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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/>



- **Senate OKs 3-year moratorium on high-stakes testing for state's public schools**
Senators approved a bill ([2014-S 2059A](#)) that would amend the method by which the state assessment program would be implemented in public schools, providing that no state assessment would be used to determine a student's ability to graduate from high school prior to the Class of 2017. Rep. Maria E. Cimini (D-Dist. 7, Providence) sponsors a similar bill ([2014-H 7256](#)) in the House.
[Click here to see news release.](#)
- **Legislators discuss options, consequences of nonpayment of 38 Studios bonds**
A private consulting firm hired by the state to weigh the potential consequences of the state's nonpayment of the moral obligation bonds related to Curt Schilling's failed 38 Studios video game development company met with legislators at a Senate briefing and a House Finance Committee meeting. The SJ Advisors [report](#) says that if it does not repay the bonds associated with 38 Studios, it will likely face downgrading of its bond status and higher borrowing costs. Meanwhile, the House Oversight Committee met with economists and public policy leaders as part of its analysis of the matter.
- **Commission issues report on Garrahy garage proposal**
Led by Co-chairmen Sen. Joshua Miller (D-Dist. 28, Cranston, Providence) and Rep. Christopher R. Blazewski (D-Dist. 2, Providence), a special legislative study commission issued a [report](#) saying a 1,250-space, seven-story parking garage at the Garrahy Judicial Complex in Providence would not only alleviate the parking crunch at and near the courthouse, but would also attract favorable development of the adjacent properties formerly occupied by Route 195. A measure allowing for bonds for its construction, estimated to cost about \$43 million, is included in the 2015

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budget proposal submitted by Gov. Lincoln D. Chafee, currently being reviewed by the House and Senate Finance Committees.

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- **Senate OKs bill to increase penalties for texting while driving**

The Senate approved legislation ([2014-S 2678](#)) that will increase the penalties for texting while driving and also the penalties for minors using a cell phone while driving. The legislation was introduced by President of the Senate M. Teresa Paiva Weed (D-Dist. 13, Newport, Jamestown) to address the growing problem of distracted drivers resulting from cell phone use and texting. A companion House bill ([2014-H 7761](#)) has been introduced by Rep. Deborah Ruggiero (D-Dist. 74, Jamestown, Middletown).

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- **Senate OKs bill changing how inmates are counted for census, redistricting**

The Senate approved legislation ([2014-S 2286A](#)) to require that persons in government custody be counted at their home address for purposes of the census and redistricting, rather than the current practice of counting them at their place of incarceration. The legislation was introduced by Sen. Harold M. Metts (D-Dist. 6, Providence). A companion House bill ([2014-H 7263](#)) was introduced by Rep. Anastasia P. Williams (D-Dist. 9, Providence).

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- **House votes to close loopholes on usage of wireless devices while driving**

The House approved a measure that would expand certain definitions in statutes relating to cell phone use while operating a motor vehicle to protect children and young drivers. Sponsored by Rep. Raymond H. Johnston Jr. (D-Dist. 61, Pawtucket) on behalf of the state Department of Transportation (DOT), the legislation ([2014-H 7683A](#)) specifically prohibits school bus drivers from using a “personal wireless communications device” while transporting children, except in the case of an emergency. Minors would also be prohibited from utilizing a cell phone or any other personal wireless device while operating a motor vehicle with the same exception.

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- **Senate OKs harsher penalties for driving to endanger, DUI charges**

The Senate approved legislation ([2014-S 2646](#)) that would increase the penalties for driving so as to endanger and driving under the influence in scenarios where a victim dies or becomes injured as a result of the offenses. Sponsored by Sen. V. Susan Sosnowski (D-Dist. 37, South Kingstown, New Shoreham), the bill also creates a new criminal offense: driving under the influence, resulting in personal injury. Rep. Donna M. Walsh (D-Dist. 36, Charlestown, New Shoreham, South Kingstown, Westerly) sponsors a companion bill ([2014-H 7147](#)) in the House.

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- **Finn sponsors bill to study expansion of broadband access**

Rep. Linda D. Finn (D-Dist. 72, Middletown, Portsmouth) has introduced legislation ([2014-H 8136](#)) to create a special legislative commission to study broadband services and accessibility, with the goal of identifying ways to improve access to high-speed

Internet. Sen. Juan M. Pichardo has introduced similar legislation ([2014-S 2827A](#)) in the Senate.

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- **Office of Energy Resources briefs legislators on recent impact report**

The Office of Energy Resources made a presentation to members of the General Assembly on a recently issued economic, jobs and environmental impact report on the state's distributed generation program and renewable energy fund. An annual report was one of the requirements of legislation enacted last year that made some changes to the distributed generation program, which facilitates the development of local, small-scale renewable energy projects.

[Click here to see news release.](#)

- **Senate passes bill establishing felony charges for 'knockout assaults'**

The Senate approved legislation ([2014-S 2598](#)) sponsored by Sen. Michael J. McCaffrey (D-Dist. 29, Warwick) that would put assault or battery for the purpose of causing unconsciousness – also known as a “knockout assault” – in the category of a felony.