Weekly Market Commentary

October 4, 2021

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As the calendar turns to a new month, all we can say is good riddance to September. The just-completed month delivered some of the most awful news of the year, leaving the Biden administration as well as investors with severe headaches. Stocks turned in their worst performance since March 2020, with the S&P 500 tumbling by nearly 5 percent. The deepest slide was saved for the final week, when the swirl of unfortunate events coalesced into a firestorm. Not surprisingly, the muddled events on Capitol Hill, the proximate cause of the administration's angst, topped the list and continue to weigh heavily on the financial markets.

The last-minute agreement to pass a bill that funds the government through December 3 avoids a government shutdown that would have occurred on midnight at the end of that forgettable month. But the clock is still ticking on a number of other issues that will keep tempers in Congress inflamed and the markets on tenterhooks. The most dire threat surrounds the debt ceiling imbroglio, which, if not resolved by October 18 would, according to Treasury Secretary Yellen, have catastrophic consequences for the U.S. economy, resulting in a deep recession and a financial crisis. Few expect Congress to fail to lift the debt ceiling before that happens, but the longer partisan bickering over the issue continues, the greater will be the turmoil in the financial markets. The Democrats want a bipartisan vote on lifting the debt ceiling, but Republicans want Democrats to lift it themselves, refusing to endorse the spendthrift proclivities embodied in their proposed bills.

With regards to the latter, the $1 trillion infrastructure bill passed by the Senate remains stalemated in the House, as the progressive wing of the Democratic Party is battling with its moderate members over the size and scope of the larger $3.5 trillion social policy and climate bill. The moderates want to shrink it and the progressives are threatening to block the infrastructure bill unless they get a commitment on the larger package. The uncertain outcome puts the Biden administration's agenda in peril and challenges the president's campaign assertions that he can effectively work with Congress to get things done. On Friday, House leaders were still quibbling over when to put the infrastructure bill up for a vote.

The political drama overshadowed health and economic news this week, which essentially provided a mixed bag of results. On the negative side, households – the economy's main growth driver – continue to display high anxiety over the spread of the Delta variant. The confidence readings of both the Conference Board and University of Michigan in September stood considerably below their nearby peaks in June, and the downbeat mindset of households is undercutting their buying plans. Escalating inflation along with the deteriorating health crisis is weighing on consumers as well. The downshift in household spirits aligns with their pullback in spending over the summer.

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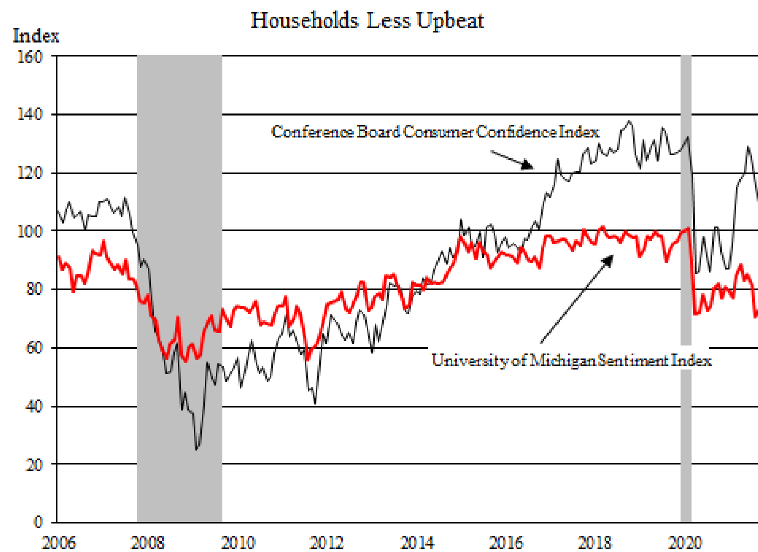
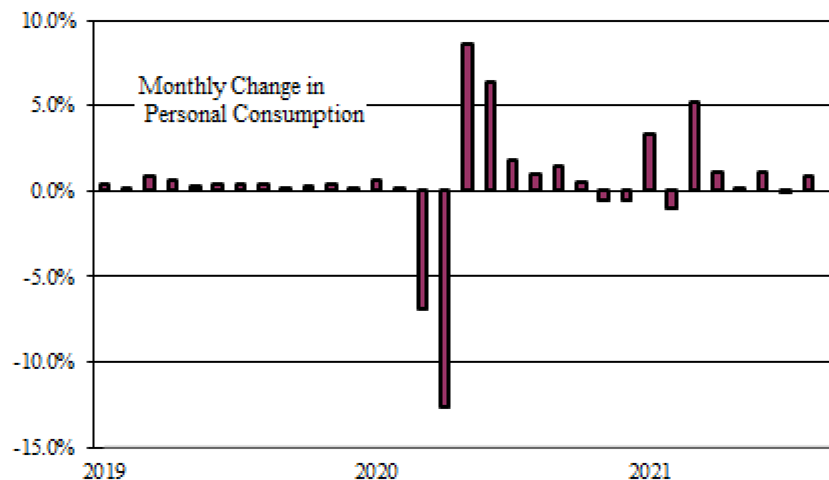


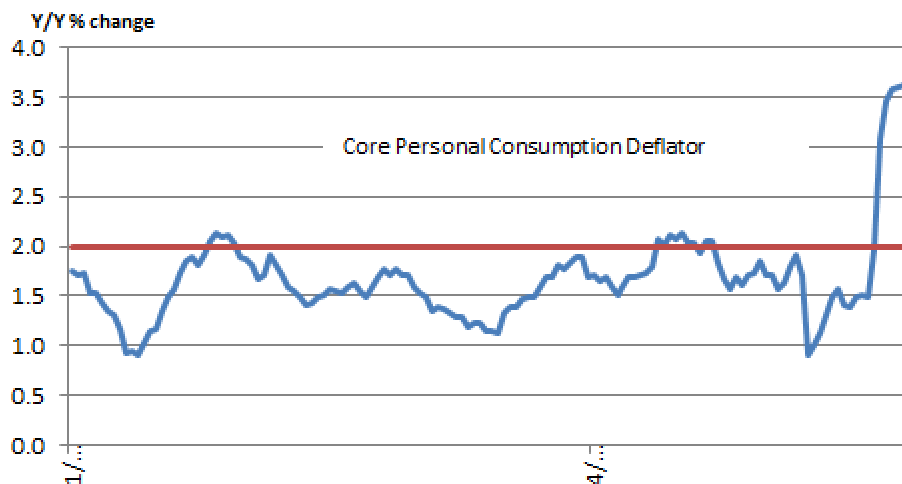
Indeed, after a stellar 12 percent annualized increase during the second quarter, consumer spending is tracking a tepid gain of less than 1 percent in the current quarter. That prospective pullback would put a severe dent in the economy's overall growth rate, which we expect to slow from last quarter's 6.7 percent pace to 1.5 percent in the third. But the slowdown, as stark as it is, is by no means the beginning of the end of the expansion. That might be the case if the resurgent pandemic – which is the primary cause of the current slowdown – were to worsen in the months ahead. The good news is that the light at the end of the tunnel is shining brighter.

Not only are case counts ebbing, the pace of inoculations is picking up. Vaccine hesitancy is still a roadblock to herd immunity, but the imposition of mandates from Washington, local governments and businesses is having a dramatic effect in prodding people to get their shots. As vaccination rates continue to trend higher, the growth-retarding impact of the pandemic should be curtailed. Consumers who pulled back social activities during the summer as health fears flared up will return to the more open behavior that propelled the robust consumption gains during the second quarter. Indeed, the stirrings of a comeback are already on the radar.

On Friday, the Commerce Department reported that consumer spending increased by a respectable 0.8 percent in August following a downwardly revised 0.1 percent decline in July. Importantly, the August rebound occurred despite the worsening trend in virus cases that month, indicating that the pandemic's grip on the economy was already loosening. Simply put, households are responding to pandemic fatigue and are learning to live with the virus. Now that promising signs on the health front are proliferating, households are likely to become even more emboldened to resume normal behavior. We suspect that an even stronger spending gain will be seen in September. High frequency data from reservation sites, like Open Table, the Transportation Authority and credit card vendors indicate that people are returning to restaurants, increasing debt purchases and traveling more.



Hence, the stage is set for a robust spending increase in the fourth quarter that will punctuate the strongest annual increase for personal consumption since 1946. No doubt, that will put more pressure on the Federal Reserve to speed up its plans to remove support for the economy. The pressure could well intensify further if the current inflation spike turns steeper and becomes more entrenched than the Fed expects. On this score, the inflation gauge that the Fed monitors threw off mixed messages in the latest income and spending report. The headline personal consumption deflator firmed up a bit in August, rising 4.3 percent from a year ago, up 0.1 percent from July. But the annual increase in the core PCE deflator held steady at 3.6 percent for the third consecutive month.



Clearly, both measures are running considerably above the Fed's target of 2 percent over time. The good news, as hinted by the stabilizing core inflation rate, is that peak inflation may be behind us. The bad news, as confirmed by Fed chair Powell this week, is that inflation may linger at higher levels for a longer period of time than the Fed had earlier thought. That said, Powell attributed the persistent overshoot to supply-chain disruptions, which show little sign of easing. If anything, pandemic-related shutdowns of factories in Vietnam that were widely reported this week are impeding the inventory rebuilding process of a broad swath of U.S. retailers, particularly sellers of apparel and other goods that rely on imports from those factories. The plight of the auto industry to obtain much-needed chips from overseas to build cars also remains bleak.

The conundrum for the Fed is that its policy decisions do not influence the forces responsible for the supply constraints that are primarily driving up inflation. What they do influence, however, is demand, and the urgency to suppress it by withdrawing monetary support is a matter of debate. The doves arguing for a sustained accommodative policy point to the millions of jobs that are still missing since the onset of the pandemic; in their eyes, demand-suppressing decisions should be postponed until those jobs are recovered. What's more, they note, correctly, that the massive fiscal support that has underpinned demand throughout the pandemic is ending, and that support will transform into a severe fiscal drag next year. Hence, economic headwinds are already in place without the reinforcement of a less supportive Fed policy.

The hawks, however, point to the formidable tailwinds that are poised to deliver another year of solid growth in 2022, adding fuel to the inflation fire. Labor demand remains in high gear, with the search for workers exceeding the supply of labor. That combination, in turn, is driving up labor costs as well as wages, which puts pressure on businesses to raise prices and provides workers with the wherewithal to accept higher prices. There is more than enough anecdotal evidence to verify the former, as numerous business surveys indicate that businesses plan to lift prices to cover rising labor costs. But the acceptance of higher prices by consumers is far from entrenched. Households are reeling from sticker shock from the surge in car prices, contributing to a steep pullback in auto sales. A similar response can be seen in the housing market, where many first-time buyers are priced out the house search. Surveys of inflation expectations indicate that households expect higher inflation over the near term – i.e. one-year out – but a return to lower inflation in later years.

That's the perception that underscores the Fed's current plan, and one with which we concur. The current inflation spiral is mostly driven by supply constraints that will linger well into next year and keep inflation elevated at least through the first half of 2022. While the Fed can not alter that prospect by reducing its asset purchases, neither should the withdrawal of support pose much of a threat to demand, as elevated savings of households together with expected solid job growth in coming months should provide consumers with sufficient firepower to sustain spending. But the shift to a less dovish policy would clearly help keep inflation expectations in check, an important goal of the Federal Reserve.