



Stellus Capital Management (SCM)

Updated March 17th, 2023, by Josh Arnold

Key Metrics

Current Price:	\$14	5 Year CAGR Estimate:	10.8%	Market Cap:	\$276 M
Fair Value Price:	\$16	5 Year Growth Estimate:	-1.0%	Ex-Dividend Date:	03/30/23
% Fair Value:	86%	5 Year Valuation Multiple Estimate:	3.0%	Dividend Payment Date:	04/15/23
Dividend Yield:	11.4%	5 Year Price Target	\$15.41	Years Of Dividend Growth:	2
Dividend Risk Score:	F	Retirement Suitability Score:	C	Rating:	Buy

Overview & Current Events

Stellus Capital Management is a business development company, or BDC, that bills itself as a flexible source of capital for the middle market. The company provides capital solutions to companies with \$5 million to \$50 million of EBITDA and does so with a variety of instruments, the majority of which are debt. Stellus provides first lien, second lien, mezzanine, convertible debt, and equity investments to a diverse group of customers, generally at high yields, in the US and Canada. The company was formed in 2012, should produce about \$95 million in revenue for 2023, and has a \$276 million market cap.

Stellus reported fourth quarter and full-year earnings on February 28th, 2023, and results were better than expected on both revenue and earnings. The company noted adjusted net investment income per-share of \$1.38, which was five cents better than estimated. Total investment income, which is akin to revenue, was up almost 18% to \$75.1 million, and beat estimates by almost \$2 million.

The company noted a boost in net assets results from operations of \$14.5 million for the quarter, and \$33.6 million for the year, which equates to 74 cents per share and \$1.72 per share, respectively.

The company noted its portfolio of loans is 97% floating rate, while its liabilities are 65% fixed rate. This means that as rates rise, the company has a much larger increase in net interest income, but the reverse is true as well.

We see \$1.80 in NII-per-share for this year on strong 2022 results and outlook for 2023.

Stellus also boosted its monthly dividend to \$0.1333 per share, which is a massive 43% increase from the prior level, and represents its highest annualized payout for over a decade.

Growth on a Per-Share Basis

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2028
NII	\$1.33	\$1.34	\$1.33	\$1.39	\$1.21	\$1.42	\$1.23	\$1.13	\$1.12	\$1.46	\$1.80	\$1.71
DPS	\$1.43	\$1.36	\$1.36	\$1.36	\$1.36	\$1.36	\$1.36	\$1.09	\$1.08	\$1.36	\$1.60	\$1.60
Shares¹	12.1	12.3	12.5	12.5	14.9	16.0	18.9	19.5	19.5	19.7	20	22

Stellus, like most BDCs, has a difficult time growing NII. The combination of high funding costs (generally with debt and/or preferred stock) as well as varying yields on the company's debt portfolio, make it difficult to offset a rising share count over time. We're moving our growth estimate down from 2% annually to a decline of 1%, given the very high base of earnings for 2023. The company's floating rate portfolio and fixed rate liabilities mean that it stands to do very well in 2023, but we don't necessarily think that's sustainable.

We think the company's lower debt portfolio yield will bottom sometime soon and as Stellus is able to reset with new investments, its spreads should remain high for the foreseeable future. However, a possible headwind to this is interest rates declining off of currently elevated levels. The company's net assets continue to grow over time, but these gains have been largely offset by a rising share count. We think the share count will continue to be a headwind moving forward, and that Stellus will have a difficult time offsetting this with earnings gains. The company's recovery from the

¹ Share count in millions

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pandemic appears complete, but low interest rates and share issuances remain a constant headwind. We note Q4 results are supportive of higher NII estimates going forward, barring a big reduction in market interest rates.

Valuation Analysis

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Now	2028
Avg. P/NII	11.2	10.5	8.5	7.5	11.3	9.0	11.4	8.4	11.5	9.1	7.8	9.0
Avg. Yld.	9.6%	9.7%	12.0%	13.0%	9.9%	10.6%	9.7%	12.8%	8.4%	10.3%	11.4%	10.4%

Stellus has traded with an average price-to-NII ratio of ~10 in its relatively short history as a public company, and we assess fair value at 9 times NII. We note, however, that Stellus' valuation has moved somewhat erratically, trading for 7.5 times NII in 2016 and then 11.3 times the next year, for instance. We see the stock as undervalued today given it trades for 7.8 times NII, implying a tailwind from the valuation in the coming years.

The dividend yield is now 11.4%, which is above historical values. Stellus moved from a monthly dividend to a quarterly one, which accompanied the dividend cut from \$1.36 annually to \$1.00. It has since been reinstated as a monthly payout, and raised to \$1.60 annually. We currently believe Stellus can maintain its dividend payment for the foreseeable future, but also that room for further increases is minimal.

Safety, Quality, Competitive Advantage, & Recession Resiliency

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2028
Payout	108%	101%	102%	98%	112%	96%	106%	96%	96%	93%	89%	94%

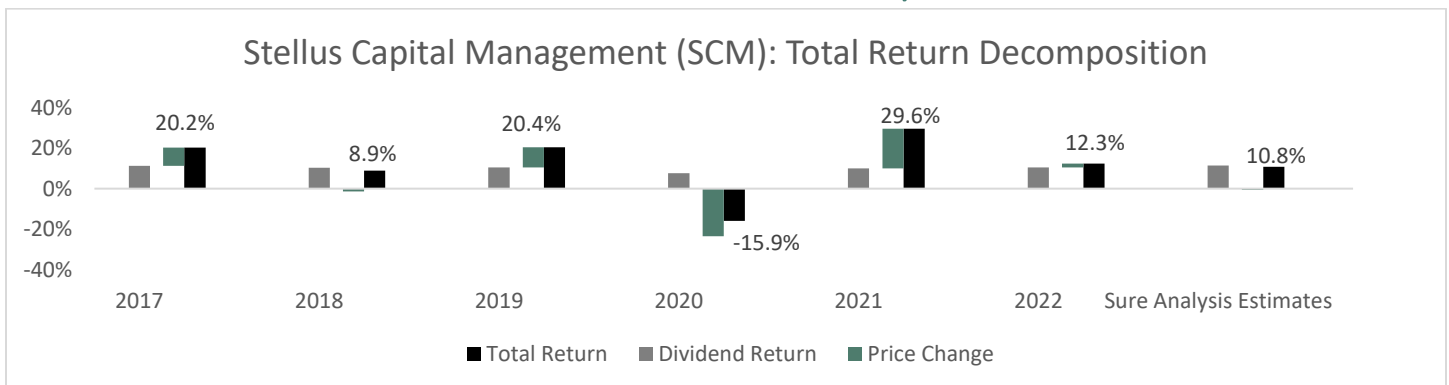
Stellus, like other BDCs, has no competitive advantages. It offers the same products as any other BDC to the same set of customers, so advantages are virtually impossible to achieve. In addition, BDCs suffer mightily during recessions because borrowers have a more difficult time meeting repayment timelines. Stellus wasn't around during the last recession, but we see it as having significant issues with NII generation during future recessions, although it seems to be holding up.

Stellus is required to pay virtually all its NII in distributions as a BDC, so the payout ratio will always be high. While the current payout should be safe for the time being, we note that the risk of lower rates means the payout is constantly at risk as well. We are currently not expecting another dividend cut, but it cannot be ruled out.

Final Thoughts & Recommendation

Total return potential comes in at 10.8% annually. Despite the inherent risk of owning a BDC, given the strong projected total returns, we are upgrading Stellus from hold to buy. The yield is very high at 11.4%, but we note the risks of owning a small BDC are high as well, so only investors with high-risk tolerances should consider Stellus. The valuation could drive a 3% tailwind, which could be partially offset by negative growth.

Total Return Breakdown by Year



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Income Statement Metrics

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Revenue	29	32	35	26	27	31	32	26	43	21
Gross Profit	25	27	29	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Gross Margin	85.6%	83.9%	83.4%	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
SG&A Exp.	7	7	7	4	5	4	4	5	5	5
Operating Profit	18	20	22	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Operating Margin	61.8%	63.2%	62.8%	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Net Profit	18	10	8	23	23	26	26	20	34	14
Net Margin	59.7%	31.5%	21.8%	87.7%	83.0%	84.3%	83.4%	78.0%	78.7%	66.7%
Free Cash Flow	(68)	(27)	(24)	9	19	(102)	(93)	(3)	(76)	(56)
Income Tax		0	0	(0)	(0)	1	1	1	4	1

Balance Sheet Metrics

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Total Assets	298	327	365	380	400	526	649	675	821	898
Cash & Equivalents	14	2	11	9	25	17	16	18	44	48
Accounts Receivable	0	0	0	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Total Liabilities	122	153	201	209	180	301	378	402	536	622
Accounts Payable	3	3	3	3	3	4	4	2	5	5
Long-Term Debt	119	148	196	203	174	292	366	393	518	604
Shareholder's Equity	176	174	165	171	220	225	271	273	285	276
LTD/E Ratio	0.68	0.85	1.19	1.19	0.79	1.30	1.35	1.44	1.82	2.19

Profitability & Per Share Metrics

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Return on Assets	---	3.3%	2.2%	6.2%	5.8%	5.7%	4.5%	3.1%	4.5%	1.7%
Return on Equity	10.0%	5.8%	4.5%	13.8%	11.6%	11.8%	10.7%	7.4%	12.0%	5.2%
ROIC	---	3.3%	2.2%	6.3%	5.9%	5.7%	4.6%	3.1%	4.6%	1.7%
Shares Out.	12.1	12.3	12.5	12.5	14.9	16.0	18.9	19.5	19.5	19.6
Revenue/Share	2.44	2.63	2.82	2.12	1.83	1.95	1.73	1.33	2.19	1.07
FCF/Share	-5.67	-2.21	-1.96	0.71	1.27	-6.42	-5.10	-0.18	-3.90	-2.88

Note: All figures in millions of U.S. Dollars unless per share or indicated otherwise.

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