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Legislative Press Bureau at 222-2457

## **THIS WEEK AT THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

STATE HOUSE – Here are the highlights from news and events that took place in the General Assembly this week. For more information on any of these items visit <http://www.rilin.state.ri.us/News/>



- **2015 budget signed into law, governor orders removal of Sakonnet Bridge tolls**  
The 2015 state budget bill is now law, with the signature of Gov. Lincoln D. Chafee, who ordered the tolls on the Sakonnet River Bridge to be removed by noon Friday. The \$8.7 billion budget bill ([2014-H 7133Aaa](#)) closes an unexpected \$67 million gap, fully funds education aid while averting tolls on the Sakonnet River Bridge and broad-based tax increases, establishes a steady source of transportation funding, promotes economic development and reduces the corporate and death taxes. The bill institutes combined reporting to close a loophole that allows multistate corporations to avert state taxes. It also includes bond questions for public transportation hubs, a new engineering school facility at the University of Rhode Island, as well as renovations at public and nonprofit arts facilities, a public parking garage at the Garrahy Judicial Complex in Providence and environmental initiatives and improvements at Roger Williams Park and Zoo.  
[Click here to see news release.](#)
- **Lawmakers raise minimum wage to \$9 in 2015**  
The General Assembly approved legislation ([2014-H 7194A](#), [2014-S 2249A](#)) raising Rhode Island's minimum wage to \$9 per hour beginning Jan. 1. The bill, sponsored by Sen. Erin P. Lynch (D-Dist. 31, Warwick, Cranston), and Rep. David A. Bennett (D-Dist. 20, Warwick, Cranston), will provide minimum wage workers a \$1-per-hour raise over the current state minimum wage, \$8. The sponsors say the legislation is meant to assist those at the bottom of the wage scale and help boost the economy through increased consumer spending.  
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More...

- **Assembly votes to eliminate ‘master lever’**

The General Assembly has approved legislation that will eliminate the ‘master lever,’ or straight-party voting option, on all non-primary Rhode Island elections to be held after Jan. 1, 2015. Approved and sent to the governor was legislation ([2014-H 8072A](#), [2014-S 2091A](#)) introduced by Rep. K. Joseph Shekarchi (D-Dist. 23, Warwick) and Sen. David E. Bates (R-Dist. 32, Barrington, Bristol, East Providence). Rhode Island is one of only 14 states, and the only New England state, that still employ the master lever option in elections.  
[Click here to see news release.](#)
- **Lawmakers send ignition interlock bills to governor’s desk for signature**

The General Assembly passed legislation authorizing judges and magistrates to prohibit individuals adjudicated of driving under the influence from operating vehicles that are not equipped with ignition interlock systems. Sponsored by Sen. V. Susan Sosnowski (D-Dist. 37, South Kingstown, New Shoreham) and Rep. Raymond E. Gallison Jr. (D-Dist. 69, Bristol, Portsmouth) on behalf of Attorney General Peter Kilmartin, the legislation ([2014-S 2231A](#), [2014-H 8296](#)) also establishes updated rules, regulations, fines and penalties for the continued enforcement of the ignition interlock system. Representatives Gregg Amore (D-Dist. 65, East Providence) and J. Patrick O’Neill (D-Dist. 59, Pawtucket) had similar bills in the House.  
[Click here to see news release.](#)
- **Legislators OK ‘just cause’ bill to protect tenants’ rights**

Lawmakers approved legislation ([2014-H 7449A](#), [2014-S 2659A](#)) that will aid in preventing foreclosing owners from evicting tenants in one- to four-family units without just cause. Sponsored by Rep. John G. Edwards (D-Dist. 70, Portsmouth, Tiverton) and Sen. Harold M. Metts (D-Dist. 6, Providence), the measure clearly delineates the circumstances in which an eviction can take place. Presently, tenants living in foreclosed homes have 90 days before the foreclosing lender can evict them without cause.  
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- **Assembly approves DNA collection from violent crime arrestees**

Passed by the General Assembly and sent to the governor was legislation ([2014-H 7304Aaa](#), [2014-S 2101B](#)) that will require the collection of DNA samples from any person arrested for a crime of violence, with the assurance the samples will be automatically expunged if the person is found or proven innocent. The so-called ‘Katie’s Law’ legislation, which has been enacted in more than two dozen other states, was introduced by Rep. Brian Patrick Kennedy (D-Dist. 38, Hopkinton, Westerly) and Sen. David E. Bates (R-Dist. 32, Barrington, Bristol, East Providence).  
[Click here to see news release.](#)
- **Lawmakers OK bill to divert organic waste from landfill**

The General Assembly approved legislation sponsored by Rep. Donna M. Walsh (D-Dist. 36, Charlestown, Westerly, South Kingstown, New Shoreham) and Sen. Catherine Cool Rumsey (D-Dist. 34, Exeter, Charlestown, Richmond, Hopkinton, West Greenwich) to require institutions that are large producers of food scraps to dispose of them in a more environmentally friendly manner than tossing them in the

landfill. Beginning Jan. 1, 2016, the legislation ([2014-H 7033Aaa](#), [2014-S 2315Aaa](#)) requires institutions that produce more than 104 tons of food residue annually to separate it from their trash and either compost it, arrange to have it used agriculturally, such as for as animal feed, or send it to a composting or anaerobic digesting facility. The law will apply only when an appropriate facility exists within 15 miles of the institution.

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▪ **Assembly creates Climate Change Council to curb greenhouse gas emissions**

The General Assembly lent its final approval to legislation creating a nine-member Climate Change Council, charged with coordinating efforts to ensure the state is doing everything in its power to reduce harmful greenhouse gas emissions while advancing the public's understanding of changes in sea level, severe weather events and critical infrastructure vulnerability. Sponsored by Sen. William J. Conley Jr. (D-Dist. 18, East Providence, Pawtucket) and Rep. Arthur Handy (D-Dist. 18, Cranston), the legislation ([2014-S 2952A](#), [2014-H 7904A](#)) commands attention to the often disastrous results of climate change to the country's economy, health and ecosystem.

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▪ **Assembly allows consideration of low-cost high school equivalency tests**

The General Assembly passed legislation that may allow more students struggling with financial hardships to obtain their high school equivalency degree. Sponsored by Senate Majority Whip Maryellen Goodwin (D-Dist. 1, Providence) and Rep. Grace Diaz (D-Dist. 11, Providence), the bills ([2014-S 2182A](#), [2014-H 7564A](#)) require the Board of Education to consider several factors in determining which high school equivalency tests would be recognized by the state, including other states' recognition of the tests in question, the portability of the exam, and other necessary criteria for determining the alignment of the test's standards with those of Rhode Island public schools. Currently, the only accepted exam is the General Education Development (GED) test. The legislation also directs the Board of Education to reinstate the waiver of fees for those who cannot afford the test.

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▪ **Assembly gives OK to Bruins license plates**

Lawmakers gave final approval to legislation ([2014-S 2555](#), [2014-H 8118](#)) sponsored by Senate Majority Whip Maryellen Goodwin (D-Dist. 1, Providence) and Rep. Kenneth A. Marshall (D-Dist. 68, Bristol, Warren) to create a new specialty license plate for the Boston Bruins Foundation, the Bruins charitable foundation dedicated to supporting organizations that promote athletic activities, academics, health and outreach in the community.

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