

2014 LEGISLATIVE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

BUDGET

- The 2015 state budget bill cut the corporate tax rate from 9 percent to 7 percent, and raised the credit on the estate tax from \$921,655 to \$1.5 million, eliminating the cliff provision so families will pay taxes only on the amount above that threshold. The \$1.5 million credit will be adjusted annually for inflation.
- It eliminated tolls on the Sakonnet River Bridge while creating a new fund for maintenance of roads and bridges. Vehicle-related fees will be gradually redirected from the state's general fund to the new infrastructure fund over the next five years.
- The budget fully funds the continued implementation of the state's education aid formula, adding \$33.4 million over the Fiscal Year 2014 level.
- Lawmakers included an additional \$10 million for the Community College of Rhode Island, Rhode Island College and the University of Rhode Island to extend their tuition freeze. The budget also included two new facilities for higher education. One would lease part of the former South Street Power Station in Providence for a nursing education facility shared by URI and RIC. The other would put a \$125 million bond referendum on the November ballot for the renovating and expanding URI's College of Engineering complex.
- It also includes a ballot question for \$53 million in bonds for numerous environmental and water initiatives and improvements to Roger Williams Park and Zoo; a \$35 million bond question for renovations to public and nonprofit arts facilities; and a \$35 million bond question for construction of mass transit hubs.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT/BUSINESS

- The Assembly passed a central component of the Senate's "Rhode To Work" legislative action plan, repositioning and empowering the Governor's Workforce Board to administer and coordinate all workforce development in the state. The new Workforce Board replaces the Rhode Island Human Resource Investment Council and will be charged with breaking down barriers, bottlenecks and other challenges to provide a unified, cohesive and responsive training system.
- Legislators gave final passage to legislation that would stop the state from taking a 10 percent cut from the employer-paid Job Development Fund, or JDF. The JDF, which provides money for workforce training, is subject to a 10 percent indirect cost recovery charge that most of the state's restricted receipt accounts pay to the general fund. The initiative is part of the Senate's "Rhode To Work" legislative package and is featured in the Fiscal Year 2015 budget.
- Lawmakers passed a regulatory reform bill that amends the process for submission of economic impact statements, eliminates a number of exclusions in the existing statute and improves the procedure for adoption of proposed regulations. The Assembly also approved another bill synchronizing the Office of Regulatory Reform's upcoming regulatory reviews with the Secretary of State's re-file process.

- Lawmakers extended the expiration of a program to provide child-care to low-income parents while they participate in training and work-readiness programs.
- The General Assembly created a Rhode Island Career and Technical Board of Trustees and a Rhode Island Career and Technical Education Trust – both entities with an explicit focus on improving career and technical education in the state and working in partnership with employers to develop internships and other student-learning opportunities.
- The Assembly OK'd legislation saving a \$6 million federal grant awarded to the Quonset Development Corporation. The bills make state public works project apprenticeship requirements subject to federal law and regulations pertaining to federal aid contracts.

PUBLIC SAFETY AND JUSTICE

- The General Assembly passed legislation recommended by a 20-member legislative task force that conducted a review of current law regarding the state's participation in the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) as it pertains to mental health. Under legislation stemming from the panel's findings, the District Court would submit limited information to NICS about individuals who are involuntarily committed for mental health treatment and pose a threat of violence to themselves or others.
- The General Assembly approved a measure requiring the collection of DNA samples from any person arrested for a crime of violence, with the assurance that the sample will be expunged if the person is found or proven innocent.
- Lawmakers additionally approved 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.
- The Assembly passed legislation adding an additional term of up to 10 years for any felony committed in association with any criminal street gang. The sentence is to be served consecutively with whatever sentence the defendant receives for the crime itself.
- Lawmakers also created "child safe zones," prohibiting any facility that provides programs or services intended primarily for minors from employing a registered sex offender.
- Lawmakers allowed the passage of two bills related to internet crime. The first bill closes a loophole and makes it a felony to electronically disseminate sexually explicit images to minors, including photos and videos, as well as live sex acts transmitted via webcam. The second creates a computer crime of "online impersonation," making it a felony to use the name or persona of another person in various online formats without that person's express consent.
- The Assembly gave final approval to the 2014 Student and Employee Social Media Privacy acts that will bar employers from demanding social media-related materials of job applicants, and will establish similar prohibitions for colleges as they consider prospective students.

- Legislators adopted legislation, also known as “Erin’s Law,” to establish a comprehensive school program to provide an age-appropriate course of instruction in the prevention of child abduction, child sexual exploitation and child sexual abuse.
- The Assembly made the manufacture, sale or possession of 1 ounce to 1 kilogram of a mixture or substance containing a detectable amount of synthetic drugs punishable by imprisonment of up to 50 years and a fine of up to \$500,000. The new law also makes manufacture, possession or sale of more than 1 kilogram of such substances punishable by a prison term of up to life and a fine of up to \$1 million.
- The General Assembly has approved legislation that will allow the release of patient records for investigation and prosecution if a health care provider believes, after providing services to the elder patient, that the patient is or has been physically, psychologically or sexually abused, neglected or exploited. The statute of limitations for elder exploitation will also increase from three to 10 years under separate legislation approved by lawmakers.

EDUCATION

- Lawmakers put a three-year moratorium on using standardized assessments to determine a student’s ability to graduate, beginning with this current school year when students were assessed using the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP). This would affect seniors graduating prior to 2017.
- The General Assembly approved bills stating that any teacher who is, upon an initial evaluation, rated “highly effective” or given a number “4” mark or the equivalent would only need to be evaluated once every three years. A teacher rated as “effective” or given a number “3” mark would need to be evaluated only every two years. Any teacher who scores a lesser rating could be subject to annual evaluations.
- The General Assembly approved legislation to provide full education aid funding for children enrolled in full-day kindergarten, beginning with the 2016-17 school year.
- Legislators moved the layoff notification date for teachers from March 1 to June 1 in order to avert situations where school districts send layoff notices to every teacher in February to provide maximum flexibility in the face of budget uncertainties ahead.
- The Assembly passed a bill requiring 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, which can be costly to students from low-income families. It requires the Board of Education to offer a hardship waiver for low-income students.

- Lawmakers approved the creation of the 1696 Historical Commission, which will develop a comprehensive African-American history curriculum for Rhode Island public schools from kindergarten through grade 12. That curricula could potentially include a history of people of African heritage, including the history of African peoples before the political conflicts that led to the development of slavery, the passage to America and Rhode Island, the enslavement experience in America and Rhode Island, abolition and the contributions of Africans to America and Rhode Island.

ENVIRONMENT

- Lawmakers approved the creation of the 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.
- Legislators expanded the distributed generation program, which will encourage the development of small-scale commercial and residential renewable energy projects around the state.
- Under legislation passed this year, beginning in 2016, institutions that are large producers of food scraps will be required to dispose of them by composting onsite, sending them to be used agriculturally, such as for as animal feed, or by having them processed by a composting or anaerobic digesting facility, if such a facility is available within 15 miles.
- Rhode Island can participate in regional efforts to address electric price volatility and reliability and to pursue energy infrastructure expansion projects for electricity and natural gas, as well as clean energy resources, under a bill sought by Governor Chafee and approved by lawmakers.
- A new law encourages job creation in the renewable energy sector, specifically in the realm of solar thermal installations, by offering new licenses for renewable energy professionals and solar thermal professionals.
- The Assembly approved legislation to increase littering fines and as well as legislation allowing cities and towns to keep 30 percent of those fines.

HEALTH

- The Assembly approved several measures to address the region's opioid overdose epidemic, strengthening parity in coverage of mental health and substance use disorders, requiring insurance coverage for methadone and opioid overdose treatment and better hospital discharge plans for patients with substance abuse disorders, and encouraging more widespread use of the state's electronic prescription drug monitoring program.

- The General Assembly approved several bills to better integrate behavioral health and primary care, including a bill calling upon the Department of Health and the Office of the Insurance Commissioner to scrutinize the state’s laws and regulations to ensure that those with behavioral health care needs receive the services they require, and another for the creation of a pilot project to integrate health promotion and primary and behavioral healthcare.
- The General Assembly approved legislation designed to help expedite the Department of Health “certificate of need” process and to help open doors for domestic medical tourism companies to locate in Rhode Island.
- Lawmakers prohibited the sale of e-cigarettes to minors.
- Legislators approved a bill to establish a licensing process for lactation consultants, thereby facilitating insurance coverage of their service to assist nursing mothers and infants.
- A new law requires health care facilities that perform mammograms to notify their patient of dense breast tissue and basic information about breast density.
- Legislation approved by the Assembly directs the creation of a state plan to better enable the state’s elderly population to remain living in their communities.

CONSUMER/QUALITY OF LIFE

- The General Assembly voted to raise the state’s minimum wage to \$9 per hour beginning Jan. 1, 2015. That’s a \$1 per hour increase over the current minimum wage of \$8, which went into effect at the beginning of this year.
- Lawmakers approved legislation that will aid in preventing foreclosing owners from evicting tenants in one- to four-family dwellings without “just cause.” The bills spell out the circumstances under which an eviction may take place and require notices to tenants 30 days prior to any foreclosure sale.
- Passed by the legislature and signed into law was legislation to permit the use of electronic proof of auto insurance coverage, in any format that can be displayed on any mobile electronic device.
- Legislation was passed to give communities and developers several options for conforming to municipal ordinances regarding the construction of affordable housing, including a developer’s fee-in-lieu of construction which the community would apply to construction or renovation of affordable units.
- Lawmakers approved bills to increase the penalties for companies violating the state’s wage law, increasing not only the monetary fines but also the amount of potential jail time.

ELECTIONS AND GOOD GOVERNMENT

- The General Assembly passed legislation requiring Rhode Island's quasi-public agencies to carry out their government missions effectively and to exemplify a commitment to transparent, accountable and effective government. All 20 quasi-public agencies and subsidiaries of Commerce RI would also be required to conduct a performance audit every five years beginning in 2015.
- Lawmakers passed legislation that will eliminate the "master lever," or straight-party voting option, on all non-primary Rhode Island elections beginning after Jan. 1, 2015.
- Legislation was passed and signed by the governor to put a question on the November ballot, asking voters if they wish to call a convention to consider revisions to the state's constitution.

VETERANS AND MILITARY

- Legislation passed by the Assembly will allow disabled veterans who are permanent residents of Rhode Island and who are eligible for waivers for free admission into competitive college programs to register for classes during the regular enrollment period.
- The legislature OK'd bills to allow honorably discharged veterans and National Guard reservists to use the skills they learned during their military service to fulfill requirements when they seek apprenticeships in various trades.
- The Assembly approved and the governor signed legislation to create a commission to study the establishment of a Desert Storm and Desert Shield Memorial at the Veterans' Cemetery in Exeter. Also approved by the Assembly was legislation to place inside the State House a POW/MIA Chair of Honor to pay tribute to those who were prisoners of war or listed as missing in action.

GAMING

- Rhode Island voters will be asked two questions on November's ballot concerning Newport Grand, under legislation approved by the General Assembly. One would amend the state constitution to specify that no gambling facility may change locations within its city or town without an affirmative vote from the citizens of that city or town. The other would allow Newport Grand to expand to offer table games, but only with the approval of voters statewide and in Newport, and only if the other question is also approved statewide.
- Lawmakers allowed Twin River in Lincoln to offer lines of credit of up to \$50,000 to patrons, and stipulated that no casino may place a lien on a person's real estate as a result of such a marker.
- The budget included funding, effectively \$1.1 million, to boost Twin River's marketing efforts at a time when the Lincoln gaming facility could soon face increased competition from expansion of gaming in Massachusetts.

OTHER LEGISLATION

- Squid will have a new place in the hierarchy of the state's official emblems, with Assembly passage of legislation to christen Rhode Island-style calamari as the state's official appetizer.
- The Boston Bruins could join the ranks of New England teams whose logos Rhode Island drivers can sport on their license plates, with Assembly passage of bills to allow Boston Bruins Foundation specialty plates.
- To help support the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals care for mistreated animals that come under the society's control, the Assembly passed legislation to require individuals convicted of or pleading to a charge of animal cruelty to be financially responsible for the SPCA's cost of caring for those animals.
- Two other pieces of legislation dealing with animals were OK'd by lawmakers. One, signed into law, will give the Department of Environmental Management greater and broader control over inspections of animals with contagious, infectious or communicable diseases. The other makes it a misdemeanor to confine any animal in a motor vehicle if done in a manner that places the animal in a life- or extreme health-threatening situation.
- Stealing farm products and livestock is now a crime and, depending on the value of the stolen goods, a felony punishable by up to five years in jail, under legislation approved by the General Assembly and signed into law by the governor.