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Summary:

Westwood, Massachusetts; General Obligation

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Credit Profile

US\$17.095 mil GO mun purp ln bnds ser 2016 due 03/01/2036

<i>Long Term Rating</i>	AAA/Stable	New
Westwood GO		
<i>Long Term Rating</i>	AAA/Stable	Affirmed
Westwood GO		
<i>Long Term Rating</i>	AAA/Stable	Affirmed

Rationale

S&P Global Ratings assigned its 'AAA' rating and stable outlook to Westwood, Mass.' series 2016 general obligation (GO) municipal-purpose loan bonds and affirmed its 'AAA' rating, with a stable outlook, on the town's existing GO debt.

We rate Westwood above the sovereign because we believe the town can maintain credit characteristics independent of the nation based on its predominantly locally derived revenue and our view that pledged revenue supporting debt service on the bonds is at limited risk of negative sovereign intervention. In 2015, local property taxes generated 78% of the town's revenue, demonstrating a lack of dependence on central government revenue.

The town's full-faith-and-credit pledge, subject to limitations of Proposition 2 1/2, secures the bonds. Despite limitations imposed by the commonwealth's levy limit law, we did not make a rating distinction for the limited-tax GO pledge due to the town's flexibility under the levy limit. Officials plan to use series 2016 bond proceeds to finance police station design and construction, streetlights, and land development.

The rating reflects our opinion of the following factors for Westwood, specifically its:

- Very strong economy, with access to a broad and diverse metropolitan statistical area (MSA);
- Very strong management, with strong financial policies and practices under our Financial Management Assessment (FMA) methodology;
- Strong budgetary performance, with a slight operating surplus in the general fund and an operating surplus at the total governmental fund level in fiscal 2015;
- Strong budgetary flexibility, with an available fund balance in fiscal 2015 of 13.5% of operating expenditures;
- Very strong liquidity, with total government available cash at 26% of total governmental fund expenditures and 5.1x governmental debt service, and access to external liquidity we consider strong;
- Very strong debt and contingent liability position, with debt service carrying charges at 5.1% of expenditures and net direct debt that is 50.9% of total governmental fund revenue, as well as low overall net debt at less than 3% of market value and rapid amortization, with 69.7% of debt scheduled to be retired within 10 years; and
- Strong institutional framework score.

Very strong economy

We consider Westwood's economy very strong. The town, with an estimated population of 15,041, is located in Norfolk County in the Boston-Cambridge-Newton MSA, which we consider broad and diverse. The town has a projected per capita effective buying income of 203% of the national level and per capita market value of \$270,436. Overall, the town's market value grew by 11.1% over the past year to \$4.1 billion in 2016. The county unemployment rate was 4.3% in 2015.

Westwood is an affluent residential community about 13 miles southwest of Boston. The town, which encompasses 11 square miles, is near the high-tech corridors along interstates 95 and 495. In our opinion, access to employment centers has made the town attractive to wealthy professionals, which translates to very strong economic factors.

The town is beginning to see the results of a large-scale, transit-oriented development at University Park Station/Route 128: Several stores opened in March 2015. The 137-acre project includes an anchor grocery store, a mix of restaurant and retail storefronts, up to 650 residential units, a hotel, and office space; the project abuts the Amtrak and Acela Station, which is a stop for trains south to New York City and Washington.

Town officials conservatively estimate the University Station project will result in a \$2 million net annual revenue increase. They expect additional revenue to come from the increase in the assessed value of surrounding properties. We expect this project to contribute to, what we already view as, a very strong economy, providing a stable commercial base and an expanded residential base that will serve the town for many years to come.

Very strong management

We view the town's management as very strong, with strong financial policies and practices under our FMA methodology, indicating financial practices are strong, well embedded, and likely sustainable.

We believe that Westwood maintains best practices deemed critical to supporting credit quality and that these are well embedded in the government's daily operations and practices. Formal policies support many of these activities, which adds to the likelihood Westwood will continue these practices and transcend changes in the operating environment or personnel.

Management presents monthly budget and treasury reports to the board of selectmen. Management also prepares a five-year operating budget in conjunction with a long-range planning committee and maintains a five-year capital improvement plan that identifies funding sources for all projects. The town has basic debt management guidelines and an investment policy. In addition, management maintains a reserve policy that sets a minimum of available reserves at 8% of revenue, net of debt service.

Strong budgetary performance

Westwood's budgetary performance is strong in our opinion. The town had slight surplus operating results in the general fund of 1.5% of expenditures, and surplus results across all governmental funds of 1.7% of expenditures in fiscal 2015.

The town has generated a general fund surplus in each of the past three fiscal years, and it is projecting to do so again in fiscal years 2016 and 2017. Management attributes favorable performance to conservative, forward-thinking budgeting. In fiscal 2015, the largest increases came from motor vehicle excise taxes, up by 25% over budgeted

figures, and licenses and permits, up by 48% compared with budgeted figures. The fiscal 2016 budget is a 4.6% increase over the fiscal 2015 budget, and it sustains appropriations for capital projects and long-term liabilities such as other postemployment benefits (OPEB).

We believe favorable budgetary performance stems from a recovery in local fees and taxes and proactive budget management. We also believe Westwood maintains a stable and predictable revenue profile that is largely independent of commonwealth and federal revenue. Property taxes generate 78% of revenue, and we consider collections strong and stable. State aid accounts for 14% of revenue, and we note commonwealth funding has been stable recently.

Strong budgetary flexibility

Westwood's budgetary flexibility is strong, in our view, with an available fund balance in fiscal 2015 of 13.5% of operating expenditures, or \$10.7 million.

Budgetary flexibility has improved over the past several fiscal years. Reserves are up from fiscal 2013 levels of \$8.3 million, or 11.2% of expenditures. We understand that town officials do not currently plan to spend down reserves over the next few fiscal years and that they expect available reserves to remain in-line with fiscal 2015 results. As previously noted, the town's policy is to maintain available reserves at more than 8% of revenue, net of debt service. We recognize Westwood has minimal additional flexibility in unused levy capacity, which was \$539,997 in fiscal 2016.

Very strong liquidity

In our opinion, Westwood's liquidity is very strong, with total government available cash at 26% of total governmental fund expenditures and 5.1x governmental debt service in 2015. In our view, the town has strong access to external liquidity if necessary.

Westwood is a frequent issuer of GO debt. The majority of Westwood's cash and investments are in bank accounts. Westwood does not currently have any variable-rate or direct-purchase debt. We expect the town's liquidity profile to remain very strong.

Very strong debt and contingent liability profile

In our view, Westwood's debt and contingent liability profile is very strong. Total governmental fund debt service is 5.1% of total governmental fund expenditures, and net direct debt is 50.9% of total governmental fund revenue. Overall net debt is low at 1.2% of market value, and approximately 69.7% of the direct debt is scheduled to be repaid within 10 years, which are, in our view, positive credit factors.

Following this bond issuance, Westwood has roughly \$56.7 million of total direct debt outstanding, roughly \$1.8 million of which is self-supporting enterprise debt and \$8.4 million of which the commonwealth will reimburse for school building projects. The town does not have any additional debt plans within the next two years.

Westwood's combined required pension and actual OPEB contribution totaled 6.1% of total governmental fund expenditures in fiscal 2016. Of that amount, 3.1% represented required contributions to pension obligations, and 3% represented OPEB payments. The town made its full annual required pension contribution in fiscal 2016.

Westwood participates in the Norfolk County Retirement System, and it contributes 100% of the required amount. In fiscal 2015, Westwood paid \$3.3 million, or about 3.1% of expenditures. Using updated reporting standards in

accordance with Governmental Accounting Standards Board Statement Nos. 67 and 68, the town's proportionate share of the net pension liability was about \$33 million with 60% funded as of fiscal 2015. While pension costs are manageable due to the county retirement system's below-average funded ratio, we believe this will likely remain a growing pressure over the next few fiscal years.

Westwood's OPEB liability was \$35.6 million as of July 1, 2015, based on a 7.25% discount rate. The annual OPEB cost was \$3.2 million in fiscal 2015, 50% of which the town contributed. This is a reduction in the liability from previous years, and it reflects the town's recent switch to the State Group Insurance Commission. The fiscal 2017 budget includes a \$1.35 million contribution to the OPEB trust, bringing current balance in the fund to approximately \$4.46 million.

Strong institutional framework

The institutional framework score for Massachusetts municipalities is strong.

Outlook

The stable outlook reflects S&P Global Ratings' expectation that Westwood's very strong underlying economy, ongoing economic developments, very strong management, and predictable operating profile will likely translate into strong budgetary performance and operating flexibility over the outlook period. In addition, we expect Westwood will likely maintain, what we consider, its very strong debt and liability profile despite existing and pending capital projects. We believe debt service and pension and OPEB costs will likely remain manageable and not pose an immediate budgetary challenge over the two-year outlook period due to the town's proactive initiatives. For these reasons, we do not expect to change the rating over the next two years. While currently unlikely, if budgetary performance were to deteriorate significantly, leading to diminished reserves, we could lower the rating.

Related Research

- S&P Public Finance Local GO Criteria: How We Adjust Data For Analytic Consistency, Sept. 12, 2013
- Incorporating GASB 67 And 68: Evaluating Pension/OPEB Obligations Under Standard & Poor's U.S. Local Government GO Criteria, Sept. 2, 2015

Certain terms used in this report, particularly certain adjectives used to express our view on rating relevant factors, have specific meanings ascribed to them in our criteria, and should therefore be read in conjunction with such criteria. Please see Ratings Criteria at www.standardandpoors.com for further information. Complete ratings information is available to subscribers of RatingsDirect at www.globalcreditportal.com. All ratings affected by this rating action can be found on the S&P Global Ratings' public website at www.standardandpoors.com. Use the Ratings search box located in the left column.

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