



Stellus Capital Management (SCM)

Updated March 13th, 2024, by Josh Arnold

Key Metrics

Current Price:	\$13	5 Year CAGR Estimate:	11.8%	Market Cap:	\$312 M
Fair Value Price:	\$15	5 Year Growth Estimate:	-1.0%	Ex-Dividend Date:	03/27/24
% Fair Value:	84%	5 Year Valuation Multiple Estimate:	3.6%	Dividend Payment Date:	04/15/24
Dividend Yield:	12.3%	5 Year Price Target	\$15	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 \$100 million in revenue for 2024, and has a \$312 million market cap.

Stellus posted fourth quarter and full-year earnings on March 4th, 2024, and results were somewhat mixed. The BDC posted fiscal year adjusted NII of \$1.92, which beat estimates by 19 cents. Total investment income, which is akin to revenue, was up 41% year-over-year to \$106 million, and missed estimates by over \$5 million. Stellus noted that its loan portfolio is yielding 11.9% as of the end of the year.

Operating expenses for the year totaled \$64 million, up from \$47 million in 2022. The increase was driven by increased interest expense and income incentive fees. Base management fees totaled \$15.5 million, up slightly from \$14.8 million a year ago.

Net investment income was \$42.2 million, up from \$28.6 million in 2022. Stellus issued more than four million shares during the year, so on a per-share basis, earnings rose much less than they did on a dollar basis.

The company's investment portfolio had a net change in unrealized appreciation of \$2.8 million, which was a huge improvement over 2022's decline of nearly \$18 million. Net realized losses in 2023 came to \$30.2 million, a big deterioration from a \$3.7 million gain in 2022.

We start 2024 with an estimate of \$1.72 in NII-per-share, part of which has to do with the much higher share count.

Growth on a Per-Share Basis

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2029
NII	\$1.34	\$1.33	\$1.39	\$1.21	\$1.42	\$1.23	\$1.13	\$1.12	\$1.46	\$1.92	\$1.72	\$1.64
DPS	\$1.36	\$1.36	\$1.36	\$1.36	\$1.36	\$1.36	\$1.09	\$1.08	\$1.36	\$1.60	\$1.60	\$1.60
Shares¹	12.3	12.5	12.5	14.9	16.0	18.9	19.5	19.5	19.7	24.1	25	35

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 up from -4% annually to a decline of 1%, given the lower base of earnings.

Stellus has reset much of its investment portfolio with higher rates, leading to a very strong portfolio yield. 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.

¹ Share count in millions

Disclosure: This analyst has no position in the security discussed in this research report, and no plans to initiate one in the next 72 hours.



Stellus Capital Management (SCM)

Updated March 13th, 2024, by Josh Arnold

Valuation Analysis

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Now	2029
Avg. P/NII	10.5	8.5	7.5	11.3	9.0	11.4	8.4	11.5	9.1	6.7	7.6	9.0
Avg. Yld.	9.7%	12.0%	13.0%	9.9%	10.6%	9.7%	12.8%	8.4%	10.3%	12.5%	12.3%	10.9%

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 7.6 times NII, implying a meaningful tailwind from the valuation in the coming years.

The dividend yield is now 12.3%, which is in line with 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	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2029
Payout	101%	102%	98%	112%	96%	106%	96%	96%	93%	83%	93%	98%

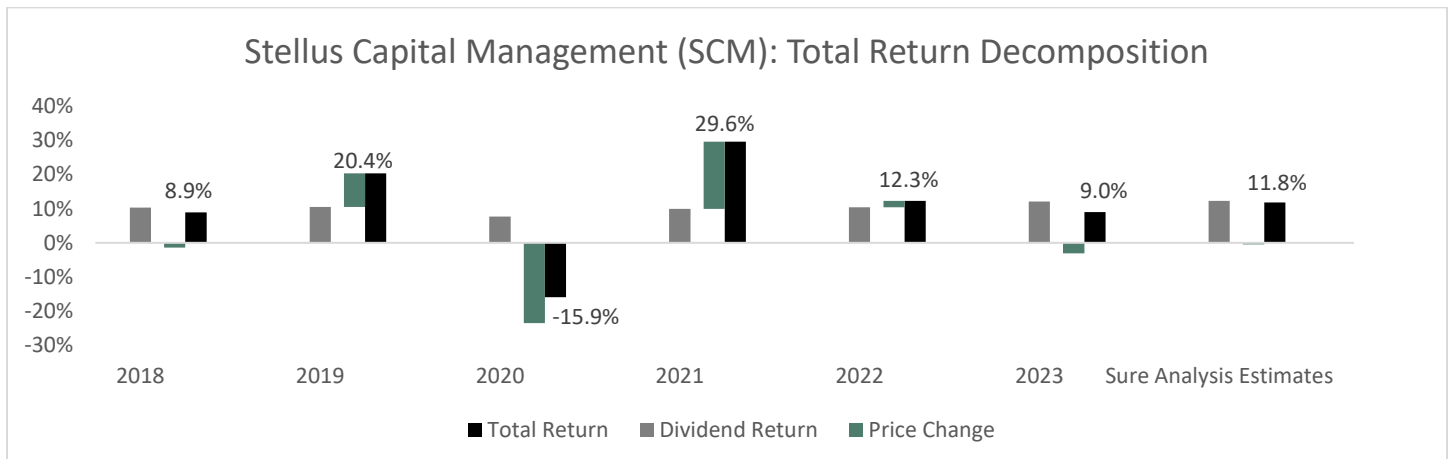
Stellus, like other BDCs, has no competitive advantages. It offers the same products as any other BDC to the same set of customers, so advantages are virtually impossible to achieve. In addition, BDCs suffer mightily during recessions because borrowers have a more difficult time meeting repayment timelines. 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 11.8% annually. Given the higher projected returns, boosting the stock from hold to buy. The yield is very high at 12.3%, 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 3.6% tailwind, which could be offset by negative NII growth.

Total Return Breakdown by Year



[Click here to rate and review this research report. Your feedback is important to us.](#)

Disclosure: This analyst has no position in the security discussed in this research report, and no plans to initiate one in the next 72 hours.



Stellus Capital Management (SCM)

Updated March 13th, 2024, by Josh Arnold

Income Statement Metrics

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Revenue	32	35	26	27	31	32	26	43	21	21
Gross Profit	27	29	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Gross Margin	83.9%	83.4%	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
SG&A Exp.	7	7	4	5	4	4	5	5	5	6
Operating Profit	20	22	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Operating Margin	63.2%	62.8%	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Net Profit	10	8	23	23	26	26	20	34	14	18
Net Margin	31.5%	21.8%	87.7%	83.0%	84.3%	83.4%	78.0%	78.7%	66.7%	85.7%
Free Cash Flow	(27)	(24)	9	19	(102)	(93)	(3)	(76)	(56)	(17)
Income Tax	0	0	(0)	(0)	1	1	1	4	1	(2)

Balance Sheet Metrics

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total Assets	327	365	380	400	526	649	675	821	898	908
Cash & Equivalents	2	11	9	25	17	16	18	44	48	26
Accounts Receivable	0	0	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Total Liabilities	153	201	209	180	301	378	402	536	622	588
Accounts Payable	3	3	3	3	4	4	2	5	5	5
Long-Term Debt	148	196	203	174	292	366	393	518	604	576
Shareholder's Equity	174	165	171	220	225	271	273	285	276	320
LTD/E Ratio	0.85	1.19	1.19	0.79	1.30	1.35	1.44	1.82	2.19	1.80

Profitability & Per Share Metrics

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Return on Assets	3.3%	2.2%	6.2%	5.8%	5.7%	4.5%	3.1%	4.5%	1.7%	1.9%
Return on Equity	5.8%	4.5%	13.8%	11.6%	11.8%	10.7%	7.4%	12.0%	5.2%	5.9%
ROIC	3.3%	2.2%	6.3%	5.9%	5.7%	4.6%	3.1%	4.6%	1.7%	2.0%
Shares Out.	12.3	12.5	12.5	14.9	16.0	18.9	19.5	19.5	19.6	22.0
Revenue/Share	2.63	2.82	2.12	1.83	1.95	1.73	1.33	2.19	1.07	0.96
FCF/Share	-2.21	-1.96	0.71	1.27	-6.42	-5.10	-0.18	-3.90	-2.88	-0.78

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

Disclaimer

Nothing presented herein is, or is intended to constitute, specific investment advice. Nothing in this research report should be construed as a recommendation to follow any investment strategy or allocation. Any forward-looking statements or forecasts are based on assumptions and actual results are expected to vary from any such statements or forecasts. No reliance should be placed on any such statements or forecasts when making any investment decision. While Sure Dividend has used reasonable efforts to obtain information from reliable sources, we make no representations or warranties as to the accuracy, reliability or completeness of third-party information presented herein. No guarantee of investment performance is being provided and no inference to the contrary should be made. There is a risk of loss from an investment in marketable securities. Past performance is not a guarantee of future performance.