

April 14, 2026

House Finance Committee  
Rhode Island General Assembly  
State House  
Providence, Rhode Island 02903

**Re:** Written Testimony in Support of House Bill No. 8144 – Capital Development Program, 2026 Green Economy Bond Referenda

Dear Members of the House Finance Committee,

My name is Andrew Wade, and I serve as the Director of Community Services & Parks for the Town of East Greenwich. I am writing today with deep conviction and a sense of professional obligation to offer my strong support for House Bill No. 8144 and the requested \$3 million increase in Rhode Island's Outdoor Recreation Grant Program funding within the FY2027 Green Economy Bond.

Over the course of a 26-year career in parks and recreation, I have had the privilege of witnessing firsthand the transformative power that parks, open spaces, and recreational infrastructure hold for communities across Rhode Island. I have served on the Rhode Island Recreation Resources Commission (RRRC) for 12 years – six of those years as Chairperson – and in that capacity I have reviewed hundreds of project applications, evaluated statewide community need, and observed how thoughtful public investment in parks changes the trajectory of lives and neighborhoods. I submit this testimony not merely as a professional, but as someone who has spent more than two decades at the intersection of community well-being and public investment.

### **The Gap Between Need and Investment Is Striking**

The numbers before this committee tell a compelling story. In the most recent 2026 grant cycle, Rhode Island municipalities submitted 50 applications from 28 communities, requesting over \$15 million in funding. Only \$5.8 million was awarded to 15 communities, leaving the vast majority of eligible, ready projects unfunded. Against this backdrop, the current FY2027 budget proposes only \$1 million for the next cycle – a reduction that would represent a dramatic step backward at precisely the wrong time.

The \$3 million increase sought through House Bill No. 8144 would meaningfully close that gap. More importantly, it would signal to Rhode Island's municipalities that the state values what decades of research consistently demonstrate: parks are essential infrastructure, not discretionary amenities.

### **What the Evidence Tells Us: NRPA Standards and Research**

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) – the foremost national authority on standards, research, and best practices in our field – has documented in rigorous

and extensive research the profound return on investment that parks deliver to communities and taxpayers alike.

NRPA's national standards recommend a minimum of 10 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents. Many Rhode Island communities fall short of this benchmark, and aging infrastructure only widens the gap between what residents need and what municipalities can provide without state support. The Outdoor Recreation Grant Program is, in many cases, the only viable mechanism through which smaller and less-resourced municipalities can begin to close that gap.

According to NRPA research, every \$1 invested in parks and recreation infrastructure returns approximately \$3 in public health savings alone. Physical inactivity costs the United States an estimated \$117 billion annually in healthcare expenditures – a burden that quality parks directly help to reduce. Communities with accessible, well-maintained parks see measurably higher rates of physical activity among residents across all age groups, contributing to lower rates of obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and mental illness.

NRPA data also reflects that approximately 80% of Americans view parks and recreation as an essential local government service – a conviction reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic, when parks emerged as the single most consistently accessed public amenity, providing mental health relief, safe outdoor space, and community connection when nearly every other public institution was closed.

### **Parks Are an Economic Engine – Not Just a Public Expense**

The economic case for park investment is as strong as the public health case – and the two are deeply intertwined. Parks do not merely cost money; they generate it, attract it, and protect it. A growing body of national research documents what communities with great parks have long understood intuitively: quality green space is a driver of local economic vitality.

The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, in partnership with the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable, has measured the outdoor recreation economy at approximately \$788 billion in annual contribution to the nation's GDP – representing nearly 2% of the total U.S. economy. Locally, the NRPA has documented that parks and recreation agencies generate more than \$154 billion in economic activity each year and support over 1.1 million jobs nationwide. These are not abstract figures; they reflect the real economic output of the parks, trails, facilities, and programs that state investment makes possible.

The impact on property values is particularly well-documented. Research published by the Trust for Public Land and corroborated by numerous academic studies has found that residential properties located within a quarter mile of a quality park or greenway command premiums of between 5% and 20% compared to similar properties without park access. In a state like Rhode Island, where property tax revenue is a cornerstone of municipal finance, this translates directly into stronger local tax bases, greater fiscal capacity for communities, and a positive return on every dollar of state investment in

park infrastructure. A community that invests in a quality park is also, by extension, investing in the long-term health of its tax rolls.

The effect on local businesses is equally compelling. The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy has studied the economic impact of trail corridors across the country and found consistent, meaningful increases in revenue for businesses located along trail routes – restaurants, cafés, outfitters, bike shops, and local retailers all benefit from the foot traffic that well-designed parks and greenways attract. Communities that have invested in waterfront parks, multi-use trail networks, and destination recreational facilities have seen those investments catalyze broader commercial revitalization in adjacent areas. In communities that compete to attract employers, young families, and visitors, high-quality parks and recreational amenities have become a measurable factor in site selection and economic development decisions.

NRPA research further highlights that parks reduce long-term municipal costs associated with crime, healthcare, and social services – savings that compound over time. A neighborhood with an accessible, well-maintained park tends to have lower crime rates, stronger social cohesion, and greater resilience against economic decline. Conversely, communities that allow park infrastructure to deteriorate often find themselves facing far more expensive consequences: code violations, safety liabilities, reduced property values, and the harder-to-measure but very real cost of community disinvestment. The choice before this committee is, in a very real sense, a choice between investing now at a modest cost or paying far more later.

### **Parks Change Lives – for Every Generation**

I believe deeply, after 26 years in this profession, that parks are among the most profoundly democratizing institutions a community can provide. They ask nothing of the people who enter them – no admission fee, no membership, no prerequisite. They welcome the child with nowhere else to play safely, the teenager seeking a constructive after-school environment, the working parent looking for a few hours outdoors with their family, the older adult managing their health through daily walks, and the senior finding connection and purpose in programming designed for them.

For our youngest residents, NRPA research documents that youth with access to quality recreational facilities and programming show lower rates of juvenile delinquency, higher levels of school engagement, and stronger social-emotional development. Nature-based play – the kind that well-designed parks provide – has been shown to reduce symptoms of attention disorders and build cognitive resilience in children. The park is often the first place a child learns to navigate the social world outside their home.

For Rhode Island's older adults – one of the fastest-growing demographic segments in our state – regular use of parks and participation in recreation programming is associated with reduced social isolation, improved cognitive health, lower rates of depression and anxiety, and greater physical independence. These are not incidental benefits; they are outcomes with measurable, positive implications for healthcare systems and long-term care costs statewide.

NRPA's work on social equity further highlights that parks are often the primary – and sometimes the only – health and wellness resource available to low- and moderate-income residents. In communities where gym memberships, private sports leagues, and recreational travel are financially out of reach, the local park is not a luxury. It is a lifeline. Investing in parks is an act of equity, and Rhode Island has the opportunity to affirm that commitment through the passage of this legislation.

### **Rhode Island Deserves to Meet This Moment**

As someone who has reviewed countless project applications through my 12 years of service on the RRRC – including six years as Chairperson – I can attest that the communities applying for these grants are not seeking amenities. They are seeking to meet basic, documented, and urgent need. They are replacing aging and failing infrastructure that poses safety risks. They are creating accessible spaces that welcome residents of all abilities. They are building the community gathering places that research consistently tells us are foundational to social cohesion, mental and physical wellness, and civic identity.

The demand is real, it is documented, and it is statewide. The 2026 grant cycle alone demonstrated that Rhode Island municipalities are ready, willing, and eager to invest in their communities – they simply need a state partner that meets them at the level of demonstrated need. A \$1 million allocation against \$15 million in requests is not a partnership; it is a missed opportunity.

The case for increased investment is not speculative. It is grounded in more than two decades of NRPA national research, in Rhode Island's own grant data, in the professional consensus of our field, and in the lived experience of the communities I have spent a career serving. Parks change lives – at every age, in every season, in every corner of this state.

I respectfully and enthusiastically urge the members of this committee to support House Bill No. 8144 and the requested \$3 million increase in Outdoor Recreation Grant Program funding. This investment will return measurable value to Rhode Island residents of every age and background, in every municipality, with the reach and equity that only a well-funded public parks system can deliver.

Thank you sincerely for your time, your service to the people of Rhode Island, and your thoughtful consideration of this testimony.

Respectfully submitted,

### **Andrew Wade**

Director of Community Services & Parks  
Town of East Greenwich, Rhode Island  
Rhode Island Recreation Resources Commission – Former Chairperson  
26 Years of Service in Parks and Recreation