



STATE of RHODE ISLAND
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GOVERNOR'S COMMISSION ON DISABILITIES
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Dear Member of the House Finance Committee:

We at the Governor's Commission on Disabilities (GCD) are writing to urge that funds for the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA) are restored as proposed in the Governor's budget. The GCD has consistently advocated for RIPTA funding as we recognize its importance to Rhode Islanders. Our support also extends beyond paratransit, as not all people with disabilities qualify for public transit, but also because we support a program that benefits all Rhode Island.

The Governor's proposed budget recognizes the importance of RIPTA funding to the health and independence of Rhode Islanders as well as to the Rhode Island economy. We hope that this committee will approve the proposed restoration of RIPTA's funding.

Paratransit Services

Paratransit services provide door-to-door transportation to people with disabilities who would otherwise not have access to transportation. For people who use wheelchairs, they provide transportation using accessible vehicles. In 2024 alone, RIDE Paratransit provided service to more than 4,000 Rhode Islanders with Disabilities. As mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), paratransit is required within $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile of any fixed route within the hours that the route runs. While this is a crucial service, it does not address those with disabilities who live outside of the service area, need transportation outside of the area, or outside of regular service hours. In these circumstances, there are often no affordable alternatives for disabled individuals striving for independence, whether that be in accessing employment, education, or socialization.

RIPTA has made great progress to fill this gap in service by introducing its RIDE Anywhere Pilot Program in January 2024. This program has opened new opportunities for people with disabilities, who previously could not independently access areas of our state. According to RIPTA's own studies the program has been highly successful. However, given the popularity of the program, there needs to be an increase in funding for the program.

This all comes at a time when our state is taking the steps to create and implement its own Olmstead Plan. Under the Olmstead ruling, the Supreme Court found that states have a legal obligation to facilitate disabled individuals living, working, and engaging in the community in the least restrictive environment. During listening sessions held as part of the Olmstead planning process, transportation was repeatedly mentioned as a fundamental necessity for independent living. The RIDE Paratransit

program was also frequently mentioned as an example of a service currently available from the state that supports the ability of people with disabilities to live independently.

Fixed Route Services

Our support also extends beyond paratransit, as not all persons with disabilities qualify for public transit, but also because we support a program that benefits all Rhode Island.

Economic Opportunity: The transportation provided by RIPTA expands the range of jobs and economic opportunities available to residents. This is of particular importance to economically disadvantaged individuals who do not own a car. According to the RI Transit Forward Plan, 20% of jobs are within ½ a mile of public transit.¹ Reducing services will further limit the percentage of jobs available to those who rely on public transportation. At the public hearings held last summer, we heard from many people who testified that they will lose their jobs if the cuts are put in place because they will no longer be able to get there. Buying a car is not a viable option, even for those who do not have a disability that prevents them from driving, because of the cost. In 2022 the annual cost of car ownership (not including the purchase price of the car and interest on car loans) was \$3,029, mostly due to insurance rates and the high cost of repairs.² This amount will likely only increase when tariffs are put into place, which will make car ownership out of reach for even more individuals.

Employers also benefit from public transportation, which allows employers to access a broader and more diverse pool of employees allowing them to consistently fill vacant positions and select better qualified candidates for those positions. Cutting services will restrict the number of employees available to businesses. For example, the 73 bus that serves Twin River and the CCRI campus is proposed to be cut. Twin River can be estimated to employ 200 individuals in a wide range of positions. CCRI also employs many people to run the campus- professors, teaching assistants to janitorial staff, and food service. Service to Bryant University is also proposed to be cut. Other lines to the same area are proposed for reduced service. Cutting off service to this area would greatly reduce access for employees to job opportunities at these major employers and conversely access to qualified employees for these businesses.

Having a ready workforce is essential to a state's economic growth. Businesses are attracted to areas with an available, qualified labor force. If faced with a worker shortage, businesses will choose to relocate to another state. Our state cannot afford to lose businesses. We should instead use our transit system as a way to attract businesses. We have already invested in lines to serve specific companies, such as Amazon, to encourage them to come to Rhode Island. Decreasing service will have the opposite effect, and businesses will choose to relocate in other states.

Small Businesses: Small and medium sized businesses also benefit from RIPTA. Not only does it enhance their available workforce, but it also helps make their businesses accessible to more people. If routes are cut, this will eliminate the ability of customers to travel to their stores and buy goods and services.

¹ [Cost and benefits - RIPTA](#)

² <https://www.golocalprov.com/business/rhode-island-is-new-englands-most-expensive-state-to-drive-in-says-report>

For example, service to Wickford Village will be reduced under the proposed cuts. As a result, fewer people will travel to patronize the shopping area there.

Housing: Rhode Island is struggling with a housing crisis at a 2.6 rental vacancy rate³ and a home vacancy rate of .4%⁴. This makes finding a home extremely difficult in this state. We heard from several people at the hearings that they chose to move to an area because it had access to public transportation, but their access would be lost under the cuts. These are people who rely on public transportation, and without it they will be stranded. Because of the low vacancy rate in this state, moving is not a viable option.

In choosing where to spend any available funding that the state has, restoring RIPTA funding is a choice that will bring the greatest benefit to the Rhode Island economy. According to the American Public Transportation Association, every \$1 invested in public transportation generates \$5 in economic returns. Every \$10 million in operating investment yields \$32 million in increased business sales⁵. This means that restoring \$10 million to RIPTA's budget will generate \$32 million in increased business sales for Rhode Island. As explained above, reducing funding will conversely have a ripple affect that will harm the economy due to loss of workers, employers and consumers in addition to making essential services less accessible to those who need them.

We also know that investing in RIPTA is a smart choice because the efficiency study demonstrates that RIPTA has used the funds available to it to provide the best possible service. Metrics such as cost per capita, the percentage of funds used for administrative costs, and bus cost per revenue mile are show that the agency is performing well, providing residents value for the tax dollars. This allows you to be confident in providing funding to RIPTA over investing it into another initiative that is unproven or has not undergone such a rigorous analysis.

For these reasons, we at the Governor's Commission on Disabilities strongly urge the Governor and the General Assembly to restore the funding to RIPTA.

Elisabeth Hubbard

Elisabeth K. Hubbard, Executive Secretary

³ <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/RIRVAC>

⁴ <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/RIHVAC>

⁵ [Public Transportation Facts - American Public Transportation Association](#)