FITCH RATES MASSACHUSETTS GO BONDS 'AA+'; OUTLOOK STABLE

Fitch Ratings-New York-14 March 2017: Fitch Ratings has assigned 'AA+' long-term ratings to $777 million in Commonwealth of Massachusetts general obligation (GO) bonds, consisting of:

--$400,000,000 GO bonds, consolidated loan of 2017, series A;
--$100,000,000 GO bonds, consolidated loan of 2017, series B (green bonds);
--$277,000,000 GO refunding bonds, 2017 series C.

The par amount for the GO refunding bonds is subject to change pending final sale.

The GO bonds will be offered by negotiated sale on or about April 6, 2017.

The Rating Outlook on the long-term bonds is Stable.

SECURITY
The bonds are general obligations of the Commonwealth, to which its full faith and credit are pledged. A statutory state tax revenue growth limit does not exclude principal and interest on debt obligations from the limit.

KEY RATING DRIVERS

Massachusetts' 'AA+' Issuer-Default Rating (IDR) reflects its considerable economic resources, strong budget controls and a record of careful financial management. The Commonwealth carries a long-term liability burden that is well above average for a U.S. state but remains a moderate burden on resources. The Stable Outlook reflects the expectation that the Commonwealth will continue to act as needed to ensure budget balance and maintain an adequate budgeted reserve position.

Economic Resource Base
The Commonwealth has a broad and diverse economy. Employment growth is solid, education levels are high, and population growth has approximated that of the U.S. this decade. The Commonwealth's economic fundamentals include significant strength in the health care, technology and education sectors, leaving it well positioned for solid gains going forward. Measured by per capita personal income, Massachusetts is the second wealthiest state in the nation.

Revenue Framework: 'aaa' factor assessment
Tax revenues, while diverse, are dominated by personal income taxes (PIT), which are sensitive to economic conditions, particularly those related to capital gains. Baseline growth prospects for taxes are strong, driven by the Commonwealth's solid economic fundamentals.

Expenditure Framework: 'aaa' factor assessment
Consistent with most states, the natural pace of spending growth is expected to marginally exceed expected revenue growth over time, requiring ongoing cost control. The Commonwealth has ample ability to reduce spending throughout the economic cycle.

Long-Term Liability Burden: 'aa' factor assessment

Liability levels in Massachusetts, while high for a U.S. state, are a moderate burden on resources. The Commonwealth's above average liability position is partly the result of state funding for needs that are more commonly funded at the local level.

Operating Performance: 'aaa' factor assessment
The Commonwealth has exceptional fiscal resilience, with strong gap-closing capacity stemming from a practice of building solid reserve balances and making revenue and spending changes as needed in response to changing circumstances. Conservative budgeting, ongoing economic and revenue monitoring, and mechanisms to protect the general fund from economically sensitive PIT and judgment and settlement receipts, support the Commonwealth's fiscal flexibility.

RATING SENSITIVITIES
The rating is sensitive to shifts in fundamental credit characteristics including Massachusetts' consistent commitment to strong financial management practices.

CREDIT PROFILE

Massachusetts has a fundamentally strong economy with solid growth prospects. Its dynamic, service-oriented economy includes numerous institutions of higher education and health care that lend stability, in addition to supporting development and innovation in other sectors. At 128% of the U.S. average, per capita personal income is the second highest of the states. Educational attainment is very high, and population growth has approximated that of the U.S. during this decade, a shift from historical experience of slow population gains. Despite this shift, the Commonwealth's population profile remains older than the U.S. average, consistent with other states in the region.

Economic performance has been highly sensitive to national trends. In the most recent recession, economic performance was significantly better than the national experience, in contrast to 2002-2004 when Massachusetts suffered among the steepest employment drops in the country. Employment losses in the most recent recession were slightly less severe than those of the U.S. (down 6% in Massachusetts versus 6.3% for the U.S.), and employment since then has risen slightly more than the U.S. (up 12.6% in Massachusetts versus 12% for the U.S.).

Revenue Framework
General fund resources derive primarily from PIT, sales tax and corporate income tax. The former two are particularly important, with an estimated 57% of tax revenues from PIT and another 24% from sales tax in fiscal 2017. The PIT is levied at flat rates based on type of income, with a 5.1% rate currently applicable to most categories. Under current law the Commonwealth has been gradually lowering the PIT rate to 5%, from a previous level of 5.3%, in 0.05% increments based on a statutory mechanism incorporating Boston-area inflation and baseline revenue growth; no reduction was triggered as of Jan. 1, 2017. Revenues are economically sensitive; particularly PIT receipts from capital gains as well as receipts from judgments and settlements.

Solid economic fundamentals and a revenue system that captures economic growth are the basis for a revenue profile that is likely to grow at or above the national average over time, in Fitch's view.

The Commonwealth has no significant legal limitations on its ability to raise revenues. A statutory tax revenue growth limit based on average wage and salary growth is present but has not hindered the Commonwealth's ability to manage its revenue resources. The initiative environment has periodically been active, and certain revenues have been affected by past initiative petitions, notably property taxes. Importantly, the legislature retains the ability to make changes to successful initiative petitions.

Expenditure Framework

Massachusetts' expenditure profile is very broad, driven by an expansive scope of services. Medicaid and other social services are the largest single spending commitment in the general fund at about half of total spending; rising needs, including those emerging from implementation of the Affordable Care Act, have pressured total spending in recent years, although growth is expected to slow going forward. Education is also a significant commitment, with extensive funding of local schools and a broad higher education network. The Commonwealth's education commitment extends to covering the pension liabilities of local teachers. Consistent with practices in many smaller states, the Commonwealth is responsible for delivering or funding many services routinely funded at local levels in other states.

As with most states, spending in the absence of policy actions is expected to be in line with to marginally above expected revenue growth, driven by social services, particularly Medicaid. The state retains considerable ability to cut spending; statute allows for swift response in the event of forecast revenue underperformance, including the governor's statutory powers to unilaterally cut allotments under Section 9C of Commonwealth general law. Medicaid is a fiscal challenge common to all U.S. states, including the Commonwealth, and the nature of the program as well as federal government rules that limit the states' options in managing the pace of spending growth. Federal action to revise Medicaid's programmatic and financial structure appears likely, although the timing and magnitude of changes for state budgets remains unknown. Both the Presidential administration and Congressional leadership support significant Medicaid policy shifts. As one of the largest parts of state budgets and by far the biggest source of federal funding to the states, federal decisions could have significant implications for states' ability to manage this key budget item.

Long-Term Liability Burden

Debt and pension liabilities are high for a state but represent only a moderate burden on resources. On a combined basis, the burden of net tax-supported debt and unfunded pension liability for employees and teachers equaled 17.1% of personal income, well above the 5.1% median for U.S. states as of Fitch's 2016 state pension update report.

The Commonwealth's net tax-supported debt equals a comparatively high 9.4% of personal income as of Jan. 31, 2017, including sales tax-backed obligations of the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority and the Massachusetts School Building Authority and annual contract assistance commitments that support the Massachusetts Department of Transportation. GO debt continues to represent the majority of outstanding debt. The comparatively high direct debt level is partially explained by the Commonwealth's above-average role in funding local government capital needs, relative to most other states. Fitch expects direct debt to remain high for a U.S. state but still manageable.

As of their Jan. 1, 2016 valuations, pension systems covering state employees and teachers (except in the City of Boston) were funded at 63.5% and 52.8%, respectively. Using Fitch's more conservative 7% return assumption would result in lower funded ratios of 60.2% and 50.1%, respectively. Some pension reforms have been undertaken, including shifting to more conservative assumptions while maintaining a statutorily closed amortization target for achieving full funding in 2040. Currently, the Commonwealth expects contributions to rise 8.9% per year until the projected date of full prefunding, in fiscal 2036.

Operating Performance

Fitch believes the Commonwealth retains significant flexibility to address cyclical downturns and operating under-performance and has repeatedly demonstrated its commitment to maintaining a solid financial position. Mechanisms for maintaining balance include the governor's requirement to reduce allotments or identify alternative balancing measures in the event of a mid-year forecast deficiency, under Section 9C of Commonwealth general statute.

The Commonwealth has established mechanisms to cap the impact of volatile capital gains-related PIT receipts and judgment and settlement payments on the general fund, with excesses devoted to the stabilization fund (the Commonwealth's rainy day fund) or to retirement liabilities. Since fiscal 2011, capital gains have been budgeted in the general fund at $1 billion maximum, rising annually based on U.S. GDP growth; as of fiscal years 2017 and 2018 the figures are $1.128 billion and $1.169 billion, respectively. Judgments and settlements are budgeted in the general fund based on a five-year rolling benchmark, currently at $271 million including fiscal 2017.

In the last recession, the Commonwealth relied on allotment cuts, federal stimulus and draws on the stabilization fund in response to revenue shortfalls. While the Commonwealth did not fully deplete the fund, the balance fell to $670 million in fiscal 2010, from a high of $2.34 billion in fiscal 2007.

The Commonwealth has continued to demonstrate ample flexibility both in the form of the rebuilt stabilization fund as well as its ability to cut expenses in response to unforeseen weakness. Similar to many states, the Commonwealth has faced budgetary challenges at several points in the current economic expansion, including the impact of shifting federal tax law and unexpected demands for Medicaid triggered in part by federal health reform. Although these factors have weighed on progress in rebuilding stabilization fund balances to prerecession levels, the existing balances remain solid and considerable flexibility remains.

With initial recovery, the stabilization fund balance rose to $1.65 billion by fiscal 2012, driven by capital gains and judgment and settlement receipts in excess of their respective caps. Unexpected Medicaid needs and underperformance on PIT receipts has resulted in draws and partial suspensions of planned stabilization fund deposits in recent fiscal years. The stabilization fund balance remains a still adequate $1.303 billion estimated at fiscal 2017 year-end, equal to 5% of fiscal 2017 tax revenues. The fiscal 2017 budget directed that the first $150 million in capital gains above the $1.128 billion statutory threshold be held in the general fund, with any excess transferred to the stabilization fund; under the current forecast no such transfers are expected.

Recent Operating Performance Steady

In fiscal 2017, similar to fiscal 2016, actual revenue collections have slightly underperformed earlier forecast targets. The January 2016 consensus revenue forecast originally assumed nearly $26.9 billion in fiscal 2017 revenues, although slow collections late in fiscal 2016 and weaker than expected sales tax growth in early fiscal 2017 contributed to the fiscal 2017 forecast revenue being lowered to $26.1 billion, in October 2016. In response, the Commonwealth undertook several balancing actions including voluntary separations, balance transfers, and implementation of $95 million in Section 9C reductions. Year-to-date through February 2017 on a preliminary basis, fiscal 2017 tax collections were just below benchmark, although 1.9% above the prior year level.

Fiscal 2018 revenues as of the January 2017 consensus revenue forecast are expected to rise 3.9% over the fiscal 2017 level, to nearly $27.1 billion. The forecast and the governor's executive budget assume that the 0.05% PIT rate cut noted earlier will be triggered as of Jan. 1, 2018, based on forecast economic growth. The governor's executive budget recommends total budgeted expenditures of $40.5 billion, 4.3% higher than currently expected fiscal 2017 expenditures, excluding Medicaid trust fund and other transfers. Under a proposed modification for capital gains deposits to the stabilization fund, half of the amount over the projected statutory threshold would be transferred on a pre-budget basis, rather than at year-end, with the remainder transferred at fiscal year-end. Based on the proposal, $52 million would be deposited at the start of fiscal 2018.

Contact:

Primary Analyst
Douglas Offerman
Senior Director
+1-212-908-0889
Fitch Ratings, Inc.
33 Whitehall Street
New York, NY 10004

Secondary Analyst
Laura Porter
Managing Director
+1-212-908-0575

Committee Chairperson
Marcy Block
Senior Director
+1-212-908-0239

Media Relations: Elizabeth Fogerty, New York, Tel: +1 (212) 908 0526, Email: elizabeth.fogerty@fitchratings.com.

Additional information is available on www.fitchratings.com

In addition to the sources of information identified in the applicable criteria specified below, this action was informed by information from Lumesis and InvestorTools

Applicable Criteria
Rating U.S. Public Finance Short-Term Debt -- Effective Nov. 17, 2015 - Feb. 8, 2017 (pub. 17 Nov 2015)
https://www.fitchratings.com/site/re/873508
U.S. Tax-Supported Rating Criteria (pub. 18 Apr 2016)
https://www.fitchratings.com/site/re/879478