

# The Providence Journal

## STATE

# New, slimmed down state archives building proposed to hold RI's state treasures



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## Key Points

The preferred site for a new archives building remains a lot on Smith Street in front of the Department of Administration

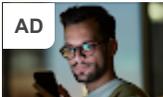
Building next to the PVD train station was rejected due to security concerns and a site on State Street passed up because of parking

The history center building would cost around \$45 million and another \$15 million would store records at URI's Carothers library

Rhode Island Secretary of State Gregg Amore's new plan for a state archives and history museum in Providence is more modest than previous designs that were never built because of their price tags.

The proposed home for Rhode Island's historical treasures would be located across the street from the Rhode Island State House and cost around \$45 million, with another \$15 million requested to store documents at the [University of Rhode Island](#), according to a funding request to [Gov. Dan McKee's](#) administration.

Amore, and before him predecessor Nellie Gorbea, have been pushing for a dedicated, state-owned archives building for years but have seen their requests turned down by the General Assembly.

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Identity theft.** 

In 2024, the archives building was estimated to cost \$102 million. McKee included \$70 million for it in his annual budget proposal, but lawmakers balked at the spending, which would have required voter approval, and the fact that there was no plan identified to bridge the \$32 million funding gap.

So Amore went back to the drawing board, and with \$500,000 set aside in 2024 to study the issue, hired a consultant to find a design and location for a less expensive archives.

The study by LLB Architects, completed at the end of July, recommended chopping the four-story building proposed in 2018-2019 down to two stories. The square footage was also sliced from 52,700 to 24,600 square feet.

The result is a much more modest museum and history center that would not have enough space to keep all of the state's historical records.

So to supplement the new building, Amore is requesting an additional \$15 million to move collections storage and research functions to the University of Rhode Island's Carothers Library on the Kingston campus.

All told, Amore is requesting \$60.8 million in state capital funds, including \$800,000 for his office's website, which hosts the state open meetings portal and other databases.

Most of the money in McKee's 2024 archives proposal, \$60 million of the \$70 million, would have been borrowed and required voter approval if it had made it through the legislature.

Amore's request is for pay-as-you-go capital funds that do not require a referendum, although lawmakers will decide whether to fund the project through a bond that could go before voters in November 2026.

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## What would go in a new Rhode Island History Center?

The Rhode Island State Archives is made up of more than 10 million records, including priceless documents stretching back to 1638, such as Roger Williams' original land deed, a Declaration of Independence, the Act of Renunciation to King George III and a copy of the Bill of Rights.

Those documents, and thousands of more mundane records, have for years lived in spaces leased from private landlords in Providence. The most recent location is at 33 Broad St. (The Royal Charter of 1663 sits in a separate small museum in the Rhode Island State House.)

But Rhode Island's secretaries of state have seen the archives as a potential draw for visitors that will never be realized in rented office space.

They have also expressed concern about preserving and protecting very old texts in buildings the state does not control and which may not have top-notch climate control. One former archives location on Westminster Street had sewer issues.

A new archives history center would have gallery space for rotating exhibits, including traveling materials from out of state and a multipurpose room to host events and functions. There would also be storage space and offices.

"The revised program and design concepts focus on offering a captivating visitor experience to supplement the State House visitor programs and other tours of the Capitol Hill campus," the new feasibility study said. "The core of the program is the exhibit space ('Treasure Room') where the most significant documents with high public interest will be on display."

## Where would the new archives go?

The study looked at four locations in the area around the Rhode Island State House, including the vacant plot in front of the Powers Department of Administration building on Smith Street that was Gork <sup>AD</sup>

One of the parking lots on State Street that serve state offices, the former Chapin state health laboratory building on Orms Street and the lawn next to the Providence train station were also considered.

The Chapin and Station Park sites were both rejected because they were considered too close to the Northeast Corridor train tracks and, as a result, "associated with significant security concerns."

What security concerns were planners worried about, considering the tracks' path is directly underneath the high-traffic Providence Place mall and next to a large apartment building?

"The security concerns for the Station Park site are certainly worst-case scenarios, but proximity to active train tracks increases the risk of explosions or accidents involving toxic and hazardous materials," LeeAnn Byrne, chief of staff for Amore, wrote. "There are also specific limitations for an archives/history center that may not apply to other buildings – for example, vibrations from passing trains would regularly shift archival documents, causing them to deteriorate faster."

That left the two sites on either side of the capitol office complex, 125 Smith St. and the State Street parking lot.

The feasibility study found the State Street site to be the best option, because it is elevated from the street and would "enliven" the central plaza "completing the ensemble of buildings on Capitol Hill."

However, building on that site would mean losing 126 parking spaces from the carapace of asphalt lots covering the capitol complex, a nonstarter in Rhode Island state government.

To develop the State Street site, Amore's request says it would be necessary to build a \$17 million parking garage to maintain all of the parking spaces.

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But the added cost of a garage, bringing the total price tag for State Street above \$60 million, tipped the scale toward the Smith Street site favored by the secretary of state back in 2018, which would only result in the loss of green space.

The estimated cost of the Smith Street building is \$43.2 million (\$32.4 million construction and \$10.8 million in soft costs.)

If the project is approved, the feasibility study recommends hiring a new state history center director and then beginning the design process.

"If design commences in July 2027, the Rhode Island State History Center can be expected to open its doors in July 2030," the study said.

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