

Maximizing Tax Benefits with Opportunity Zones and Cost Segregation

by:

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Overview

Opportunity Zones and Cost Segregation are powerful strategies to help reduce and defer income taxes. This article highlights key considerations of potentially combing these strategies for commercial and residential rental real estate. As always, consult with a qualified tax professional.

1. Tax Benefits for Opportunity Zone Fund Investments

An Opportunity Zone (OZ) is an area that has been designated as an economically distressed community. The purpose of an Opportunity Zone Fund (OZF) is to drive economic development into these lower income areas by providing three main tax benefits to investors.

- a) First, investors who invest in an OZF with prior gains may defer such gains until the earlier of the date on which the investment in the OZF is sold or exchanged, or December 31, 2026.
- b) Second, if the OZF investment is held for longer than 5 years, the investor may exclude 10% of the deferred prior gain from capital gains tax while, if held for longer than 7 years, the exclusion increases another 5% to 15%.
- c) Finally, capital gains are excluded on the *gain in value* of the new investment if the gains invested in the OZF is held for at least 10 years.

These tax benefits are for federal tax purposes. In addition, many states also comply in various manners to the program.

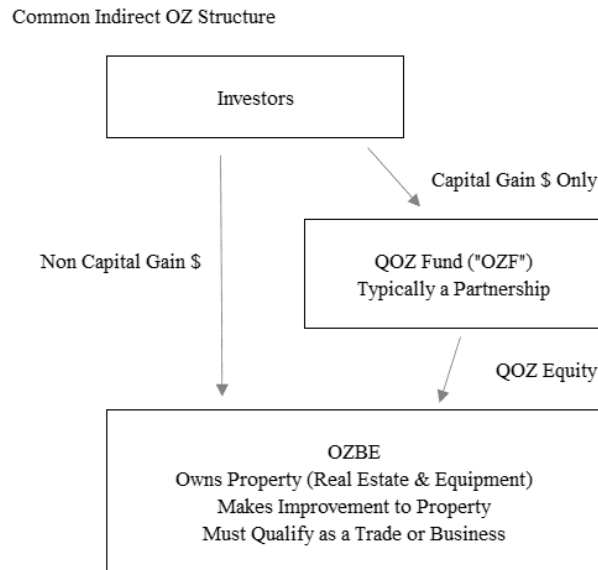
2. Substantial Improvement Test

According to the tax regulations, property is substantially improved if, during any 30-month period beginning after the property is acquired (this is expanded under certain applicable COVID-19 relief regulations), additions to the basis of the property exceed an amount equal to the adjusted basis at the start of the 30-month period. Given this, OZFs do not work well for acquiring stabilized real estate unless there is the ability and desire to do a major addition, renovation, or construct additional buildings on the site. The property needs to be improved such that the cost of the improvements exceeds the tax basis of the building when the OZF acquires the property. Therefore, OZFs work extremely well for substantial rehabs of existing buildings or new construction projects.

Note that this substantial improvement test only applies to the basis of the building(s) on the site, not the personal property, land improvements, or land. Consequently, it can be beneficial to do a cost segregation study when acquiring the property to lower the building basis thereby lowering the required capital expenditures required to meet the substantial improvement test.

3. Common OZ Structure

Taxpayers who wish to take advantage of these preferential capital gain tax rules must make their investments into OZs through an investment vehicle termed an Opportunity Zone Fund (OZF). An OZF must be set up as either a partnership, a corporation or REIT for federal tax purposes. OZFs can invest directly in real estate. However, most OZ real estate transactions are implemented with an indirect investment structure involving the OZBE (Opportunity Zone Business Entity), as illustrated below.



The OZF exists to receive capital gain dollars from investors and deploy those funds into OZ property via equity ownership of the OZBE. An OZBE is similar to traditional real estate partnerships. Capital gain dollars must go through the OZF to reap the tax benefits. Given the various tax regulations, it is generally recommended to direct non-capital gain equity funding straight into the OZBE and not through the OZF. Note that the OZF tax benefits only apply to capital gain dollars. The tax implications can be different for the OZF investors versus non OZF investors that invest traditional equity into the OZBE.

4. Ability to Use Depreciation and Other Losses

Qualified capital gains invested into an OZF initially have zero tax basis for federal income tax purposes (this could be different for state purposes depending on the state). A taxpayer will need to have basis to deduct depreciation and other losses such as loan interest. Using debt to fund the OZF will give the taxpayer basis. Generally, recourse and nonrecourse debt in real estate will increase the taxpayer's basis. If the taxpayer is not using debt, a small amount of losses can be used with the 10% 5-year and 15% 7-year milestone step-up in basis and the remaining losses can be used after 10 years.

If the OZBE/OZF has basis, a cost segregation study can be beneficial because it will provide additional tax losses during the first 10 years and will increase the excludable gain after 10 years.

5. Post 10-year Benefit of OZ

This is by far the most valuable benefit of OZs – the ability to exclude the investment gain on sale after 10 years. This gain includes both appreciation and tax depreciation. The basis of the property can be stepped up to the FMV, meaning that any gain on appreciation is excluded and any depreciation taken over the 10 years is also excluded.

6. Cost Segregation & The Benefit of Accelerated Depreciation

A cost segregation study allows for property owners to accelerate depreciation deductions by reclassifying certain items from longer life Sec. 1250 property to shorter life Sec. 1250 and Sec. 1245 property, which is often eligible for accelerated methods and bonus depreciation. This shorter life property is typically personal property, qualified improvement property, and land improvements. In general, a taxpayer benefits from a reduced current year tax liability by maximizing depreciation deductions and deferring taxes. However, by utilizing Cost Segregation on OZ property these tax losses from the accelerated depreciation (including bonus) will not be recaptured after year 10. Therefore, the taxpayer can not only use depreciation to offset income at the ordinary income tax rate, but that depreciation is never recaptured as long as the property is held for 10 years in the OZF. This is permanent tax savings. See example below.

OZ Real Estate Investment		
	Purchase price of vacant land	\$1,000,000
	Total construction cost of new commercial building	\$10,000,000
	Total investment	\$11,000,000
	Increase in value over 10 years	\$4,000,000
	Value of property after 10 years	\$15,000,000
Without Cost Segregation		
	Total depreciation after 10 years	\$2,564,103
	Tax basis after 10 years	\$8,435,897
	Total OZ excludable taxable gain after 10 years	\$6,564,103
With Cost Segregation - Using Accelerated Depreciation		
	Total depreciation after 10 years (30% reclassified to shorter life)	\$4,794,872
	Tax basis after 10 years	\$6,205,128
	Total OZ excludable taxable gain after 10 years	\$8,794,872
Benefit with Cost Segregation		
	Increase in OZ excludable taxable gain with cost seg after 10 years	\$2,230,769
	Additional permanent tax benefit assuming 35% tax rate	\$780,769

Recall that it may make sense to do a cost segregation study on the property when acquired in addition to when it is improved.

7. Qualified Improvement Property

The CARES Act corrected the original drafting error for Qualified Improvement Property (QIP). In the CARES Act, QIP was specifically identified as having a 15-year recovery period, therefore rendering it eligible for bonus depreciation. QIP is defined as any improvement made to the interior of a nonresidential property after the property is placed into service. A cost segregation study will identify which improvements qualify as QIP.

8. Opting Out of Bonus and Using ADS lives or QIP for Real Property – Qualified Business Interest Deduction IRC 163(j)

Taxpayers need to consider this interplay because it may be beneficial to claim bonus depreciation for personal property and land improvements and then opt out of bonus depreciation for QIP. Recall that bonus depreciation can be selectively elected out for each asset class of property.

9. Bonus Depreciation on Acquired and New Construction

Beginning September 28, 2017, Section 168(k) bonus depreciation increased from 50% to 100% for qualified property. Further, bonus depreciation was expanded to include non-original use property. This gives taxpayers the ability to claim the 100% bonus depreciation deduction on eligible used property that they acquire, which was not previously in use by the taxpayer nor was acquired from a related party. This can increase the OZ tax benefits.

10. Other Related Tax Incentives

Taxpayers may want to consider other tax incentives that could enhance the benefits of Opportunity Zones and Cost Segregation further. Some of these include:

- The Energy Efficient Commercial Building Deduction (179D)
- The Energy Efficient Home Credit (45L)
- The Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit
- The Low-Income Housing Tax Credit
- The Renewable Energy Investment Tax Credit
- New Markets Tax Credits

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About the Authors: John Hoffman, Alex Bagne, and Malik Javed are all Certified Cost Segregation Professionals (CCSP) and Board Members of the American Society of Cost Segregation Professionals (ASCSP). The ASCSP was established as a non-profit corporation in response to the growing need for education, credentials, technical standards, and a code of ethics within the cost segregation industry.