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Ratings

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Summary:

Grand Ledge, Michigan; General Obligation

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Credit Profile		
US$7.3 mil cap imp bnds (ltd tax GO) ser 2019 due 11/01/2034		
Long Term Rating	AA-/Stable	New
Grand Ledge GO		
Long Term Rating	AA-/Stable	Affirmed
Grand Ledge GO (AGM)		
Unenhanced Rating	AA-(SPUR)/Stable	Affirmed
Grand Ledge GO (MAC)		
Unenhanced Rating	AA-(SPUR)/Stable	Affirmed

Many issues are enhanced by bond insurance.

Rationale

S&P Global Ratings assigned its 'AA-' rating to Grand Ledge, Mich.'s series 2019 limited-tax capital improvement general obligation (GO) bonds. At the same time, we affirmed our 'AA-' rating on the city's previously issued debt. The outlook on all ratings is stable.

Officials will use series 2019 bond proceeds to fund future capital outlay related to various sewer, water, and street projects, financing the acquisition of equipment and machinery, and the construction of a storage facility for road salt.

Grand Ledge's full faith and credit limited-tax GO pledge and an agreement to levy ad valorem property taxes, within statutory and constitutional tax limitations applicable to the city, secure the bonds outstanding. Despite these limitations, we rate the limited-tax GO debt on par with our view of the city's general creditworthiness, as reflected in its unlimited-tax GO rating.

Grand Ledge has overseen material economic development over the last few years that has substantiated its tax base in support of continued growth, facilitating its ability to sustain positive operating performance amid planned capital improvements. Primarily residential, the city optimizes its operations through conservative, strategic budgeting as well as keying in on advantageous grant funding to continuously reinvest in its communities. Despite relatively high fixed costs, the city enjoys strong financial flexibility. Grand Ledge's recently adopted city charter, outlining greater millage ceilings for operations and streets, as well as recreation, which further reinforces its financial positioning moving forward. We expect management to continue its track record of strong budgetary performance while carrying out strategic capital improvements over the outlook horizon.

The rating further reflects our assessment of the city's:

- Adequate economy, with access to a broad and diverse metropolitan statistical area (MSA);
- Strong management, with good financial policies and practices under our Financial Management Assessment (FMA)

methodology;

- Strong budgetary performance, with operating surpluses in the general fund and, after adjusting for one-time capital outlay, at the total governmental fund level in fiscal 2018;
- Very strong budgetary flexibility, with an available fund balance in fiscal 2018 of 46.2% of operating expenditures;
- Very strong liquidity, with total government available cash at 78% of total governmental fund expenditures and 5.5x governmental debt service, and access to external liquidity that we consider strong;
- Very weak debt and contingent liability profile, with debt service carrying charges at 14.2% of expenditures and net direct debt that is 313.6% of total governmental fund revenue, and a large pension and other postemployment benefits (OPEB) obligation, but rapid amortization, with 82.7% of debt scheduled to be retired in 10 years; and
- Strong institutional framework score.

Adequate economy

We consider Grand Ledge's economy to be adequate. The city, with an estimated population of 8,059, is in Clinton and Eaton counties in the Lansing-East Lansing, Mich. MSA, which we consider to be broad and diverse. At fiscal year-end 2018, the city had a projected per capita effective buying income of 104.9% of the national level and an expected per capita market value of $63,332 for fiscal 2020. Overall, the city's market value grew by 4.8%, to $463.6 million, in 2018, and subsequently grew 2.2%, to $473.8 million, in 2019. The weighted average unemployment rate of the counties was 3.5% in 2018.

Residential, commercial, and industrial valuations account for approximately 72%, 25%, and 3%, respectively, of the city's taxable values for fiscal 2020. Management expects increases in taxable values and stability in the largest taxpayers, noting an influx of wealth that has recently come into the area. Officials indicate that approximately $700 million of investment has migrated to the surrounding area of Grand Ledge, including an estimated $50 million of private investment as well as a housing complex, currently under construction, totaling about $30 million. In addition, the city has added 175 acres of land to facilitate further build-out and development. The 10 largest taxpayers make up approximately 11.9% of the assessed value for fiscal 2020, which we consider reflective of a diverse tax base. Lastly, management also notes that no significant tax appeals are outstanding. Therefore, we expect the city's economy to remain at least adequate, in our opinion, over the next two years as the city positions itself for further development.

Strong management

We view the city's management as strong, with good financial policies and practices under our FMA methodology, indicating financial practices exist in most areas, but that governance officials might not formalize or monitor all of them on a regular basis.

Some of the management highlights include:

- Use of at least three years of historical information in the formulation of the upcoming year's revenue and expenditure assumptions, with the help of outside sources and a line-by-line approach to budgeting;
- Monthly reporting of budget-to-actual performance to the council, with the ability to make amendments to the budget as needed;
- A formal long-term capital plan that addresses the city's capital needs for the next five years;

- Formalized investment management policy, with monthly reporting of investments and holdings;
- Formalized debt management policy, reflective of state guidelines; and
- Formalized fund balance policy to maintain 25% of budgeted expenditures in the fund balance.

The city lacks a long-term financial plan.

Strong budgetary performance

Grand Ledge's budgetary performance is strong, in our opinion. Budgetary performance has been adjusted to account for recurring transfers, bond proceeds, and one-time revenues and expenditures. The city had spent down approximately $1.6 million in bond proceeds relating to its series 2016 issue for the purposes of various capital improvements.

For fiscal 2018, the city's general fund resulted in an operating surplus of 1.1% of expenditures, and across total governmental funds resulted in an operating surplus of 7.8% of expenditures. The city planned to use the general fund surplus for future capital improvements and maintaining the target fund balance. The general fund was primarily funded by taxes (51% of revenues), followed by intergovernmental revenues (30%) and charges for services (6.7%).

For fiscal 2019, Grand Ledge's preliminary figures reflect an operating deficit of approximately $119,000 and a total governmental fund balance decrease of about $596,000. However, management notes that the deficit is primarily the result of a mistiming in revenues to be received from the state that will essentially reimburse the city for these deficit-driving expenses in fiscal 2019. On a standard operating basis, accounting for the timing of the revenue mismatch, the city would have produced a surplus; in addition, the anticipated $119,000 deficit would not affect the maintenance of its available fund balances at its current levels.

For 2020, the city's budget calls for a deficit of nearly $700,000. Based on historical results, management typically budgets conservatively when comparing final budgeted figures to actual results. As such, we expect its performance to produce at least break-even to positive results, especially considering the city's passage of increased millage headroom to facilitate additional revenue if necessary. Despite the possibility of a deficit, we expect Grand Ledge's budgetary performance to be strong over the next two years, given the city's ability to outperform its budget.

Very strong budgetary flexibility

Grand Ledge's budgetary flexibility is very strong, in our view, with an available fund balance in fiscal 2018 of 46.2% of operating expenditures, or $1.4 million. Given its historical maintenance and concerted growth in recent years, we expect the available fund balance to remain above 30% of expenditures for the current and next fiscal years, which we view as a credit strength.

Despite an expected general fund deficit in fiscal 2019 and possible deficit in 2020, we believe that the city's budgetary flexibility will remain very strong, given management's conservative budgetary practices and intention to maintain available fund balance at current levels. The city implemented a new charter at the beginning of fiscal 2019 that increased the millage headroom for operations and streets, from 13 mills to 14 mills, and an additional 1 recreational mill. The added levy flexibility provided by the implemented charter further supports the expectation that management will maintain the strength of its budgetary profile.

Very strong liquidity

In our opinion, Grand Ledge's liquidity is very strong and, after adjusting for roughly $1 million in bond proceeds, with total government available cash at 82.7% of total governmental fund expenditures and nearly 5.5x governmental debt service in 2018.

We believe the city has strong access to external liquidity, as it has issued GO debt that demonstrates access to capital markets. We do not expect the city's cash position, with respect to its total governmental expenditures and debt service, to change much in the next two years, and we believe it will remain strong. We understand the city does not have any potential contingent liabilities that could have an adverse effect on its cash position.

Very weak debt and contingent liability profile

In our view, Grand Ledge's debt and contingent liability profile is very weak. Total governmental fund debt service is 14.2% of total governmental fund expenditures, although this is exacerbated by the front-loaded maturity schedule for the city's 2016 bonds. Net direct debt is 313.7% of total governmental fund revenue. Approximately 77.8% of the direct debt is scheduled to be repaid within 10 years, which we view as a credit strength.

Grand Ledge does not have any major plans to issue additional debt in the near term. Furthermore, the city does not have any direct purchase debt, private placements, or variable-rate debt instruments.

In our opinion, a credit weakness is Grand Ledge's large pension and OPEB obligation. Combined required pension and actual OPEB contributions totaled 6.7% of total governmental fund expenditures in 2018. Of that amount, 3.6% represented required contributions to pension obligations, and 3.1% represented OPEB payments.

City law enforcement participates in the Michigan Municipal Employees' Retirement System (MERS), an agent multiple-employer, defined-benefit pension plan. The city makes its full required contributions, according to state statutes, each year. The city's proportion of the net MERS liability as of the 2018 valuation was $1.21 million. The funded ratio, which consists of the plan fiduciary net position as a percent of the total pension liability, was 62.8%, fairly flat from the 2017 valuation of 62.9%. We believe the plan's high discount rate of 7.3%, wage inflation, and static mortality assumptions are somewhat aggressive. However, the city is reducing the pension liability by contributing above its required contribution, having made 112% of its annual required pension contribution in 2017, followed by 108% in 2018, and plans to do so for fiscal 2019 and beyond. Driving the city's pension funding strategy is its simultaneous revision of its discount rate assumption as it utilizes a 5.75% rate of return. Although the city is taking action to reduce its liability, we believe increased contributions may place additional pressure on finances.

The city maintains the City of Grand Ledge Group Pension Plan, a defined-contribution pension plan administered by the Public Sector Retirement Organization to provide retirement benefits to all participating full-time city employees. However, the plan has now been closed to any employees hired after July 1, 2018. Its maximum contribution is 15% for employees hired before July 1, 2012, and 10% for employees hired after June 30, 2012. Employer contributions to the plan for fiscal year-end 2018 totaled $157,987.

The city also provides OPEBs to its retirees through a city-administered single-employer, defined-benefit health care plan that provides health insurance benefits to certain retirees and, in some cases, their beneficiaries. The required contribution is based on projected pay-as-you-go financing requirements; however, the city prefunds it on a discretionary basis. For the year ended June 30, 2018, the plan had a funded ratio of 128.5%. For 2018, the city contributed $181,563, including $150,000 in advance funding. For 2019, the OPEB plan had a funded ratio of 108%, funded by a dedicated retiree health-funding vehicle through MERS, and maintained a net OPEB asset of $37,290. Management expects to advance fund again in 2020.

Strong institutional framework

The institutional framework score for Michigan municipalities with populations between 4,000 and 600,000 is strong.

Outlook

The stable outlook reflects our view that the city will maintain its very strong budgetary flexibility and strong budgetary performance, despite planned capital outlay and potential for pension contributions to increase. We do not expect to change the ratings within the two-year outlook period.

Upside scenario

If all credit factors remain stable, we could raise the rating if the city's economic metrics improve to levels commensurate with those of higher-rated peers, and if the debt and pension burden were to moderate moving forward.

Downside scenario

If budgetary performance declines to a level that results in a material deterioration in the city's budgetary flexibility, we could lower the rating.

Related Research

- S&P Public Finance Local GO Criteria: How We Adjust Data For Analytic Consistency, Sept. 12, 2013

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