# MEMORANDUM

Date: October 2, 2019

To: The Honorable Chairman and Members
Pima County Board of Supervisors

From: C.H. Huckelberry
County Administrator

Re: **Credit Ratings**

The County has received credit rating reviews by Fitch Ratings (Attachment 1) and S&P Global Ratings (Attachment 2) for the Certificates of Participation (COPs) that will be issued later this month to fund the Valencia Road Extension project. Both rating agencies continue to assign the following ratings to Pima County's COPs and General Obligation debt:

| Credit Ratings | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Standard & Poor's | | Fitch Ratings | |
| | Rating | Date | Rating | Date |
| Certificate of Participations (COPs) | AA- | Sep-19 | AA | Sep-19 |
| General Obligation | AA | Sep-19 | AAA | Sep-19 |

In their ratings reports, the two firms spoke highly of County fiscal management and our overall management in general. Here are some of the comments from the ratings reports released in September 2019:

- "Strong management, with good financial policies and practices...." *(S&P)*
- "Very strong liquidity... *(S&P)*
- "Conservative budgeting, solid expenditure flexibility and a commitment to healthy reserves position the county to promptly close any budgetary gaps and maintain a high level of financial flexibility." *(Fitch)*

CHH/lab

Attachments

c: Jan Lesher, Chief Deputy County Administrator
Michelle Campagne, Director, Finance and Risk Management

**SOLICITATION STATUS**

The ratings above were solicited and assigned or maintained at the request of the rated entity/issuer or a related third party. Any exceptions follow below.

## Endorsement Policy

Fitch's approach to ratings endorsement so that ratings produced outside the EU may be used by regulated entities within the EU for regulatory purposes, pursuant to the terms of the EU Regulation with respect to credit rating agencies, can be found on the EU Regulatory Disclosures page. The endorsement status of all International ratings is provided within the entity summary page for each rated entity and in the transaction detail pages for all structured finance transactions on the Fitch website. These disclosures are updated on a daily basis.

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# ATTACHMENT 2

RatingsDirect®

## Summary:

# Pima County, Arizona; Appropriations; General Obligation

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**Summary:**

# Pima County, Arizona; Appropriations; General Obligation

| Credit Profile | | |
|---|---|---|
| US$12.86 mil certs of part ser 2019A due 12/01/2033 | | |
| *Long Term Rating* | AA-/Stable | New |
| Pima Cnty approp | | |
| *Long Term Rating* | AA-/Stable | Affirmed |
| Pima Cnty GO | | |
| *Long Term Rating* | AA/Stable | Affirmed |

## Rationale

S&P Global Ratings assigned its 'AA-' long-term rating to Pima County, Ariz.'s series 2019A certificates of participation (COPs; par amount: $12.86 million). At the same time, S&P Global Ratings affirmed its 'AA' long-term rating and underlying rating (SPUR) on the county's general obligation (GO) debt outstanding and its 'AA-' rating on the county's outstanding COPs. The outlook on all ratings is stable.

The 'AA' rating reflects the county's growing and stable economy, as employers are expanding or moving into the community, along with strong residential and commercial activity leading to good assessed value (AV) growth in recent years. Financially, the county's positive operational performance has led to very strong general fund reserves, supporting our view of the county's creditworthiness. The rating also reflects our view of the county's manageable overall debt profile, including rapid amortization of debt and low overall net debt at less than 2% of full cash value (market value).

### Security and purpose

The COPs are payable from lease payments made from legally available revenue of the county subject to annual appropriation. The ratings on the COPs reflect the county's covenant to budget and appropriate annual lease payments. We rate this obligation one notch lower than the county's general creditworthiness to account for the appropriation risk associated with the lease payment. Proceeds from the sale of the series 2019A COPs will be used to fund various capital projects throughout the county.

Revenue from unlimited ad valorem taxes levied on taxable property within the county secures the GO bonds. The county has the power and obligation to levy these taxes without limitation as to rate or amount. Following the issuance of the series 2019A COPs, the county will have approximately $927.7 million in total direct debt outstanding.

### Credit fundamentals

The 'AA' ratings reflect our view of the county's:

- Strong 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;
- Adequate budgetary performance, with an operating surplus in the general fund but an operating deficit at the total governmental fund level in fiscal 2018;
- Very strong liquidity, with total government available cash at 67.2% of total governmental fund expenditures and 5.1x governmental debt service, and access to external liquidity we consider exceptional;
- Very strong debt and contingent liability profile, with debt service carrying charges at 13.1% of expenditures and net direct debt that is 50.4% of total governmental fund revenue, as well as low overall net debt at less than 3% of market value and rapid amortization, with 93.1% of debt scheduled to be retired in 10 years; and
- Strong institutional framework score.

### Strong economy

Pima County, with an estimated population of 1 million, is located in the Tucson, Ariz., MSA, which we consider to be broad and diverse. Pima County encompasses 9,184 square miles of southern Arizona, and roughly half of its population resides in Tucson. Education and health care, defense, and government are the county's primary employment sectors. The county has a projected per capita effective buying income of 86.7% of the national level and per capita market value of $82,014. The county's market value grew by 7.4% over the past year to $84.1 billion in 2020. The county unemployment rate was 4.5% in 2018.

The University of Arizona is the leading employer (12,500 estimated employees), followed by Davis-Monthan Air Force Base (11,800) and Raytheon Missile Systems (11,500). Davis-Monthan Air Force Base supports a variety of missions; one of the largest plane groups at the base is the A-10. The Pentagon extended funding for the A-10, which had previously been at risk for near-term retirement. Retirement has since been extended until 2022. Management reports that the F-35 is a probable replacement, and the base benefits from the competitive advantages provided by the airspace availability and weather. At this time, we understand that there are no consolidation concerns for the base. While we consider the regional economic base to be diverse, its reliance on the aerospace, defense, and government sectors contributed to a weaker recovery relative to those of areas that depend less on federal, state, and local government spending.

According to management, residential and commercial development has been quite strong recently, which we believe will lead to tax base growth and higher sales tax collections in the next several years. The county has experienced four consecutive years of valuation growth, and limited property AV grew by 5% in fiscal 2020, reaching $8.7 billion. The top 10 taxpayers for the county represent 7% of AV in fiscal 2020, which we consider very diverse.

### Strong management

We view the county'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 regularly monitor all of them.

Highlights include the following:

- The budget is based on major revenue projections from the county and the state that include property tax revenue and state-shared revenue, while departmental expenditures are built on zero-based budgets.

- Officials review budget-to-actual performance monthly and monitor investment performance monthly, in accordance with an investment management policy that specifies permitted investments, maturities, benchmarks, and objectives.
- A formal debt policy limits the types, permitted uses, maximum maturities, and sources of payment for bonded debt and sets procedures for debt monitoring and oversight.
- The county maintains a comprehensive five-year rolling capital improvement plan, updated annually, and produces informal five-year financial projections as part of its budget development.
- The county has resolved to maintain a debt service retirement reserve of $5 million, and informally targets a minimum 5% reserve for contingencies, which is appropriated in its annual budget.

### Adequate budgetary performance

Pima County's budgetary performance is adequate, in our opinion. The county had surplus operating results in the general fund of 2.1% of expenditures, but a deficit result across all governmental funds of 1.9% in fiscal 2018.

We have adjusted the county's revenue and expenditures to reflect recurring transfers in and out of the general fund that we believe function like ongoing activity, including relatively large reoccurring transfers out for debt service and support for certain special revenue funds. The county's operations are stable, in our view, supported by a third consecutive general fund surplus. Management attributes the stable budget results in recent years to departmental efficiencies, along with conservative and comprehensive budgeting, including budgeting for all contingencies spent, which historically never occurs. Moreover, the county's revenue profile has continued to increase year over year, largely due to an increase in the primary property tax rate and growth in state-shared sales tax revenue. We understand that the county raised its primary property tax rate in fiscal 2018 to mitigate an attempt from the state to shift certain expenses onto the county, which the state ultimately did not do. We note that the county did lower the tax rate back down to $5.65 in 2019 from $6.02 in fiscal 2018. From 2014 to 2018, the county's general fund revenue grew an aggregate 18.7%, largely due to the good growth in local sales taxes. The county is anticipating to end fiscal 2019 with balanced operations. However, audited results are likely to be negative, due to some one-time spending that occurred during the year, notably a $7 million transfer out of the general fund for technology upgrades. Furthermore, the county expects to spend an additional portion of available reserves in fiscal 2020 for street improvements.

### Very strong budgetary flexibility

Pima County's budgetary flexibility is very strong, in our view, with an available fund balance in fiscal 2018 of 20% of operating expenditures, or $108.9 million.

Our calculation of available fund balance combines assigned and unassigned portions of the general fund balance. The county's reserves have increased year over year since 2015, and the county added $11.2 million to its available fund balance in 2018. According to management, the county accumulated reserves in previous years to help fund upcoming road improvements. Although the county intends to spend down a portion of reserves in the near term, we anticipate available fund balances will remain at least strong in the next several years.

### Very strong liquidity

In our opinion, Pima County's liquidity is very strong, with total government available cash at 67.2% of total governmental fund expenditures and 5.1x governmental debt service in 2018.

We believe the county has exceptional access to external liquidity, as evidenced by its consistent and diverse bond programs over the past 15 years, and we have not identified any immediate, short-term risks to liquidity. We do not consider the county's investments aggressive, as it invests primarily in federal agency securities and the state pool. Although the county has a sizable number of investments in corporate bonds, the majority hold investment-grade ratings by S&P Global Ratings. We have not identified any contingent liquidity risks in the form of variable-rate debt or significant contingent liabilities.

In 2017, the county entered into a private placement agreement with JP Morgan Chase Bank in the amount of $25.7 million. The privately placed bonds are secured by revenue from unlimited ad valorem taxes levied on taxable property in the county, and are also on parity with the county's existing GO bonds. We understand that JP Morgan Chase Bank lacks the ability to accelerate debt service payments under the agreement.

### Strong debt and contingent liability profile

In our view, Pima County's debt and contingent liability profile is very strong. Total governmental fund debt service is 13.1% of total governmental fund expenditures, and net direct debt is 50.4% of total governmental fund revenue. Overall net debt is low at 1.5% of market value, and approximately 93.1% of the direct debt is scheduled to be repaid within 10 years, which are in our view positive credit factors.

We understand the county plans to issue approximately $45 million in additional COP debt in calendar year 2020, along with potential COP and street and highway revenue bond issuances in 2021. The county's debt management policy calls for a maximum amortization period of 15 years for GO, appropriation, and revenue debt, and we understand that any future COP or revenue bond would comply with the policy.

Pima County's combined required pension and actual other postemployment benefit (OPEB) contributions totaled 6.1% of total governmental fund expenditures in 2018. We consider this to be a low carrying charge for pension obligations, although future increases in contribution rates, if not accompanied by funding progress, could elevate the county's pension burden. The county made 100% of its annual required pension contribution in 2018.

The county contributes to four multiple employer pension plans and has historically consistently funded its annual required contributions, as well as a portion of employees' statutorily required contributions. Pima County reported an aggregate net pension liability of $822 million in fiscal 2018. The Arizona State Retirement System (ASRS), the largest single retirement plan, represents roughly 50% of the county's aggregate net pension liability. As of June 30 2018, the ASRS plan was 73% funded. The Public Safety Personnel Retirement Plan is only 41% funded, and the Corrections Officer Retirement System was 48% funded. OPEBs for certain retired employees are provided through these state retirement systems and financed on a pay-as-you-go basis, and we understand that the county closed retiree health benefit plans to new members several years ago, which lowered its unfunded OPEB liability.

### Strong institutional framework

The institutional framework score for Arizona counties is strong.

## Outlook

The stable outlook reflects our view of the county's large taxing area and strong economic activity in recent years, which has boosted property and sales tax collections. The stable outlook also reflects our view of the county's recent positive operations and corresponding fund balance increases. Although we expect the county will issue additional debt in the near term, we anticipate the county's overall debt position will remain manageable. We do not expect to change the ratings within the two-year outlook horizon.

### Upside scenario

Should the county's key economic indicators improve to levels comparable with those of higher-rated peers, while the county sustains positive operational performances and fund balances at levels we consider very strong, we could raise the ratings.

### Downside scenario

If the county is unable to achieve operational balance for multiple years, resulting in reserves falling below a strong level, we could lower the ratings.

## Related Research

2018 Update Of Institutional Framework For U.S. Local Governments

| Ratings Detail (As Of September 23, 2019) | | |
|---|---|---|
| Pima Cnty approp | | |
| *Long Term Rating* | AA-/Stable | Affirmed |
| Pima Cnty approp | | |
| *Long Term Rating* | AA-/Stable | Affirmed |
| Pima Cnty certs of part | | |
| *Long Term Rating* | AA-/Stable | Affirmed |
| Pima Cnty Certs of part | | |
| *Long Term Rating* | AA-/Stable | Affirmed |
| Pima Cnty Certs of part | | |
| *Long Term Rating* | AA-/Stable | Affirmed |
| Pima Cnty GO | | |
| *Long Term Rating* | AA/Stable | Affirmed |
| Pima Cnty APPROP | | |
| *Long Term Rating* | AA-/Stable | Affirmed |
| **Pima Cnty GO** | | |
| *Unenhanced Rating* | AA(SPUR)/Stable | Affirmed |

Many issues are enhanced by bond insurance.

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.capitaliq.com. All ratings affected by this rating action can be found on S&P Global Ratings' public website at www.standardandpoors.com. Use the Ratings search box located in the left column.