



# Ares Commercial Real Estate Corporation (ACRE)

Updated May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2024 by Nikolaos Sismanis

## Key Metrics

<b>Current Price:</b>	\$6.78	<b>5 Year CAGR Estimate:</b>	13.0%	<b>Market Cap:</b>	\$369.0 M
<b>Fair Value Price:</b>	\$7.50	<b>5 Year Growth Estimate:</b>	0.0%	<b>Ex-Dividend Date:</b>	06/28/2024
<b>% Fair Value:</b>	90%	<b>5 Year Valuation Multiple Estimate:</b>	2.0%	<b>Dividend Payment Date:</b>	07/16/2024
<b>Dividend Yield:</b>	14.7%	<b>5 Year Price Target</b>	\$7.50	<b>Years Of Dividend Growth:</b>	N/A
<b>Dividend Risk Score:</b>	F	<b>Retirement Suitability Score:</b>	C	<b>Rating:</b>	Buy

## Overview & Current Events

Ares Commercial Real Estate Corporation (referred to as ACRE throughout the report) is a specialty finance company primarily engaged in originating and investing in commercial real estate (“CRE”) loans and related investments. The company is externally managed by a subsidiary of the publicly traded Ares Management Corporation (NYSE: ARES), a leading global alternative asset manager. ACRE generated around \$198.6 million in interest income last year and is headquartered in New York, New York.

The company’s loan portfolio (98% of which are senior loans) comprises 44 market loans across 8 asset types, with an outstanding principal balance of \$2.0 billion. The majority of the loans are tied to multifamily, office, and mixed-use properties. In terms of geographical diversification, ACRE’s exposure features a healthy mix between the Southeast, West, and Midwest.

On May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2024, ACRE reported its Q1 results for the period ending March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2024. Interest income came in at \$44.0 million, 11% lower year-over-year. The decline was due to the company’s loans struggling to perform as higher rates of inflation and certain cultural shifts such as work-from-home trends continue to impact the operating performance and the economic values of commercial real estate.

In the meantime, interest expense rose by 24% to about \$28.8 million. Thus, total revenues (interest income - interest expenses + \$3.48 million in revenue from ACRE’s own real estate) fell by 29% to roughly \$18.7 million. Total expenses rose by about 38% to \$8.6 million, primarily due to higher general and administrative expenses and new expenses from real estate owned previously absent. Hence, Ares posted a net loss of \$12.3 million versus a net loss of \$6.4 million last year. Distributable EPS for the quarter was a negative (\$0.62) compared to \$0.18 last year. Our past figures in our per-share table reflect GAAP metrics.

We believe the company has a distributable EPS power of \$1.00. However DEPS should be close to \$0.30 this year.

## Growth on a Per-Share Basis

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2029
<b>EPS</b>	\$0.86	\$1.20	\$1.42	\$1.07	\$1.35	\$1.29	\$0.66	\$1.42	\$0.57	(\$0.72)	<b>\$0.30</b>	<b>\$1.00</b>
<b>DPS</b>	\$1.00	\$1.00	\$1.04	\$1.08	\$1.16	\$1.32	\$1.32	\$1.40	\$1.40 <sup>1</sup>	\$1.36	<b>\$1.00</b>	<b>\$1.00</b>
<b>Shares<sup>2</sup></b>	28.5	28.5	28.5	28.5	28.5	28.6	33.0	42.3	51.7	54.3	<b>54.4</b>	<b>75.0</b>

Over the years, ACRE has grown its asset base by increasing its loan commitments. Its diversified loan portfolio has led to a relatively robust EPS performance over the past decade. The fluctuations in EPS are attributable to ACRE’s investment yields, interest rates, the percentage of contractual payments received, and weighted average remaining life of the underlying portfolio. While the company reported record EPS in FY2022, and rising rates were supposed to further boost its performance, ACRE is now struggling as demand for commercial real estate remains at rather weak levels. We expect no growth in EPS in the medium-term as the commercial real estate market remains highly speculative. We also forecast a DPS CAGR of 0% in the medium-term for the same reason.

<sup>1</sup> Note that FY2021 and FY2022 each include supplemental dividends of \$0.08.

<sup>2</sup> Share count is 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.*



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## Valuation Analysis

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Now	2029
<b>Avg. P/E</b>	14.3	10.0	8.9	12.4	10.7	11.8	13.5	10.5	8.1	---	<b>6.8</b>	<b>7.5</b>
<b>Avg. Yld.</b>	8.2%	8.3%	8.2%	8.2%	8.1%	8.7%	14.8%	8.8%	11.0%	14.3%	<b>14.7%</b>	<b>13.3%</b>

ACRE's P/E ratio has historically hovered between the high single to low double-digits, in line with its industry peers. The blend of investors demanding a heftier yield from a YieldCo these days and additional frustration caused by dividend cut has resulted in shares plummeting lately. The stock is currently trading at just 6.8X our projected earnings and trades with a yield of 14.7%, even after the dividend cut. We believe shares are undervalued, though the valuation does reflect the heavy risks attached to ACRE's investment case.

## Safety, Quality, Competitive Advantage, & Recession Resiliency

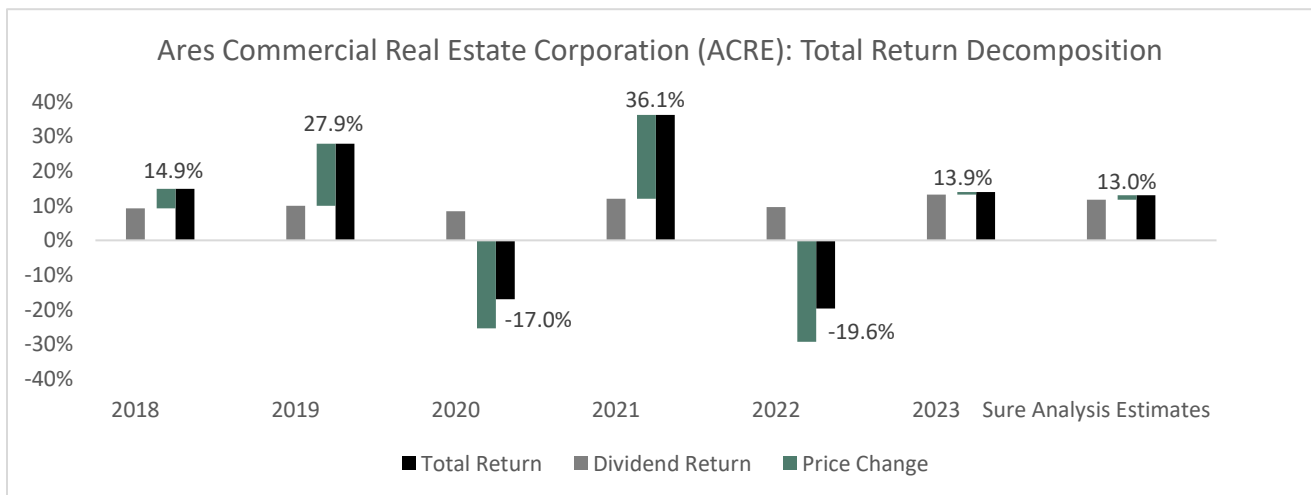
Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2029
<b>Payout</b>	116%	83%	73%	101%	86%	102%	200%	99%	246%	---	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

ACRE's dividend has historically been covered, but by razor-thin margins. Thus, it was always susceptible to a potential cut if earnings were to decline, and this is exactly what happened last year. The post-cut dividend rate of \$1.00 should be within the company's EPS generation this year. Despite that, ACRE's dividend is not entirely trustworthy. If adverse conditions are to keep impacting the commercial real estate market for longer, another dividend cut could occur. Still, we can't ignore the company's qualities, including a diversified loan portfolio that has historically generated very stable returns in a relatively risky market. This is likely due to Ares's highly regarded management team, whose presence should be considered a competitive advantage in this field. Regardless, we highlight that a prolonged recession is likely to impact ACRE's bottom line materially and, quite certainly, the dividend.

## Final Thoughts & Recommendation

ACRE features a strong track record of shareholder returns, primarily through its hefty dividend. However, the stock has had rough start in fiscal 2024. We estimate annualized returns of 13.0% in the medium-term, powered mainly by the new dividend rate and potential valuation tailwinds. We rate ACRE a buy. Still, we remind that ACRE operates in a risky space and we believe that you should not rely on the dividend. Another cut could occur if earnings remain weak, as we had previously warned.

## Total Return Breakdown by Year



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## Income Statement Metrics

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Revenue	38	50	45	46	55	77	79	102	109	81
SG&A Exp.	12	12	12	13	14	15	16	20	10	11
Net Profit	24	34	40	30	39	37	22	60	30	(39)
Net Margin	65.0%	68.6%	89.4%	65.6%	69.8%	47.9%	27.8%	58.8%	27.5%	(48.1%)
Free Cash Flow	(224)	276	(4)	31	39	31	31	48	57	47
Income Tax	0	(0)	0	0	0	1	0	0.7	0.5	0

## Balance Sheet Metrics

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total Assets	1,862	1,379	1,374	1,770	1,603	1,784	1,929	2,632	2,523	2,280
Cash & Equivalents	17	5	47	28	11	5	75	51	141	110
Accounts Receivable	3	3	0	1	1	1	1	2.6	3	4
Goodwill & Int. Ass.	59	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---
Total Liabilities	1,381	922	944	1,351	1,178	1,358	1,456	1,953	1,775	1,654
Accounts Payable	0	0		0	1	1	0	0.6	1.9	2.3
Long-Term Debt	1,115	605	806	379	1,022	1,204	1,327	1,903	1,737	1,617
Shareholder's Equity	403	409	419	419	426	426	473	679	748	626
LTD/E Ratio	2.77	1.48	1.92	0.90	2.40	2.82	2.81	2.80	2.32	2.58

## Profitability & Per Share Metrics

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Return on Assets	1.6%	2.1%	2.9%	1.9%	2.3%	2.2%	1.2%	2.7%	1.2%	(1.6%)
Return on Equity	6.0%	8.4%	9.7%	7.3%	9.1%	8.7%	4.9%	10.5%	4.2%	(5.7%)
ROIC	1.8%	2.6%	3.5%	3.0%	3.4%	2.4%	1.3%	2.8%	1.2%	(1.6%)
Shares Out.	28.5	28.5	28.5	28.5	28.5	28.6	33.0	42.7	52.1	54.3
Revenue/Share	1.31	1.75	1.58	1.62	1.93	2.68	2.37	2.39	2.10	1.50
FCF/Share	(7.84)	9.63	(0.16)	1.10	1.37	1.07	0.95	1.12	1.10	0.86

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

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