



## RATING ACTION COMMENTARY

# Fitch Rates Florida Turnpike Enterprise's Rev Bonds 'AA'; Outlook Stable

Fri 18 Mar, 2022 - 4:24 PM ET

Fitch Ratings - New York - 18 Mar 2022: Fitch Ratings has assigned an 'AA' rating to the Florida Department of Transportation's (FDOT) approximately \$134.9 million of series 2022B senior lien revenue bonds. The Rating Outlook is Stable.

## RATING RATIONALE

The 'AA' rating reflects the turnpike system's standing as an essential network used by a broad customer base in a strong service area. The turnpike system benefits from considerable rate-making flexibility, evidenced by the legal ability to adjust toll rates above the Consumer Price Index (CPI) and the precedent of several above-inflationary toll rate increases.

The rating also reflects the turnpike's substantial capital improvement program, which has supported continued expansion and maintenance of the turnpike, but is currently expected to require \$2.6 billion in debt issuances through fiscal 2026, including the series 2022B bonds as well as approximately \$500 million of other new money bonds issued in fiscal 2022. FTE's resilient financial profile evidenced by high debt service coverage and moderate leverage metrics mitigates concern regarding the coronavirus pandemic and future debt issuance and remains commensurate with its 'AA' rating.

## KEY RATING DRIVERS

### Strategically Important Turnpike System - Revenue Risk (Volume): Stronger

FTE's toll roads comprise a critical, mature transportation system underpinned by a large commuter base and limited competition. FTE's expansion of the system, coupled with sustained healthy demand, has resulted in resiliency and continued growth of the traffic base, evidenced by FTE's lack of notable traffic declines since 1990 with the exception of the last recession and the coronavirus pandemic. The turnpike has also benefited from minimal elasticity of demand in response to rate increases, which Fitch expects to continue given the asset's essentiality combined with competitive toll rates.

### Strong Rate-Making Flexibility - Revenue Risk (Price): Stronger

FTE benefits from considerable flexibility to increase toll rates and a legal framework to implement scheduled rate increases that track inflation. Its toll rates are indexed to the CPI, with the ability to increase electronic toll rates once every year but no less than every five years and cash rates every five years. Toll adjustments above the CPI index are permitted as needed to comply with bond documents and covenants.

FTE has implemented above-inflationary rate increases occasionally in the past as needed, although most historical rate increases have tracked inflation. While political opposition to tolling has not been considered a material concern, recent legislation has made it so that no toll adjustments for inflation can be made during fiscal 2023. Fitch will continue to monitor FTE's ability to adjust tolls.

### Manageable Work Program - Infrastructure Development/Renewal: Stronger

The turnpike's six-year work program (fiscal years 2022-2026) totals nearly \$8.9 billion of projects and approximately \$2.6 billion of planned bond issuances through fiscal 2026, including approximately \$500 million of new money bonds issued in fiscal 2022, as well as the series 2022B bonds. The plan focuses on increasing capacity and access to the system. Several lane-widening projects expected to be completed over the next two years will continue to enhance the turnpike's capacity. The turnpike system is in good condition overall, and its asset condition monitoring regime is robust.

### Conservative Debt Portfolio - Debt Structure: Stronger

The turnpike's debt structure is fairly conservative, featuring all senior, fully amortizing fixed-rate debt. Outstanding debt is limited by a bond cap of \$10 billion. Outstanding bonded debt remains below 33% of the limit and total debt pro forma for new issuances is expected to remain comfortably within the limit, peaking at approximately 44% of capacity in 2026 in Fitch's cases. FTE's current debt service profile including the 2022B bonds declines from 2021 through final maturity in 2052. Including Fitch estimated future debt issuances, debt service will reach its maximum in 2026 and will steadily decline through 2055.

## Financial Profile

FTE benefits from a strong financial profile, which Fitch expects to remain consistent with the current rating level even despite the coronavirus pandemic and as sizable capital program-related debt issuances come on line over the next five years. FTE's fiscal 2021 debt service coverage ratio (DSCR) was robust at 2.9x despite significant declines in revenues due to the coronavirus pandemic, and is expected to remain strong at a 10-year average of 2.6x in Fitch's conservative coronavirus rating case. Leverage was low at a net debt-to-cash-flow available for debt service (CFADS) of 2.0x in fiscal 2020 and is expected to peak at 3.9x in Fitch's rating case.

## PEER GROUP

Maryland Transportation Authority (MDTA; AA/Stable Outlook) and Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission (PTC; A+ senior/A- subordinate/Stable Outlook) are among FTE's closest peers. Each operates a strong turnpike system with both urban and rural segments and has considerable pricing flexibility. FTE and MDTA feature comparable DSCR and leverage profiles, as well as similar passenger toll rates. Continued positive traffic trends, high financial flexibility and consistently high debt service coverage resulted in a recent rating upgrade of MDTA, bringing its rating in line with FTE's rating. Conversely, PTC's higher debt burden results in higher leverage on both liens, explaining its lower ratings.

## RATING SENSITIVITIES

### **Factors that could, individually or collectively, lead to negative rating action/downgrade:**

--Erosion of DSCR below 2.3x for a sustained period due to lower than anticipated revenues from decreased transactions or minimal toll increases would put pressure on the rating.

### **Factors that could, individually or collectively, lead to positive rating action/upgrade:**

--The rating is unlikely to rise due to future investment and political risks inherent to toll systems.

## **BEST/WORST CASE RATING SCENARIO**

International scale credit ratings of Sovereigns, Public Finance and Infrastructure issuers have a best-case rating upgrade scenario (defined as the 99th percentile of rating transitions, measured in a positive direction) of three notches over a three-year rating horizon; and a worst-case rating downgrade scenario (defined as the 99th percentile of rating transitions, measured in a negative direction) of three notches over three years. The complete span of best- and worst-case scenario credit ratings for all rating categories ranges from 'AAA' to 'D'. Best- and worst-case scenario credit ratings are based on historical performance. For more information about the methodology used to determine sector-specific best- and worst-case scenario credit ratings, visit <https://www.fitchratings.com/site/re/10111579>.

## **TRANSACTION SUMMARY**

FDOT is issuing approximately \$134.9 million in series 2022B turnpike revenue bonds. Proceeds of the 2022B bonds will be used to finance a portion of the 2022B Turnpike Project and to pay costs of issuance. The bonds will bear a tax-exempt fixed rate of interest with a final maturity of July 1, 2052.

## **CREDIT UPDATE**

In fiscal 2022 YTD (July through December), toll revenue increased by 18% due to recovery from the coronavirus pandemic. In addition to recovery from the pandemic, traffic is up 30% in fiscal 2022 YTD due to a change in the transaction counting methodology in November 2021 that resulted in a much higher transaction count. Toll revenue is exceeding pre-pandemic levels up 0.2% in fiscal 2022 YTD compared to the same period in fiscal 2020.

Fiscal 2021 toll revenues increased by 1.4% over fiscal 2020 as both traffic and revenues began to recover from the coronavirus pandemic, though remained 7.8% below fiscal 2019 revenues. Traffic grew at a five-year traffic CAGR of 0.6% from 2016 to 2021, due to the strong growth in recent years prior to the coronavirus pandemic.

Higher growth rates for traffic than toll revenue in fiscal 2022 are due to the implementation of All Electronic Tolling (AET) as well as continued recovery from the pandemic. The ticket system portion of mainline plazas converted to AET in November 2021, which resulted in a significantly higher number of transactions at similar toll rates. Previously, a trip on the Ticket System that registered as one transaction, now registers as a

separate transaction for each Mainline plaza that a customer passes through. Fitch will continue to monitor the effects of AET on revenues going forward.

For more information on FTE, please see "Fitch Rates Florida Turnpike Enterprise's Rev Bonds 'AA'; Outlook Stable" at [www.fitchratings.com](http://www.fitchratings.com).

## SECURITY

Turnpike revenue bonds are secured by a first lien on the net revenues of the turnpike.

## DATE OF RELEVANT COMMITTEE

07 October 2021

## REFERENCES FOR SUBSTANTIALLY MATERIAL SOURCE CITED AS KEY DRIVER OF RATING

The principal sources of information used in the analysis are described in the Applicable Criteria.

## ESG CONSIDERATIONS

Unless otherwise disclosed in this section, the highest level of ESG credit relevance is a score of '3'. This means ESG issues are credit-neutral or have only a minimal credit impact on the entity, either due to their nature or the way in which they are being managed by the entity. For more information on Fitch's ESG Relevance Scores, visit

[www.fitchratings.com/esg](http://www.fitchratings.com/esg)

## RATING ACTIONS

ENTITY / DEBT ⇅	RATING ⇅	PRIOR ⇅
Florida Department of Transportation (FL) [Turnpike]		
Florida Department of Transportation (FL) /Toll Revenues/1 LT	LT AA Rating Outlook Stable	Affirmed AA Rating Outlook Stable

[VIEW ADDITIONAL RATING DETAILS](#)

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## **APPLICABLE CRITERIA**

[Toll Roads, Bridges and Tunnels Rating Criteria \(pub. 26 Jun 2020\) \(including rating assumption sensitivity\)](#)

[Infrastructure and Project Finance Rating Criteria \(pub. 23 Aug 2021\) \(including rating assumption sensitivity\)](#)

## **APPLICABLE MODELS**

Numbers in parentheses accompanying applicable model(s) contain hyperlinks to criteria providing description of model(s).

GIG AST Model, v1.3.1 (1)

## **ADDITIONAL DISCLOSURES**

[Solicitation Status](#)

[Endorsement Policy](#)

## **ENDORSEMENT STATUS**

Florida Department of Transportation (FL)

EU Endorsed, UK Endorsed

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