



BEST PRACTICE

Debt Management Policy

Notice:

Issuers of municipal securities should be aware of new disclosure requirements in SEC Rule 15c2-12, effective on securities issues on or after February 27, 2019. GFOA recommends issuers consult counsel prior to the effective date to determine how these changes may impact debt portfolios and debt management policies and procedures.

The Continuing Disclosure Agreements will include affirmation by governments for debt issues on or after February 27, 2019 to:

- disclose additional information about material financial obligations (e.g., guarantees, capital leases, and bank loans) for securities entered into after the effective date
- make event filings of any material changes reflecting financial difficulties should any occur to outstanding or new financial obligations

BACKGROUND:

Debt management policies are written guidelines, allowances, and restrictions that guide the debt issuance practices of state or local governments, including the issuance process, management of a debt portfolio, and adherence to various laws and regulations. A debt management policy should improve the quality of decisions, articulate policy goals, provide guidelines for the structure of debt issuance, and demonstrate a commitment to long-term capital and financial planning. Adherence to a debt management policy signals to rating agencies and the capital markets that a government is well managed and therefore is likely to meet its debt obligations in a timely manner. Debt management policies should be written with attention to the issuer's specific needs and available financing options and are typically implemented through more specific operating procedures. Finally, debt management policies should be approved by the issuer's governing body to provide credibility, transparency and to ensure that there is a common understanding among elected officials and staff regarding the issuer's approach to debt financing.

RECOMMENDATION:

GFOA recommends that state and local governments adopt comprehensive written debt management policies. These policies should reflect local, state, and federal laws and regulations. To assist with the development of these policies GFOA recommends that a government's Debt Management Policy (Policy) should be reviewed periodically (and updated if necessary) and should address at least the following:

1. Debt Limits. The Policy should consider setting specific limits or acceptable ranges for each type of debt. Limits generally are set for legal, public policy, and financial reasons.

a. *Legal restrictions* may be determined by:

- State constitution or law,
- Local charter, by-laws, resolution or ordinance, or covenant, and
- Bond referenda approved by voters.

b. *Public Policies* will address the internal standards and considerations within a government and can include:

- Purposes for which debt proceeds may be used or prohibited,
- Types of debt that may be issued or prohibited,
- Relationship to and integration with the Capital Improvement Program, and
- Policy goals related to economic development, including use of tax increment financing and public-private partnerships.

c. *Financial restrictions or planning considerations* generally reflect public policy or other financial resources constraints, such as reduced use of a particular type of debt due to changing financial conditions. Appropriate debt limits can have a positive impact on bond ratings, particularly if the government demonstrates adherence to such policies over time. Financial limits often are expressed as ratios customarily used by credit analysts. Different financial limits are used for different types of debt. Examples include:

- *Direct Debt, including general obligation bonds*, are subject to legal requirements and may be able to be measured or limited by the following ratios:
 - Debt per capita,
 - Debt to personal income,
 - Debt to taxable property value, and
 - Debt service payments as a percentage of general fund revenues or expenditures.
- *Revenue Debt* levels often are limited by debt service coverage ratios (e.g., annual net pledged revenues to annual debt service), additional bond provisions contained in bond covenants, and potential credit rating impacts.
- *Conduit Debt* limitations may reflect the right of the issuing government to approve the borrower's creditworthiness, including a minimum credit rating, and the purpose of the borrowing issue. Such limitations reflect sound public policy, particularly if there is a contingent impact on the general revenues of the government or marketability of the government's own direct debt.
- *Short-Term Debt Issuance* should describe the specific purposes and circumstances under which it can be used, as well as limitations in term or size of borrowing.
- *Variable Rate Debt* should include information about when using non-fixed rate debt is acceptable to the entity either due to the term of the project, market conditions, or debt portfolio structuring purposes.

2. Debt Structuring Practices. The Policy should include specific guidelines regarding the debt structuring practices for each type of bond, including:

- Maximum term (often stated in absolute terms or based on the useful life of the asset(s)),
- Average maturity,
- Debt service pattern such as equal payments or equal principal amortization,
- Use of optional redemption features that reflect market conditions and/or needs of the government,
- Use of variable or fixed-rate debt, credit enhancements, derivatives, short-term debt, and limitations as to when, and to what extent, each can be used, and

- Other structuring practices should be considered, such as capitalizing interest during the construction of the project and deferral of principal, and/or other internal credit support, including general obligation pledges.

3. Debt Issuance Practices. The Policy should provide guidance regarding the issuance process, which may differ for each type of debt. These practices include:

- Selection and use of professional service providers, including an independent financial advisor, to assist with determining the method of sale and the selection of other financing team members,
- Criteria for determining the sale method (competitive, negotiated, private placement) and investment of proceeds,
- Use of comparative bond pricing services or market indices as a benchmark in negotiated transactions, as well as to evaluate final bond pricing results,
- Criteria for issuance of advance refunding and current refunding bonds, and
- Use of credit ratings, minimum bond ratings, determination of the number of ratings, and selection of rating services.

4. Debt Management Practices. The Policy should provide guidance for ongoing administrative activities including:

- Investment of bond proceeds,
- Primary and secondary market disclosure practices, including annual certifications as required,
- Arbitrage rebate monitoring and filing,
- Federal and state law compliance practices, and
- Ongoing market and investor relations efforts.

5. Use of Derivatives. The Debt Management Policy should clearly state whether or not the entity can or should use derivatives. If the policy allows for the use of derivatives, a separate and comprehensive derivatives policy should be developed (see GFOA's Advisory, Developing a Derivatives Policy and Derivatives Checklist).

Notes:

- Post Issuance Compliance Checklist
- Debt Issuance Checklist: Considerations When Issuing Bonds

The County of San Diego, CA was awarded the GFOA Award for Excellence for outstanding use of GFOA's Best Practice on Debt Management Policy. To learn more about the County's implementation process, please visit their award page.

References:

- GFOA Advisory: Using Variable Rate Debt Instruments, 2010.
- GFOA Advisory: Use of Debt-Related Derivatives Products, 2010.
- GFOA Derivatives Checklist, 2010.
- GFOA Best Practice: Selecting Bond Counsel, 2008.
- GFOA Best Practice: Selecting and Managing Municipal Advisors, 2014.
- GFOA Best Practice: Selecting Underwriters for a Negotiated Bond Sale, 2008.
- GFOA Best Practice: Post-Issuance Policies and Procedures, 2017.
- GFOA Best Practice: Primary Market Disclosure, 2017.
- GFOA/NABL Post Issuance Compliance Checklist, 2003.

- Debt Management Policy Examples
- *Benchmarking and Measuring Debt Capacity*, Rowan Miranda and Ron Picur, GFOA, 2000.
- *A Guide for Preparing a Debt Policy*, Patricia Tigue, GFOA, 1998.

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