

NiSource Inc. (NI)

\$23.88 (As of 03/24/21)

Price Target (6-12 Months): **\$25.00**

Long Term: 6-12 Months

Zacks Recommendation:

Neutral

(Since: 09/22/20)

Prior Recommendation: Underperform

Short Term: 1-3 Months

Zacks Rank: (1-5)

3-Hold

Zacks Style Scores:

VGM:C

Value: B

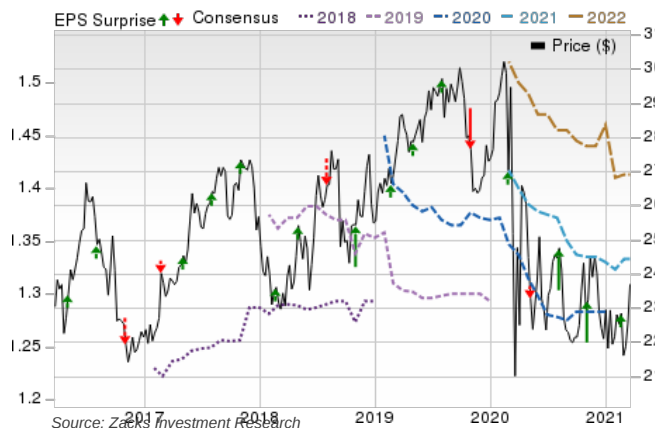
Growth: D

Momentum: B

Summary

Nearly 75% of NiSource's investment is recouped within 18 months through rate, which provides necessary funds to strengthen its infrastructure. The company plans to invest \$40 billion in the long-term utility infrastructure modernization program. The ongoing investments will further boost the reliability of natural gas and electric operations and help the company offer efficient services to its expanding customer base. Also, the utility continues to add clean power assets. NiSource's shares have outperformed the industry in the past three months. However, the utility is exposed to variability in cash flows associated with volatility in natural gas prices. Despite efforts made to maintain its assets, the old machineries may turn defunct and cause unplanned outages. The pandemic lowered demand from the commercial and the industrial customers.

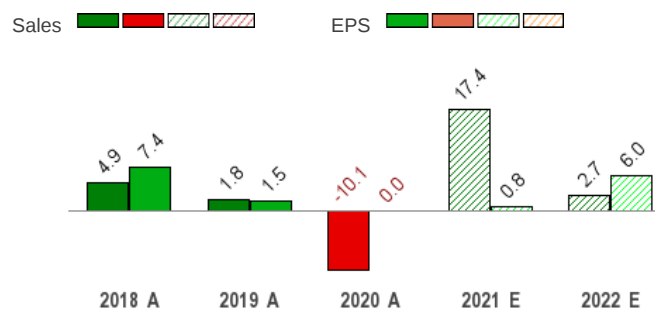
Price, Consensus & Surprise



Data Overview

52-Week High-Low	\$27.24 - \$21.09
20-Day Average Volume (Shares)	5,467,780
Market Cap	\$9.4 B
Year-To-Date Price Change	4.1%
Beta	0.30
Dividend / Dividend Yield	\$0.88 / 3.7%
Industry	Utility - Electric Power
Zacks Industry Rank	Bottom 22% (198 out of 254)

Sales and EPS Growth Rates (Y/Y %)



Last EPS Surprise	6.3%
Last Sales Surprise	-18.3%
EPS F1 Estimate 4-Week Change	0.5%
Expected Report Date	05/05/2021
Earnings ESP	-21.1%

P/E TTM	18.1
P/E F1	18.0
PEG F1	2.9
P/S TTM	2.0

Sales Estimates (millions of \$)

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Annual*
2022					5,644 E
2021	1,923 E	1,125 E	1,004 E	1,443 E	5,496 E
2020	1,606 A	963 A	903 A	1,211 A	4,682 A

EPS Estimates

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Annual*
2022					\$1.41 E
2021	\$0.93 E	\$0.18 E	\$0.10 E	\$0.34 E	\$1.33 E
2020	\$0.76 A	\$0.13 A	\$0.09 A	\$0.34 A	\$1.32 A

*Quarterly figures may not add up to annual.

The data in the charts and tables, including the Zacks Consensus EPS and sales estimates, is as of 03/24/2021. The report's text and the analyst-provided price target are as of 03/25/2021.

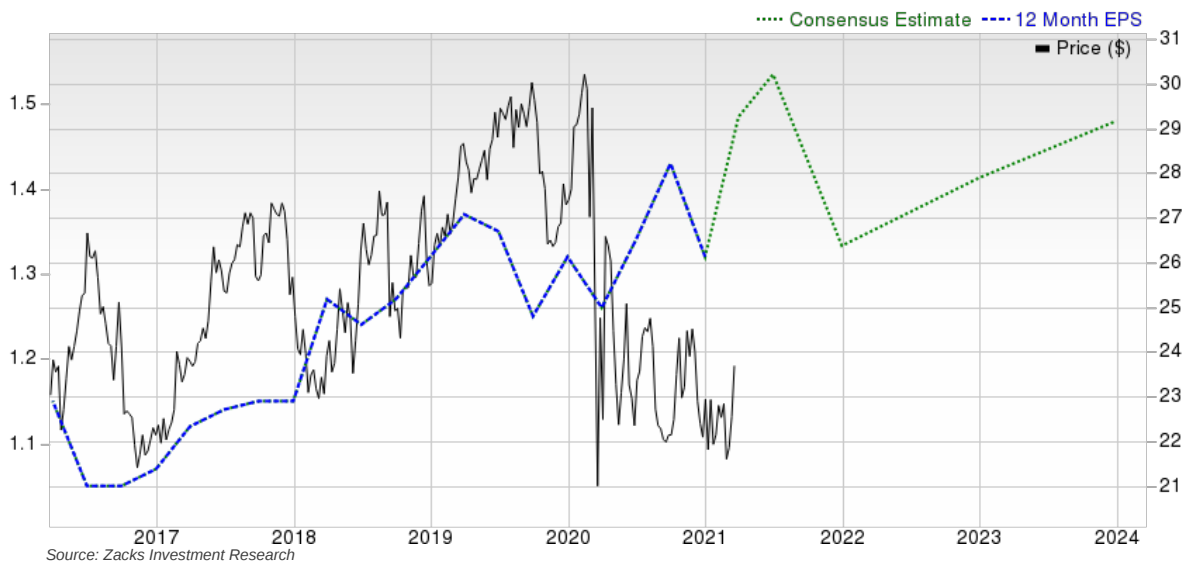
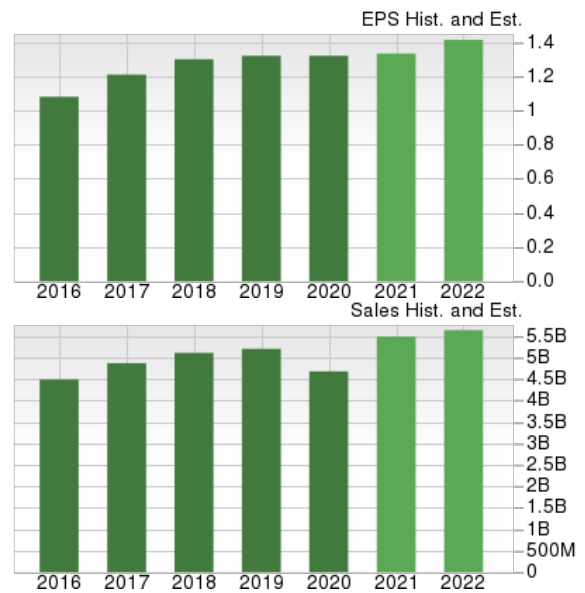
Overview

Merrillville, IN-based NiSource Inc. was founded in 1912. The company is an energy holding company and together with its subsidiaries provides natural gas, electricity and other products and services in the U.S. Its operating subsidiaries deliver energy to roughly 4 million customers in seven states — **Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Kentucky, Maryland, Indiana and Massachusetts.**

NiSource has one of the nation's largest natural gas distribution networks as measured by number of customers. NiSource's principal subsidiary is NiSource Gas Distribution Group, Inc., which is a natural gas distribution holding company. The company generates the majority of its operating income from its rate-regulated businesses.

NiSource's reportable segments are: **Gas Distribution** Operations serves around 3.5 million customers in seven states and operates about 60,000 miles of pipeline. Through its wholly-owned subsidiary NiSource Gas Distribution Group, it owns six distribution subsidiaries that provide natural gas to approximately 2.7 million residential, commercial and industrial customers in six states. In addition, through Northern Indiana Public Service Company (NIPSCO), this segment distributes natural gas to around 839,000 customers in northern Indiana. **Electric** Operations segment generates, transmits and distributes electricity through its subsidiary to about 476,000 customers in 20 counties in northern Indiana. It operates two coal-fired electric generating stations, three gas-fired generating units and two hydroelectric plants. This segment has a total operating capacity of 2,847 megawatts (MW). In May 2018, NIPSCO completed the retirement of two coal-burning units at Bailly Generating Station, IN. These units had a generating capacity of approximately 460 MW.

Gas Distribution Operations, Electric Operations, and Corporate and others contributed \$3,168.4 million, \$1,532.3 million and \$1.8 million to total revenues in 2020, respectively.



Reasons To Buy:

- ▲ In the past three months, shares of NiSource have gained 7.1% outperforming the industry's 1% rise. The company is working on long-term utility infrastructure modernization program. In 2019, the utility invested nearly \$1.9 billion across the gas and electric utilities. NiSource made capital investments of \$1.8 billion in 2020. The company has estimated \$40-billion (\$10 billion higher than the previous guidance) long-term infrastructure investment opportunities, which is expected to drive earnings beyond 2024.

NiSource's consistent investments to strengthen its existing infrastructure, and focus on clean energy are going to drive its performance.

Over the 2021-2024 time frame, the company is going to invest in the range of \$9.5-\$10.6 billion. NiSource has a 100% regulated utility business model. Its planned regulated investments will improve reliability and safety of its services and provide efficient electric and natural gas services to its increasing customer base. More than 75% of NiSource's capital expenditure starts to provide return in less than 18 months of investment. This will drive earnings per share at a 7-9% CAGR in the 2021-2024 time frame.

- ▲ NiSource, through cost-saving initiatives, is expecting to lower operating and maintenance (O&M) expenses by nearly 8% in 2021 from 2020 levels. The cost-saving efforts are expected to keep O&M expenses relatively flat in the 2011-2024 time frame. These cost-saving measures will definitely boost margins of the company over the long term. The company's cost-management efforts enabled it to offset the negative impact of COVID-19 on its performance.

- ▲ It is set to replace 80% of its coal-generating sources by 2023 and 100% by 2028 with reliable and cleaner options at lower costs. The company aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 90% within 2030 from the 2005 levels and save more than \$4 billion for customers of more than 30 years.

The company will retire its 1,300 MW R.M. Schahfer Generating Station by 2023 and replace the capacity with clean and renewable energy source. NiSource has plans to invest in the range of \$1.8-\$2 billion, primarily in 2022 and 2023, to meet its renewable goals. The company through JVs (joint ventures) and PPA agreement is scheduled to add nearly 1,030 MW of clean generation to its existing portfolio by 2023 end.

- ▲ As of Dec 31, 2020, NiSource's long-term debt amounted to \$9,219.8 million compared with \$7,856.2 million as of Dec 31, 2019. Its times interest earned ratio was 0.9 for the fourth quarter, up from 0.2 in third quarter. The company currently has \$1.7 billion liquidity available and \$2.1 billion of committed facilities, which are adequate to meet debt obligations.

The sale of Columbia Gas of Massachusetts was completed in October 2020 and the proceeds from the sale of \$1.1 billion were utilized by the company to pay down-term loan and other short-term debt. As a result, its total debt to capital ratio declined to 62.54% in the fourth quarter of 2020, from 66.19% sequentially. It does not have any significant long-term debt refinancing needs until 2024. Furthermore, according to credit rating agencies like Moody's, S&P and Fitch, the company has a stable credit score.

Reasons To Sell:

▼ The company along with its utility customers is exposed to variability in cash flows associated with natural gas purchases and volatility in natural gas prices. The company purchases natural gas for sale as well as delivery to retail, commercial and industrial customers. Variability in the market price of gas can impact their rates.

▼ NiSource also faces the risk of ageing infrastructure that needs regular replacement. Despite efforts made by NiSource to properly maintain its assets through inspection, scheduled maintenance and capital investment, the old machineries can falter, resulting in unplanned outages. These are likely to have an adverse impact on operation, impacting the utility revenues and margins.

Post the Greater Lawrence incident, the company has increased safety-related spending and higher financing costs due the accident impacted its top line.

▼ NiSource is presently engaged in a number of capital projects, including environmental improvements to its electric generating stations, as well as the construction of new transmission facilities. However, there is always an inherent risk associated with the timely completion of projects and within budget too. Delay in completion increases capital costs and stretches the time limit of the company's expected benefit from these projects.

Aging infrastructure, adverse impact of COVID-19 on demand and volatility in natural gas prices might deter NiSource's growth.

Last Earnings Report

NiSource's Q4 Earnings Beat Estimates, Revenues Miss

NiSource delivered net operating earnings of 34 cents per share in fourth-quarter 2020, which surpassed the Zacks Consensus Estimate of 32 cents by 6.3%. However, the same declined 24.4% from the year-ago quarter's figure.

On a GAAP basis, the company reported earnings of 18 cents per share against the loss of 41 cents in the year-ago quarter.

Quarter Ending 12/2020

Report Date	Feb 17, 2021
Sales Surprise	-18.29%
EPS Surprise	6.25%
Quarterly EPS	0.34
Annual EPS (TTM)	1.32

Total Revenues

NiSource generated total net revenues of \$1,210 million in the fourth quarter, which missed the Zacks Consensus Estimate of \$1,482 million by 18.4%. Further, the top line dropped 12.7% from \$1,385.4 million reported in the year-ago quarter.

Highlights of the Release

Total operating expenses in the quarter under review fell 11.2% year over year to \$ 954.9 million.

Total interest expenses in the reported quarter decreased 8.3% from the prior-year quarter's figure to \$85.6 million.

Financial Update

NiSource's cash and cash equivalents as of Dec 31, 2020 were \$116.5 million, down from \$139.3 million as of Dec 31, 2019.

Long-term debts (excluding amounts due within a year) as of Dec 31 were \$9,219.8 million compared with \$7,856.2 million as of Dec 31, 2019.

Net cash flows from operating activities in 2020 were \$1,104 million compared with \$1,583.3 million in 2019.

Outlook

NiSource reaffirmed its 2021 non-GAAP net operating earnings in the range of \$1.28-\$1.36 per share. Also, it expects net operating earnings per share to see a CAGR of 7-9% from 2021 through 2024 including near-term annual growth of 5-7% through 2023.

During the same time frame, the utility anticipates investing \$1.9-\$2.2 billion annually in growth, safety and modernization along with \$1.8-\$2 billion investments in renewable generation assets.

Recent News

NiSource's Arm Inks Two PPA & BTA to Advance Clean Energy- Mar 23, 2021

NiSource's subsidiary NIPSCO recently entered into a long-term PPA and a build & transfer agreement (BTA) for two renewable energy projects in Indiana with EDP Renewables North America LLC (EDPR NA), the unit of EDP Renewables SA (EDPR). Following the completion of construction, NIPSCO will enter into a JV.

The PPA will facilitate the construction of the 204-MW Indiana Crossroads II Wind Farm in White County (whose complete capacity is owned by NIPSCO). The BTA will help set up the 200-MW Indiana Crossroads Solar Park. The first project is likely to begin operations in 2023, while the latter in 2022.

Prior to these, the subsidiaries had together executed BTAs for two other wind farms in White County, namely the 302-MW Indiana Crossroads I Wind Farm which is currently under construction, and the 102-MW Rosewater Wind Farm which is fully operational.

Both the units are undertaking consistent efforts to supply reliable energy to customers in Indiana along with supporting transition to clean energy. This, in turn, is creating economic benefits in terms of low-cost electricity, increased economic activity and additional revenues for public services for White County.

Valuation

NiSource shares are up 4.1% in the year-to-date period but down 2.7% over the trailing 12-month period. Stocks in the Zacks sub-industry was down 0.9% but the Zacks Utility sector was up 0.3% in the year-to-date period. Over the past year, the Zacks sub-industry is up 10.1% and sector is up 15.1%.

The S&P 500 index is up 4.5% in the year-to-date period and 50.9% in the past year.

The stock is currently trading at 17.67X forward 12-month earnings, which compares to 15.02X for the Zacks sub-industry, 13.49X for the Zacks sector and 22.13X for the S&P 500 index.

Over the past five years, the stock has traded as high as 23.93X and as low as 15.40X, with a 5-year median of 19.80X. Our Neutral recommendation indicates that the stock will perform in-line with the market. Our \$25 price target reflects 18.50X forward 12-month earnings.

The table below shows summary valuation data for NI

Valuation Multiples -NI					
		Stock	Sub-Industry	Sector	S&P 500
P/E F12M	Current	17.67	15.02	13.49	22.13
	5-Year High	23.93	15.63	15.16	23.8
	5-Year Low	15.4	10.69	11.4	15.3
	5-Year Median	19.8	12.62	13.53	17.9
P/S F12M	Current	1.69	2.14	2.57	4.52
	5-Year High	2.08	2.84	3.23	4.52
	5-Year Low	1.38	2.08	1.81	3.21
	5-Year Median	1.73	2.37	2.18	3.69
P/B TTM	Current	1.85	1.97	3.06	6.6
	5-Year High	2.26	2.47	3.92	6.71
	5-Year Low	1.53	1.54	2.37	3.83
	5-Year Median	1.97	2.06	2.75	4.97

As of 3/24/2021

Source: Zacks Investment Research

Industry Analysis Zacks Industry Rank: Bottom 22% (198 out of 254)



Top Peers

Company (Ticker)	Rec	Rank
Ameren Corporation (AEE)	Neutral	3
Avangrid, Inc. (AGR)	Neutral	3
Comp En De Mn Cemig ADS (CIG)	Neutral	3
CMS Energy Corporation (CMS)	Neutral	3
DTE Energy Company (DTE)	Neutral	3
Alliant Energy Corporation (LNT)	Neutral	4
Pinnacle West Capital Corporation (PNW)	Neutral	4
Companhia Paranaense de Energia COPEL (ELP)	Underperform	4

The positions listed should not be deemed a recommendation to buy, hold or sell.

Industry Comparison Industry: Utility - Electric Power				Industry Peers		
	NI	X Industry	S&P 500	DTE	ELP	LNT
Zacks Recommendation (Long Term)	Neutral	-	-	Neutral	Underperform	Neutral
Zacks Rank (Short Term)	3	-	-	3	4	4
VGM Score	C	-	-	B	A	D
Market Cap	9.36 B	9.39 B	28.51 B	25.15 B	NA	13.32 B
# of Analysts	3	3	13	6	1	2
Dividend Yield	3.69%	3.29%	1.41%	3.32%	4.29%	3.02%
Value Score	B	-	-	B	B	C
Cash/Price	0.01	0.06	0.06	0.02	NA	0.00
EV/EBITDA	17.99	10.67	15.86	11.67	NA	13.89
PEG F1	2.94	3.25	2.30	3.23	NA	3.55
P/B	1.85	1.60	3.82	2.00	0.84	2.34
P/CF	7.05	7.64	15.83	8.76	3.50	10.84
P/E F1	18.30	18.12	21.27	18.32	10.81	20.71
P/S TTM	2.00	2.02	3.23	2.07	NA	3.90
Earnings Yield	5.57%	5.50%	4.64%	5.45%	9.17%	4.84%
Debt/Equity	1.86	1.09	0.67	1.51	0.36	1.19
Cash Flow (\$/share)	3.39	4.22	6.78	14.90	0.34	4.92
Growth Score	D	-	-	C	A	F
Historical EPS Growth (3-5 Years)	5.70%	5.16%	9.32%	7.00%	27.89%	8.91%
Projected EPS Growth (F1/F0)	1.01%	4.01%	14.55%	-0.93%	-58.27%	5.97%
Current Cash Flow Growth	6.36%	6.12%	0.61%	15.31%	30.16%	8.75%
Historical Cash Flow Growth (3-5 Years)	9.72%	5.99%	7.32%	10.26%	9.33%	8.49%
Current Ratio	0.73	0.79	1.39	1.30	1.18	0.68
Debt/Capital	61.23%	51.87%	41.42%	60.15%	26.62%	53.48%
Net Margin	-0.38%	8.99%	10.59%	11.23%	20.24%	18.28%
Return on Equity	10.89%	9.34%	14.75%	11.36%	18.93%	10.88%
Sales/Assets	0.21	0.21	0.51	0.28	0.43	0.20
Projected Sales Growth (F1/F0)	17.38%	3.04%	6.95%	3.04%	0.00%	0.00%
Momentum Score	B	-	-	B	A	A
Daily Price Change	1.53%	0.00%	0.03%	1.36%	-6.98%	0.47%
1-Week Price Change	5.06%	0.63%	-0.30%	2.02%	16.55%	1.27%
4-Week Price Change	7.66%	3.60%	0.23%	5.35%	5.08%	12.18%
12-Week Price Change	5.90%	1.54%	7.22%	9.08%	-16.20%	5.04%
52-Week Price Change	4.60%	22.20%	61.36%	41.14%	26.58%	20.69%
20-Day Average Volume (Shares)	5,467,780	455,129	2,433,322	979,318	14,947,966	1,925,854
EPS F1 Estimate 1-Week Change	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.05%	0.00%	0.00%
EPS F1 Estimate 4-Week Change	0.50%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
EPS F1 Estimate 12-Week Change	-0.12%	0.00%	2.13%	0.13%	-1.77%	-0.58%
EPS Q1 Estimate Monthly Change	-17.41%	0.00%	0.00%	-3.94%	NA	0.00%

Source: Zacks Investment Research

Zacks Stock Rating System

We offer two rating systems that take into account investors' holding horizons: Zacks Rank and Zacks Recommendation. Each provides valuable insights into the future profitability of the stock and can be used separately or in combination with each other depending on your investment style.

Zacks Recommendation

The Zacks Recommendation aims to predict performance over the next 6 to 12 months. The foundation for the quantitatively determined Zacks Recommendation is trends in the company's estimate revisions and earnings outlook. The Zacks Recommendation is broken down into 3 Levels; Outperform, Neutral and Underperform. Unlike many Wall Street firms, we maintain a balance between the number of Outperform and Neutral recommendations. Our team of 70 analysts are fully versed in the benefits of earnings estimate revisions and how that is harnessed through the Zacks quantitative rating system. But we have given our analysts the ability to override the Zacks Recommendation for the 1200 stocks that they follow. The reason for the analyst over-rides is that there are often factors such as valuation, industry conditions and management effectiveness that a trained investment professional can spot better than a quantitative model.

Zacks Rank

The Zacks Rank is our short-term rating system that is most effective over the one- to three-month holding horizon. The underlying driver for the quantitatively-determined Zacks Rank is the same as the Zacks Recommendation, and reflects trends in earnings estimate revisions.

Zacks Style Scores

The Zacks Style Score is as a complementary indicator to the Zacks rating system, giving investors a way to focus on the highest rated stocks that best fit their own stock picking preferences.

Academic research has proven that stocks with the best Value, Growth and Momentum characteristics outperform the market. The Zacks Style Scores rate stocks on each of these individual styles and assigns a rating of A, B, C, D and F. We also produce the VGM Score (V for Value, G for Growth and M for Momentum), which combines the weighted average of the individual Style Scores into one score. This is perfectly suited for those who want their stocks to have the best scores across the board.

Value Score	B
Growth Score	D
Momentum Score	B
VGM Score	C

As an investor, you want to buy stocks with the highest probability of success. That means buying stocks with a Zacks Recommendation of Outperform, which also has a Style Score of an A or a B.

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Returns quoted represent past performance which is no guarantee of future results. Investment returns and principal value will fluctuate so that when shares are redeemed, they may be worth more or less than their original cost. Current performance may be higher or lower than the performance shown.

Investing involves risk; principal loss is possible. There is no guarantee that companies that can issue dividends will declare, continue to pay or increase dividends.

Glossary of Terms and Definitions

52-Week High-Low: The range of the highest and lowest prices at which a stock has traded during the past year. This range is determined based on the stock's daily closing price which may differ from the intra-day high or low. Many investors use it as a technical indicator to determine a stock's current value and future price movement. The idea here is that if price breaks out from the 52-week range, in either direction, the momentum may continue in the same direction.

20-Day Average Volume (Shares): The average number of shares of a company traded in a day over the last 20 days. It is a direct indication of a security's overall liquidity. The higher the average daily trading volume, the easier it is to enter or exit the stock at a desired price with more buyers and sellers being available.

Daily Price Change: This is the percentage difference between a trading day's closing price and the prior trading day's closing price. This item is updated at 9 p.m. EST each day.

1-Week Price Change: This is the percentage change in a stock's closing price over the last 5 trading days. This change reflects the collective buying and selling sentiment over the 1-week period.

A strong weekly price increase for the stock, especially when accompanied by increased volume, is an indication of it gaining momentum.

4-Week Price Change: This is the percentage change in a stock's closing price over the last 20 trading days or past 4 weeks. This is a medium-term price change metric and an indication of the stock gaining momentum.

12-Week Price Change: This is the percentage change of a stock's closing price over the last 60 trading days or past 12 weeks. Similar to 4-week price change, this is a medium-term price change metric. It shows whether a stock has been enjoying strong investor demand, or if it has been in consolidation, or distress over this period.

52-Week Price Change: This is the percentage change in a stock's closing price over the last 260 trading days or past 52 weeks. This long-term price change metric is a good reference point for investors. Some investors seek stocks with the best percentage price change over the last 52 weeks, expecting the momentum to continue.

Market Cap: The number of outstanding common shares of a company times its latest price per share. This figure represents a company's size, which indicates various characteristics, including price stability and risk, in which investors could be interested.

Year-To-Date Price Change: Change in a stock's daily closing price in the period of time beginning the first day of the current calendar year through to the previous trading day.

of Analysts: Number of EPS estimates used in calculating the current-quarter consensus. These estimates come from the brokerage analysts tracking this stock. However, the number of such analysts tracking this stock may not match the number of estimates, as all brokerage analysts may not come up with an estimate or provide it to us.

Beta: A measure of risk commonly used to compare the volatility of a stock to the overall market. The S&P 500 Index is the base for calculating beta and carries a value of 1. A stock with beta below 1 is less risky than the market as a whole. And a stock with beta above 1 is riskier.

Dividend: The portion of earnings a company is expected to distribute to its common shareholders in the next 12 months for each share they own. Dividends are usually paid quarterly. Dividend payments reflect positively on a company and help maintain investors' trust. Investors typically find dividend-paying stocks appealing because the dividend adds to any market price appreciation to result in higher return on investment (ROI). Moreover, a steady or increasing dividend payment provides investors a cushion in a down market.

Dividend Yield: The ratio of a company's annual dividend to its share price. The annual dividend used in the ratio is calculated based on the most recent dividend paid by the company. Dividend yield is an estimate of the dividend-only return from a stock in the next 12 months. Since dividend itself doesn't change frequently, dividend yield usually changes with a stock's price movement. As a result, often an unusually high dividend yield is a result of weak stock price.

S&P 500 Index: The Standard & Poor's 500 (S&P 500) Index is an unmanaged group of securities considered to be representative of the stock market in general. It is a market-capitalization-weighted index of stocks of the 500 largest U.S. companies. Each stock's weight in the index is proportionate to its market value.

Industry: One of the 250+ groups that Zacks classifies all stocks into based on the nature of business. These groups are termed as expanded (aka "X") industries and map to their respective (economic) sectors; Zacks has 16 sectors.

Zacks Industry Rank: The Zacks Industry Rank is determined by calculating the average Zacks Rank for all stocks in the industry and then assigning an ordinal rank to it. For example, an industry with an average Zacks Rank of 1.6 is better than an industry with an average Zacks Rank of 2.3. So, the industry with the better average Zacks Rank would get a better Zacks Industry Rank. If an industry has the best average Zacks Rank, it would be considered the top industry (1 out of 250+), which would place it at the top 1% of Zacks-ranked industries. Studies have shown that roughly half of a stock's price movement can be attributed to the industry group it belongs to. In fact, the top 50% of Zacks-ranked industries outperforms the bottom 50% by a factor of more than 2 to 1.

Last EPS Surprise: The percentage deviation of a company's last reported earnings per share from the Zacks Consensus Estimate. Companies with a positive earnings surprise are more likely to surprise again in the future (or miss again if they recently missed).

Last Sales Surprise: The percentage deviation of a company's last reported sales from the Zacks Consensus Estimate.

Expected Report Date: This is an estimated date of a company's next earnings release. The information originated or gathered by Zacks Investment Research from its information providers or publicly available sources is the basis of this estimate.

Earnings ESP: The Zacks Earnings ESP compares the Most Accurate Estimate to the Zacks Consensus Estimate for the yet-to-be reported quarter. The Most Accurate Estimate is the most recent version of the Zacks Consensus EPS Estimate. The idea here is that analysts revising their estimates closer to an earnings release have the latest information, which could potentially be more accurate than what they and others contributing to the consensus had predicted earlier. Thus, a positive or negative Earnings ESP reading theoretically indicates the likely deviation of the actual earnings from the consensus estimate. However, the model's predictive power is significant for positive ESP readings only. A positive Earnings ESP is a strong predictor of an earnings beat, particularly when combined with a Zacks Rank #1 (Strong Buy), #2 (Buy) or #3 (Hold). Our research shows that stocks with this combination produce a positive surprise nearly 70% of the time.

Periods:

TTM: Trailing 12 months. Using TTM figures is an effective way of analyzing the most-recent financial data in an annualized format that helps neutralize the effects of seasonality and other quarter-to-quarter variation.

F1: Current fiscal year. This period is used to analyze the estimates for the ongoing full fiscal year.

F2: Next fiscal year. This period is used to analyze the estimates for the next full fiscal year.

F12M: Forward 12 months. Using F12M figures is an effective way of analyzing the near-term (the following four unreported quarters) estimates in an annualized manner. Instead of typically representing estimates for the full fiscal year, which may not represent the nitty-gritty of each quarter, F12M figures suggest an all-inclusive annualized estimate for the following four quarters. The annualization helps neutralize the potential effects of seasonality and other quarter-to-quarter variations.

P/E Ratio: The price-to-earnings ratio measures a company's current market price per share relative to its earnings per share (EPS). Usually, the trailing-12-month (TTM) EPS, current-fiscal-year (F1) EPS estimate, or forward-12-month (F12M) EPS estimate is used as the denominator. In essence, this ratio shows what the market is willing to pay today for each dollar of EPS. In other words, this ratio gives a sense of what the relative value of the company is at the already reported level of earnings or at a future level of earnings.

It is one of the most widely-used multiples for determining the value of a company and helps comparing its valuation with that of a competitor, the industry group or a benchmark.

PEG Ratio: The price/earnings to growth ratio is a stock's P/E ratio using current fiscal year (F1) EPS estimate divided by its expected EPS growth rate over the coming 3 to 5 years. This ratio essentially determines a stock's value by factoring in the company's expected earnings growth and is thus believed to provide a more complete picture than just the P/E ratio, particularly for faster-growing companies.

P/S Ratio: The price-to-sales ratio is calculated as a company's current price per share divided by trailing 12 months (TTM) sales or revenues per share. This ratio shows what the market is willing to pay today for each dollar of TTM sales per share. The P/S ratio is at times the only valuation metric when the company has yet to become profitable.

Cash/Price Ratio: The cash-to-price ratio or Cash Yield is calculated as cash and marketable securities per share divided by the company's current share price. Like the earnings yield, which shows the anticipated yield (or return) on a stock from earnings for each dollar invested, the cash yield does the same, with cash being the source of return instead of earnings. For example, a cash/price ratio of 0.08 suggests a return of 8% or 8 cents for every \$1 investment.

EV/EBITDA Ratio: The EV/EBITDA ratio, also known as Enterprise Multiple, is calculated as a company's enterprise value (market capitalization + value of total long-term debt + book value of preferred shares - cash and marketable securities) divided by EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization). Usually, trailing-12-month (TTM) or forward-12-month (F12M) EBITDA is used as the denominator.

EV/Sales Ratio: The enterprise value-to-sales ratio is calculated as a company's enterprise value (market capitalization + value of total long-term debt + book value of preferred shares - cash and marketable securities) divided by annual sales. It is an expansion of the P/S valuation, which uses market value instead of enterprise value. The EV/Sales ratio is perceived as more accurate than P/S, in part, because the market capitalization does not take a company's debt into account when valuing it.

EV/CF Ratio: The enterprise value-to-cash flow ratio is calculated as a company's enterprise value (market capitalization + value of total long-term debt + book value of preferred shares - cash and marketable securities) divided by the trailing-12-month (TTM) operating cash flow. It's a measure of how long it would take to buy the entire business if you were able to use all the company's operating cash flow.

The EV/CF ratio is perceived as more accurate than the P/CF ratio, in part, because the market price does not take a company's debt into account when valuing it.

EV/FCF Ratio: The enterprise value-to-free cash flow metric compares a company's enterprise value to its trailing-12-month (TTM) free cash flow (FCF). This metric is very similar to the EV/CF ratio, but is considered a more exact measure owing to the fact that it uses free cash flow, which subtracts capital expenditures (CAPEX) from a company's total operating cash flow, thereby reflecting the actual cash flow available for funding growth activities and payments to shareholders.

P/EBITDA Ratio: The P/EBITDA ratio is calculated as a company's per share market value divided by EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization). This metric is very similar to the EV/EBITDA ratio, but is considered a little less exact measure as it uses market price, which does not take a company's debt into account. However, since EBITDA is often considered a proxy for cash income, the metric is used as a measure of what the market is willing to pay today for each dollar of the company's cash profitability in the trailing 12 months (TTM) or forward 12 months (F12M).

P/B Ratio: The price-to-book ratio is calculated as a company's current price per share divided by its book value (total assets – liabilities – preferred stocks) per share. In short, the book value is how much a company is worth. In other words, it reflects the total value of a company's assets that its common shareholders would receive if it were to be liquidated. So, the P/B ratio indicates whether you're paying higher or lower than what would remain if the company went bankrupt immediately. Investors typically use this metric to determine how a company's stock price stacks up to its intrinsic value.

P/TB Ratio: The price-to-tangible-book value ratio is calculated as a the per share market value of a company divided by the value of its tangible assets (total assets – liabilities – preferred stocks – intangible assets) per share. Tangible book value is the same thing as book value except it excludes the value of intangible assets to get a step closer to the baseline value of the company.

P/CF Ratio: The price-to-cash flow ratio measures a company's per share market price relative to its trailing-12-month (TTM) operating cash flow per share. This metric is used to determine whether a company is undervalued or overvalued relative to another stock, industry or sector. And like the P/E ratio, a lower number is typically considered better from the value perspective.

One of the reasons why P/CF ratio is often preferred over P/E ratio is the fact that operating cash flow adds back non-cash expenses such as depreciation and amortization to net income. This feature helps valuing stocks that have positive cash flow but are not profitable because of large noncash charges.

P/FCF Ratio: The price-to-free cash flow ratio is an extension of P/CF ratio, which uses trailing-12-month (TTM) free cash flow per share instead of operating cash flow per share. This metric is considered a more exact measure than P/CF ratio, as free cash flow subtracts capital expenditures (CAPEX) from a company's total operating cash flow, thereby reflecting the actual cash flow available for funding activities that generate additional revenues.

Earnings Yield: The earnings yield is calculated as current fiscal year (F1) EPS estimate divided by the company's current share price. The ratio, which is the inverse of the P/E ratio, measures the anticipated yield (or return) from earnings for each dollar invested in a stock today.

For example, earnings yield for a stock, which is trading at \$35 and expected to earn \$3 per share in the current fiscal year (F1), would be 0.0857 ($3/35 = 0.0857$) or 8.57%. In other words, for \$1 invested in the stock today, the yield from earnings is anticipated to be 8.57 cents.

Investors most commonly compare the earnings yield of a stock to that of a broad market index (such as the S&P 500) and prevailing interest rates, such as the current 10-year Treasury yield. Since bonds and stocks compete for investors' dollars, stock investors typically demand a higher yield for the extra risk they assume compared to investors of U.S. Treasury-backed securities that offer virtually risk-free returns. This additional return is referred to as the risk premium.

Debt/Equity Ratio: The debt-to-equity ratio is calculated as a company's total liabilities divided by its shareholder equity. This metric is used to gauge a company's financial leverage. In other words, it is a measure of the degree to which a company is financing its operations through debt versus its own funds. The higher the ratio, the higher the risk for shareholders.

However, this ratio is difficult to compare across industry groups where ideal amounts of debt vary. Some businesses are more capital intensive than others and typically require higher debt to finance their operations. So, a company's debt-to-equity ratio should be compared with other companies in the same industry.

Cash Flow (\$/share): Cash flow per share is calculated as operating cash flow (after-tax earnings + depreciation + other non-cash charges) divided by common shares outstanding. It is used by many investors as a measure of a company's financial strength. Since cash flow per share takes into consideration a company's ability to generate cash by adding back non-cash expenses, it is regarded by some as a more accurate measure of a company's financial situation than earnings per share, which could be artificially deflated.

Current Ratio: The current ratio or liquidity ratio is a company's current assets divided by its current liabilities. It measures a company's ability to pay short-term obligations. A current ratio that is in line with the industry average or slightly higher is generally considered acceptable. A current ratio that is lower than the industry average would indicate a higher risk of distress or default. A higher number is usually better. However, a very high current ratio compared to the industry average could be an indication of inefficient use of assets by management.

Debt/Capital Ratio: Debt-to-capital ratio is a company's total debt (interest-bearing debt + both short- and long-term liabilities) divided its total capital (interest-bearing debt + shareholders' equity). It is a measure of a company's financial leverage. All else being equal, the higher the debt-to-capital ratio, the riskier the stock.

However, this ratio can vary widely from industry to industry, the ideal amount of required debt being different. Some businesses are more capital intensive than others and typically require higher debt to finance their operations. So, a company's debt-to-capital ratio should be compared with the same for its industry.

Net Margin: Net margin is calculated as net income divided by sales. It shows how much of each dollar in sales generated by a company translates into profit. For example, if a company's net margin is 15%, its net income is 15 cents for every \$1 of sales it makes.

A change in margin can reflect either a change in business conditions, or a company's cost controls, or both. If a company's expenses are growing faster than sales, its net margin will decline. However, different net margin rates are considered good for different industries, so it's better to compare net margin rates of companies in the same industry group.

Return on Equity: Return on equity (ROE) is calculated as trailing-12-month net income divided by trailing-12-month average shareholder equity (including reinvested earnings). This metric is considered a measure of how effectively management is using a company's assets to generate profits. For example, if a company's ROE is 10%, it creates 10 cents profits for every \$1 shareholder equity, which is basically the company's assets minus debt. A company's ROE deemed good or bad depends on what's normal for its peers or industry group.

Sales/Assets Ratio: The sales-to-assets ratio or asset utilization ratio or asset turnover ratio is calculated as a company's annual sales divided by average assets (average of assets at the beginning of the year and at the year's end). This metric helps investors understand how effectively a company is using its assets to generate sales. For example, a sales-to-assets ratio of 2.5 indicates that the company generated \$2.50 in sales for every \$1 of assets on its books.

The higher the sales-to-assets ratio, the better the company is performing. However, similar to many other ratios, the asset turnover ratio tends to be higher for companies in certain industries/sectors than in others. So, a company's sales-to-assets ratio should be compared with the same for its industry/sector.

Historical EPS Growth (3-5 Years): This is the average annual (trailing-12-month) EPS growth rate over the last 3-5 years. This metric helps investors see how a company's EPS has grown from a long-term perspective.

Note: There are many factors that can influence short-term numbers — a recession will reduce this number, while a recovery will inflate it. The longterm perspective helps smooth out short-term events.

Projected EPS Growth (F1/F0): This is the estimated EPS growth rate for the current financial year. It is calculated as the consensus estimate for the current fiscal year (F1) divided by the reported EPS for the last completed fiscal year (F0).

Current Cash Flow Growth: It measures the latest year-over-year change in operating cash flow. Cash flow growth tells an investor how quickly a company is generating inflows of cash from operations. A positive change in the cash flow is desired and shows that more 'cash' is coming in than going out.

Historical Cash Flow Growth (3-5 Years): This is the annualized change in cash flow over the last 3-5 years. The change in a longer period helps put the current reading into proper perspective. By looking at the rate, rather than the actual dollar value, the comparison across the industry and peers becomes easier.

Projected Sales Growth (F1/F0): This metric looks at the estimated sales growth for the current year. It is calculated as sales estimate for the current fiscal year (F1) divided by the reported sales for the last completed fiscal year (F0).

Like EPS growth, a higher rate is better for sales growth. A look at a company's projected sales growth instantly tells you what the outlook is for their products and services. However, different sales growth rates are considered good for different industries, so it's better to compare sales growth rates of companies in the same industry group.

EPS F1 Estimate 1-Week Change: The percentage change in the Zacks Consensus EPS estimate for the current fiscal year over the past week. The change in a company's consensus EPS estimate (or earnings estimate revision) has proven to be strongly correlated with the near-term price movement of its shares. It is an integral part of the Zacks Rank.

If a stock's consensus EPS estimate is \$1.10 now versus \$1.00 a week ago, that will be reflected as a 10% upward revision. If, on the other hand, it went from \$1.00 to 90 cents, that would be a 10% downward revision.

EPS F1 Estimate 4-Week Change: The percentage change in the Zacks Consensus EPS estimate for the current fiscal year over the past four weeks.

A stock's earnings estimate revision in a 1-week period is important. But it's more meaningful to look at the longer-term revision. And, of course, the 4-week change helps put the 1-week change into proper perspective.

EPS F1 Estimate 12-Week Change: The percentage change in the Zacks Consensus EPS estimate for the current fiscal year over the past 12 weeks.

This metric essentially shows how the consensus EPS estimate has changed over a period longer than 1 week or 4 weeks.

EPS Q1 Estimate Monthly Change: The percentage change in the Zacks Consensus EPS estimate for the current fiscal quarter over the past four weeks.

While the revision in consensus EPS estimate for the current fiscal year is strongly correlated with the near-term price movement of its shares, the estimate revision for the current fiscal quarter is an important metric as well, especially over the short term, and particularly as a stock approaches its earnings date. If a stock's Q1 EPS estimate decreases ahead of its earnings release, it's usually a negative sign, whereas an increase is a positive sign.