

State of Rhode Island

JOURNAL

-OF THE-

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

JANUARY SESSION of the General Assembly begun and held at the State House in the City of Providence on Tuesday, the Second Day of January in the year of Our Lord Two Thousand and Twenty-Four.

Volume 151, No. 1

Tuesday, January 2, 2024

First Day

The House of Representatives meets at the State House in Providence, on Tuesday, January 2, 2024, and is called to order at 4:10 o'clock P.M., by the Honorable K. Joseph Shekarchi, Speaker.

The roll is called and a quorum is declared present with 70 members present and 5 members absent as follows:

PRESENT – 70: The Honorable Speaker Shekarchi and Representatives Abney, Ackerman, Ajello, Azzinaro, Baginski, Batista, Bennett, Biah, Blazejewski, Boylan, Brien, Caldwell, Cardillo, Carson, Casey, Casimiro, Chippendale, Cortvriend, Corvese, Costantino, Cotter, Craven, Cruz, Dawson, DeSimone, Diaz, Donovan, Edwards, Fellela, Fenton-Fung, Finkelman, Fogarty, Giraldo, Handy, Henries, Hull, Kazarian, Kennedy, Kislak, Knight, Lima, Lombardi, Marszalkowski, McEntee, McGaw, McNamara, Messier, Morales, Nardone, Newberry, Noret, O'Brien, Perez, Phillips, Place, Potter, Rea, Sanchez, Serpa, Shallcross Smith, Shanley, Slater, Solomon, Speakman, Spears, Stewart, Tanzi, Vella-Wilkinson and Voas.

ABSENT – 5: Representatives Alzate, Felix, Morgan, Quattrocchi and Roberts.

INVOCATION

The Honorable Speaker presents Chairman Samuel A. Azzinaro who delivers the Invocation and leads the membership in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.

(For Invocation, see Appendix, this Journal.)

APPROVAL OF RECORD

By unanimous consent, the House Journal of Thursday, June 15, 2023, is approved.

COMMUNICATIONS

Representative Leonela Felix is unable to attend session today, Tuesday, January 2, 2024.
Representative Patricia L. Morgan is unable to attend session today, Tuesday, January 2, 2024.
Representative Karen Alzate is unable to attend session today, Tuesday, January 2, 2024.

ADJOURNMENT OF 2023 SESSION

On the motion of Majority Leader Blazejewski seconded by Minority Leader Chippendale, the House adjourns the 2023 session on a voice vote.

GUESTS

Majority Leader Blazejewski welcomes to the House Chamber the United States 1st District Representative Gabe Amo and his District Director, Kate Michaud, the former Town Manager in Warren.

COMMENCEMENT OF 2024

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ABSENT – 5: Representatives Alzate, Felix, Morgan, Quattrocchi and Roberts.

COMMUNICATIONS

Representative Leonela Felix is unable to attend session today, Tuesday, January 2, 2024.
Representative Patricia L. Morgan is unable to attend session today, Tuesday, January 2, 2024.
Representative Karen Alzate is unable to attend session today, Tuesday, January 2, 2024.

OPENING DAY ADDRESS

The Honorable Speaker Shekarchi addresses the members of the House.

(For Speaker's Address see appendix of Journal)

By unanimous consent, the House returns to:

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Representative Sanchez announces that he looks forward to working closely with everyone on Education and Housing issues this year.

Majority Leader Blazejewski announces that the next House session will be this Thursday, January 4, 2024, at 4 p.m. Next week, House session will be held on Tuesday, January 9, and Wednesday, January 10, 2024, at 4 p.m. Members should receive their recently requested legislation, which can be introduced this Thursday, January 4, 2024. Per an agreement with Speaker Shekarchi, Minority Leader Chippendale, and Majority Leader Blazejewski are requesting a chamber-wide commitment that each representative not exceed 15 bills for introduction this session. This bill limit is intended to be a mutual agreement within the chamber. This number includes any 7D introductions, but would not include legislation pertaining to marriages, corporate charters, resolutions, city and town bills, and legislation requested by a state agency. Also, this Thursday, January 4, 2024, a photographer will be available in the House Lounge beginning at 3 p.m. and will remain at the Rise to take new official photographs.

Majority Leader Blazejewski would like to wish Speaker Pro Tempore Brian Patrick Kennedy, NCSL President a Happy Birthday!

Representative Lombardi wishes Danica Iacoi a Happy Birthday!

IMMEDIATE CONSIDERATION

House Resolution No. 7000

BY Shekarchi, Blazejewski, McNamara, Chippendale, Kennedy, Edwards, Cruz, Potter, Handy, Bennett

ENTITLED, HOUSE RESOLUTION EXPRESSING CONDOLENCES ON THE PASSING OF THE HONORABLE NEIL A. CORKERY {LC3276/1}

With the agreement of the majority and the minority, Chairman McNamara requests unanimous consent for immediate consideration.

There is no objection.

Chairman McNamara discusses the resolution.

Read and passed, on a motion of Chairman McNamara, seconded by many others, by unanimous consent, on a rising vote.

House Resolution No. 7000

BY Shekarchi, Blazejewski, McNamara, Chippendale, Kennedy, Edwards, Cruz, Potter, Handy, Bennett

ENTITLED, HOUSE RESOLUTION EXPRESSING CONDOLENCES ON THE PASSING OF THE HONORABLE NEIL A. CORKERY {LC3276/1}

With the agreement of the majority and the minority, Representative Fenton-Fung requests unanimous consent for immediate consideration.

There is no objection.

Representative Fenton-Fung discusses the resolution.

Read and passed, on a motion of Representative Fenton-Fung, seconded by many others, by unanimous consent, on a rising vote.

House Resolution No. 7002

BY Fellela, Cardillo, Shekarchi, Blazejewski, Perez, Noret, Hull, Costantino, Rea, Serpa

ENTITLED, HOUSE RESOLUTION EXPRESSING DEEPEST CONDOLENCES ON THE PASSING OF CHIEF JOSEPH P. RAZZA, JOHNSTON POLICE DEPARTMENT, RETIRED {LC3267/1}

With the agreement of the majority and the minority, Representative Fellela requests unanimous consent for immediate consideration.

There is no objection.

Representative Fellela discusses the resolution. Speaker Shekarchi offers his condolences to the Razza family.

Read and passed, on a motion of Representative Fellela, seconded by many others, by unanimous consent, on a rising vote.

House Resolution No. 7003

BY Shekarchi, Blazejewski, Corvese, Chippendale, Kennedy, Edwards, Handy, Fellela, Tanzi, Bennett

ENTITLED, HOUSE RESOLUTION EXPRESSING CONDOLENCES ON THE PASSING OF DANIEL L. BEARDSLEY, JR. {LC3282/1}

With the agreement of the majority and the minority, on behalf of Speaker Shekarchi, Chairman Corvese requests unanimous consent for immediate consideration.

There is no objection.

Chairman Corvese discusses the resolution. Speaker Shekarchi offers his condolences to the Beardsley family.

Read and passed, on a motion of Chairman Corvese, seconded by many others, by unanimous consent, on a rising vote.

House Resolution No. 7004

BY Shekarchi, Blazejewski, Serpa, Fellela, Fenton-Fung, Chippendale, Hull, Corvese, Potter, Costantino

ENTITLED, HOUSE RESOLUTION EXTENDING DEEPEST SYMPATHY ON THE PASSING OF MADELINE MONTANARO {LC3792/1}

With the agreement of the majority and the minority, on behalf of Speaker Shekarchi, Chairwoman Serpa requests unanimous consent for immediate consideration.

There is no objection.

Chairwoman Serpa discusses the resolution. Speaker Shekarchi offers his condolences to the Montanaro family.

Read and passed, on a motion of Chairwoman Serpa, seconded by many others, by unanimous consent, on a rising vote.

House Resolution No. 7005

BY Shekarchi, Blazejewski, Lima, Diaz, Hull, Lombardi J, Kennedy, Serpa, Kazarian, McEntee

ENTITLED, HOUSE RESOLUTION EXTENDING DEEPEST CONDOLENCES ON THE PASSING OF KIM A. NARDOLILLO {LC3443/1}

With the agreement of the majority and the minority, Representative Lima requests unanimous consent for immediate consideration.

There is no objection.

Representative Lima discusses the resolution. Speaker Shekarchi offers his condolences to the Nardolillo family.

Read and passed, on a motion of Representative Lima, seconded by Speaker Shekarchi, Majority Leader Blazejewski, Chairwoman Diaz, and many others, by unanimous consent, on a rising vote.

TRANSMITTAL

By unanimous consent, all matters on the clerk's desk are ordered to be transmitted to His Excellency, the Governor, to the Honorable Senate, and the Honorable Secretary of State forthwith.

(For Transmittals to Governor, see Appendix of this Journal.)

DESK HELD OPEN

The Honorable Speaker Shekarchi announces that the desk will be held open.

ADJOURNMENT

At 4:50 o'clock P.M. on motion of Representative McNamara, and as a further mark of respect to the memory of Hon. Neil Corkery; on motion of Representative Fenton-Fung, and as a further mark of respect to the memory of Hon. James Davey; on motion of Representative Fellela, and as a further mark of respect to the memory of Johnston Police Chief Joseph Razza; on motion of Representative Corvese, and as a further mark of respect to the memory of Daniel Beardsley Jr.; on motion of Representative Serpa, and as a further mark of respect to the memory of Madeline Montanaro; on motion of Representative Lima, and as a further mark of respect to the memory of Kim Nardolillo; on motion of Representative Brien, and as a further mark of respect to the memory of Shirley Nunes seconded by Leaders Blazejewski and Chippendale the House adjourns, on a unanimous rising vote.

Diane M. DePina
Recording Clerk

APPENDIX**INVOCATION****REPRESENTATIVE SAMUEL A. AZZINARO**

Dear Lord: As we start our new session help us to always remember the commitment we have made to our constituents, to our State, and our country. May we always give of ourselves, without fear nor favor. And may we always be faithful and honest with each other, and to all those we are here to serve. Amen

APPENDIX**OPENING DAY REMARKS****BY SPEAKER SHEKARCHI****TUESDAY, JANUARY 2, 2024**

Members of the House, guests, and the people of Rhode Island:

Welcome back to our beautiful chamber! The last time we were all together in this room was six months ago ... however, it truly feels like we never really left. Technically, we are considered to be a part-time legislature, but many of the issues we face have required our constant focus and attention as we continue to build back after the pandemic.

There is good news: I am hopeful that Rhode Island has dodged a recession – and I am confident the strategic investments we made during the last few legislative sessions have prevented our economy from floundering. The painstaking choices made in this room have given the state great tools to grapple with many critical ongoing issues. But we aren't out of the woods yet.

Since becoming Speaker, I am proud that we have passed four balanced budgets in which we have not raised taxes. In fact, the General Assembly has made strategic tax cuts that positively impacted virtually every Rhode Islander, such as:

- The permanent elimination of the car tax;
- A widespread exemption in the tangible tax which wiped out the tax for 75% of Rhode Island small businesses;
- Raising the amount of annual retirement income that is exempt from state taxation;
- And eliminating all state income taxes on military pensions.

Despite these reforms, our constituents, like most Americans, are still feeling the pinch of inflation.

I always say that crafting a balanced budget is the most important duty we have in the House. The budget is the ultimate policy statement ... and the budget we create this session will uniquely reflect the priorities of the people in this room and the constituents we serve.

But I want to caution all of you: this year, there are some very tough decisions ahead.

The influx of new federal pandemic relief is finished. We have wisely leveraged our federal funding, and we have made investments that will stand the test of time. However, this year's budget will look very different than the last few years. The give-and-take of balancing a budget is much different when we are forced to live within our own means—difficult choices must be made. Some of our newer colleagues have not had to deal with a difficult budget year.

Through our legislative process, our collective priorities will develop and refine. We must also maintain a steady focus on the initiatives in which we have already made substantial investments.

Safe and affordable housing for every Rhode Islander has always been a personal priority for me, but it is also paramount for many of you. I want to recognize the work of Rep. June Speakman, who has chaired the Housing Affordability Study Commission for several years.

The work of that commission was responsible for the development and enactment of a dozen critical bills aimed at breaking down barriers to housing access and production, production, production.

Continuing to address the housing crisis will be an ongoing responsibility for all of us. We have made historic investments in housing – about \$300 million dollars – but our work is just beginning.

With housing prices and rents still rising and housing supply dangerously lagging, our housing and homelessness crisis is far from solved.

Many of the housing laws we passed last year took effect just yesterday. We have been very thoughtful in our approach and have given municipalities ample time – more than 6 months – to prepare for the new laws.

Many municipalities are embracing our efforts. Providence, Warwick, South Kingstown, East Providence, and others have proactively implemented new zoning to align with the legislation we've passed. However, some are wrongly trying to circumvent the spirit of the new laws.

We must not let this pushback alter our course. We must stand our ground and allow the reforms to take effect ... and let us renew our efforts to get ADUs over the finish line in 2024!

Along with housing, the environment and the stability of our infrastructure will continue to be top of mind in our chamber. In just the last few weeks, we have endured massive disruptions due to the sudden failure of one of the busiest sections of our interstate highway. Days later, widespread flooding from a powerful storm caused substantial damage to several communities.

As the Ocean State, we can literally the impact of warming temperatures and rising sea levels. In many ways, we are ground zero for climate change.

In anticipation, we have enacted landmark environmental legislation that has become a model for other states across the country. Rhode Island is leading the way when it comes to environmental initiatives: The Act on Climate, harnessing the power of wind energy, transitioning to a green economy, banning harmful PFAS from food packaging and our water supply, and reducing plastic waste.

Despite all these accomplishments, the last few weeks are a reminder that the General Assembly must soldier on in our efforts to safeguard our environment.

We are also witnessing a sea change in our workforce environment. Since the onset of the pandemic, we have seen a continuing labor shortage across multiple critical industries, including essential state services, schools, and private-sector businesses.

In recent months, we have been focused on alarming declines in the ranks of healthcare providers—especially primary care physicians.

There are increasing and concerning indications that our entire healthcare system is under a great deal of strain.

Collective effort across state and federal government, hospital systems, and health insurance providers will be required to stabilize our health care system for the future. Like access to safe housing, access to quality health care is fundamental for all Rhode Islanders, and I believe it will be a primary focus of the upcoming session.

We should all be encouraged by the life science industry in Rhode Island, which has the potential to dramatically improve our economy and workforce. We invested \$45 million dollars to jump-start our efforts in the life sciences, and the economic possibilities are limitless.

The Rhode Island Life Science Hub will tap into new discoveries to prevent emerging health threats. It will attract well-paying research and development jobs to Rhode Island, and create opportunities for families while preventing the brain drain of our talented graduates moving elsewhere.

Another important issue that we have been steadily working on since June is reforming the Law Enforcement Officers' Bill of Rights. We have encouraged the participation of all stakeholders in crafting a fair and measured bill. I am confident that our efforts over these several months will lead to the passage of meaningful legislation in 2024.

I want to take a moment to thank the chairs of our 12 commissions, as well as the members who volunteer their time during the so-called "off-session." People used to say that study commissions were where legislation went to die. I am very proud that this is absolutely not the case anymore.

I love bringing people together to get good things done. Our commissions are made up of an all-star lineup of the foremost industry experts on land use, housing, the environment, public safety, and our workforce. All of these individuals generously give their time and expertise, spending countless hours analyzing data and testimony, with little fanfare and no compensation.

As I like to say, the proof is in the pudding. We have had many pieces of legislation introduced based upon the findings of our commissions.

The result is a better product: thoughtful legislation that incorporates feedback from multiple stakeholders and is fact-based.

I am really looking forward to the legislation that will be introduced this year as a result of the hard work of our many commissions.

Something else that I'm very proud of is the transparency with which the House operates. All of our commissions, all of our committees, and all of our House sessions are televised, live-streamed, and available to view on demand. All documents and testimony are posted online for the public to review. And, we just updated the General Assembly's website so it's more user-friendly for the public we serve.

I am also proud of the decorum with which we conduct ourselves. As an example, members of this House have voluntarily agreed to adhere to a limit of 15 bills per member. We are confident this reduction of bills will improve our hearing process and facilitate public participation. I have every confidence that our spirit of collaboration and respect will serve us and the people of Rhode Island well as we begin this new session.

I pledge to work as hard as I can to live up to the trust that my constituents and all of you have placed in me. I have faith in our process, and I have faith in all of you. Now let's get to work for the great people of the State of Rhode Island!