moody's Investors Service has assigned a Aa1 rating to the State of Ohio's \$84.2 million General Obligation Highway Capital Improvements Bonds, Series W. The bonds are expected to price the week of June 1. The outlook on the bonds is stable.

RATINGS RATIONALE

The Aa1 rating is based on the state's GO credit quality, including its strong budget and financial management, sound reserve levels, and affordable fixed costs associated with below-average long-term debt, pension and retiree healthcare (OPEB) liabilities. These strengths are offset by below-average economic growth, compounded by weak demographic trends.

Ohio's highway bonds are also supported by a pledge of state highway user revenues, including gasoline taxes and motor vehicle license and registration fees. Although the bonds have substantial debt service coverage by a constitutionally dedicated revenue stream, the special tax credit quality is no higher than the state's Aa1 GO rating due to a relatively weak legal structure compared to other highly-rated special tax bonds. In addition, the bonds have insufficient legal revenue separation and economic characteristics to pierce the GO rating.

We regard the coronavirus outbreak as a social risk under our ESG framework, given the substantial implications for public health and safety. The coronavirus crisis is not a key driver for this rating action. We do not see any material immediate credit risks for the State of Ohio. However, the situation surrounding Coronavirus is rapidly evolving and the longer term impact will depend on both the severity and duration of the crisis. If our view of the credit quality of the State of Ohio changes, we will update the rating and/or outlook at that time.

RATING OUTLOOK

The stable outlook is based on our expectation that the state's proactive financial management, low fixed costs, fully-funded rainy day fund and substantial available liquidity will continue to support satisfactory budget flexibility during the severe economic disruption and revenues declines related to the coronavirus outbreak.

FACTORS THAT COULD LEAD TO AN UPGRADE OF THE RATING

- Improved demographic trends, particularly in working age population growth, net migration, and age distribution, that contribute to stronger economic growth relative to peers
- Maintenance of a budget in structural surplus, together with an increase in pension contributions sufficient to "tread water"
- Development of governance tools such as consensus revenue forecasting or publicly available long-term forecasts that institutionalize current best practices, increase transparency, and ensure consistency across administrations

FACTORS THAT COULD LEAD TO A DOWNGRADE OF THE RATING

- Further weakening of employment, personal income or demographic trends
- Financial deterioration, including a return to budgetary structural imbalance and/or materially lower reserve levels
- Unanticipated rise in long-term liabilities and an increase in fixed-costs

LEGAL SECURITY

Ohio's general obligation highway bonds are secured by the state's full faith and credit as well as a pledge of state highway user receipts, which includes gasoline taxes and motor vehicle license and registration fees. Pledged revenues are constitutionally dedicated to state highway purposes, including debt repayment, and provide substantial coverage of maximum debt service. Bonds have been historically paid entirely from highway user receipts, and the GO backstop has not been tapped.

The highway user receipts pledge provides very strong security for the bonds, but does not surpass the state's Aa1 GO rating. The special tax pledge has a relatively weak legal structure compared to other highly-rated special tax bonds, as well as insufficient legal separation of revenues and economic characteristics to pierce the GO rating. The special tax legal structure is primarily established through constitutional and statutory provisions, which do not provide the same clarity and framework as a typical special tax indenture. Somewhat unclear are provisions regarding the prioritization of debt service over other transportation spending, and detail surrounding the flow of funds and the leverage constraint. In addition, these bonds do not have sufficiently strong legal and economic characteristics to exceed the GO rating, such as a constitutional dedication that is specifically tied to debt service, and an economic base that is stronger than suggested by the GO rating.

Despite the bonds' strong coverage, future coverage could be reduced by revenue declines, a short debt service schedule, or a change in transportation funding policy, which are not considered by a constitutional cap on issuance of GO debt for highways. GO highway bond issuance is constitutionally capped at \$1.2 billion of total debt outstanding and a \$220 million per-year issuance limit, under which unused portions may be added to the annual cap amount in subsequent years. Excluding the current borrowing, the state has approximately \$265 million of remaining borrowing capacity. If the state issued all remaining capacity as 15-year bonds (matching the current structure), MADS coverage would decline very slightly. Additional flexibility is available due to the state's 15-year amortization policy, which is well below the constitutional authorization to amortize debt over a 30-year span.

Constitutional amendments in Ohio must be approved by a super-majority (3/5) in each legislative chamber, and then by a simple majority in a public vote. While the state has covenanted to levy and collect taxes at levels sufficient to pay debt service on the bonds, it is not prohibited from repealing or reducing the pledged revenues to sum-sufficient coverage.

Highway user receipts also pay the debt service on \$141.6 million of state appropriation debt issued for 26 DOT buildings (Transportation Building Fund Capital Facilities Bonds, Series 2015A and 2018A). In addition, in the event of an interruption in Title 23 funding, the DOT Director has covenanted to pay debt service on the state's \$907 million of Major New State Infrastructure Project Revenue Bonds (GARVEEs) using other funds lawfully available. The other funds would consist of appropriations of DOT revenues from sources including state gasoline tax receipts, which would become lawfully available after GO Highway debt service is paid.

USE OF PROCEEDS

Series W proceeds will finance highway capital improvements.

PROFILE

The state of Ohio has a population of 11.7 million, located in the Midwest region of the US with 312 miles of shoreline along Lake Erie, according to NOAA. The state is the seventh-largest US state by population, and has a large, diverse economy reflected in its GDP of \$676 billion (also seventh among the states).

METHODOLOGY

The principal methodology used in this rating was US States and Territories published in April 2018 and available at https://www.moodys.com/researchdocumentcontentpage.aspx?docid=PBM_1084466 . Alternatively, please see the Rating Methodologies page on www.moodys.com for a copy of this methodology.

REGULATORY DISCLOSURES

For further specification of Moody's key rating assumptions and sensitivity analysis, see the sections Methodology Assumptions and Sensitivity to Assumptions in the disclosure form. Moody's Rating Symbols and Definitions can be found at: https://www.moodys.com/researchdocumentcontentpage.aspx?docid=PBC_79004.

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