Congress Asset Management Company

Economic and Market Outlook

Fourth Quarter 2020

In New England, the inevitable change of seasons is upon us. We are three months closer to a vaccine, but the pandemic's shadow is long, casting shade on the economy. The final stretch of the most contentious presidential election in generations adds to the uncertainty, and for some, a feeling of despondency and exhaustion. The financial markets appear to have ignored it all with stocks staging a frantic rally since March and bond yields anchored near historic lows.

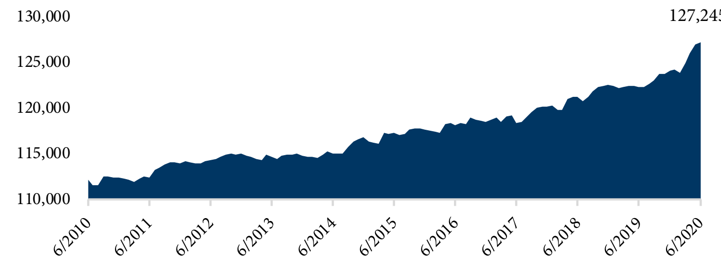
The incongruity of the strong stock market and the uneven, tenuous economic recovery stands out. Investors ignored the pandemic's path and relied instead on the massive stimulus thrown at economies globally since March. The packages were intended to provide both a cushion and path to a stronger economy in 2021. The virus, however, is not deterred by monetary programs and cannot simply be willed away. The anticipated autumn recurrence has arrived accompanied by the now familiar debates about defining essential activities and mustering additional fiscal relief to offset the economic effects of the shutdowns. The path forward is never certain but is unusually precarious now.

Much about the virus and reactions to it have been politicized and will remain so through the election. The financial markets, however, are weighing the intensity of the virus's second wave with the stronger than anticipated summer economic reports. New case clusters appear overwhelmingly to be affecting younger cohorts as schools and colleges are reopening to mixed success. However, the strain on hospitals and the medical system is being better managed and we are doing a better job protecting the vulnerable. Moreover, housing, consumer net worth, retail sales, and durable goods orders all indicate an economy expanding off deep lows.

Absent a severe virus resurgence, the economy should continue to gradually heal. The recovery's foundation was laid by the dual response of the Federal Reserve Bank (Fed) and the federal stimulus packages enacted in the spring. Most Fed programs are slow acting and are intended as long-term stimulus and fiscal programs target short-term impacts. To help bolster confidence and provide clarity, Federal Reserve Chairman Powell announced plans to keep short term rates anchored at under 0.25%, possibly through 2023. This unprecedented signaling should embolden long term investment as intermediate term interest rates are below inflation.

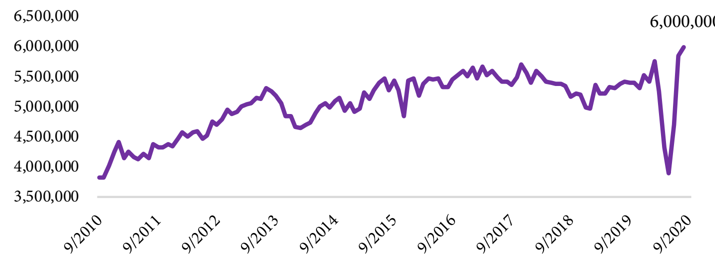
The housing market has emerged as an area of strength. The pandemic has altered how people use their homes and the value they place on personal space. This behavioral shift combined with historically low interest rates and a secular trend of increased household formation has resulted in robust housing demand. Home sales are up double digits over last year with 70% of existing homes sold within a month of listing. Along with home sales comes furnishings, paint, and re-modeling. This trend is unlikely to fade until interest rates rise.

Household Formations 2010-2020



Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis

Existing Home Sales 2010-2020



Sources: FactSet, National Association of Realtors

Inflation remains non-existent and is unlikely to appear until the employment market improves. The official unemployment rate has improved to about 9%, a far cry from the heady pre-pandemic reading of under 4%. Through September the recently unemployed had been bolstered by federal stimulus packages, which helped keep consumer spending at levels consistent with last year. That extra support has now waned. While the combination of low interest rates with negligible inflation should sustain the recovery at current rates, an expanded recovery demands a better labor environment. Both presidential aspirants have promised stimulus packages to address employment issues.

This presidential election is notable for the level of vitriol it has engendered. But we are faced with uncertain agendas every four years. This is not unusual. Both candidates appear to recognize the uniqueness of the pandemic and its effects on our economy. Both will push new stimulus plans once elected. Voters have a clear choice in temperament, tax policy, domestic priorities, and international relations but primary for both candidates is enhancing growth as soon as possible. As happens after every presidential election, U.S. companies will adjust. Our process, often messy, forces companies to adapt and respond to incentives. In this sense, 2020 is little different from other presidential election cycles.

On the whole, 2020 is unique because of the pandemic that indirectly caused a rare synchronized, global recession. A full recovery including large social gatherings and care-free travel is unlikely until vaccines are approved and widely available. In the U.S. alone there are four large scale, stage three vaccine trials underway. Wide scale adoption is likely in the first half of 2021.

The economic recovery remains tenuous and in the U.S. is driven by the consumer who has shifted spending habits. Manufacturing has been slower to recover but inventories have been drawn down to unsustainably low levels suggesting replenishment should be additive over the next few quarters. This unspectacular economic trend will be supported over the longer term by the Fed programs. Most likely, more fiscal stimulus is also on the way, although its magnitude and timing are uncertain. Stocks remain the preferred asset class given low bond yields and the potential of a stronger economy in 2021.

Investment Oversight Committee
Daniel A. Lagan, CFA
President & Chief Investment Officer

CONGRESS ASSET MANAGEMENT COMPANY

2 Seaport Lane Boston MA 02210 800.234.4516 www.congressasset.com

This material is for information purposes only. Any forecasts, figures, opinions, statements of financial market trends or investment techniques and strategies expressed are, unless otherwise stated, Congress Asset Management's own at the date of this document. They are considered to be reliable at the time of writing, may not necessarily be all-inclusive and are not guaranteed as to accuracy. They may be subject to change without reference or notification to you. The value of investments and the income from them can fall as well as rise and investors may not get back the full amount invested. Past performance is not a guide to the future.