

June 29, 2022

Legislative Press Bureau at (401) 528-1743

## **THIS YEAR AT THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

STATE HOUSE — Here are the highlights from news and events that took place in the General Assembly this year. For more information on any of these items visit <http://www.rilegislature.gov/pressrelease>



### **TAX RELIEF**

- The General Assembly approved an accelerated phase-out of the motor vehicle excise tax, eliminating it one year ahead of schedule.
- Legislators added a one-time child tax credit of \$250 per child, for up to three children per family, for those meeting the income guidelines.
- Lawmakers added \$4 million to increase the “circuit breaker” tax credit available to qualifying elderly and disabled residents, raising the maximum credit from about \$400 to \$600 beginning in tax year 2022 and indexing that amount to inflation.
- For other retirees, the Assembly raised from \$15,000 to \$20,000 the amount of annual pension income that is exempt from state taxation.

### **HOUSING**

- Legislators allocated \$250 million from the American Rescue Plan Act funds for affordable housing and addressing homelessness, including \$30 million for down payment assistance for homebuyers and \$10 million toward housing for the homeless.
- The General Assembly streamlined the procedure for approval of the construction of low or moderate income housing and updated the state’s Low and Moderate Income Housing Act.
- Lawmakers elevated the position of Deputy Secretary of Commerce for Housing to Secretary of Housing, a cabinet-level position within the executive branch of government, and created a new Department of Housing.
- The Assembly established the repurposing of school buildings for an affordable housing program, which shall be administered by the Secretary of Housing.
- Legislators revised the definition of an accessory dwelling unit (ADU) and removed the requirement that an ADU be occupied by someone related by family to the principal residence.

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## **JUSTICE and PUBLIC SAFETY**

- The General Assembly approved a law to legalize, regulate and tax adult recreational cannabis use in Rhode Island and automatically expunge previous criminal records relating to marijuana possession.
- The General Assembly approved bills to ban large-capacity gun magazines, limit sales of guns and ammunition to adults over 21 years old, and penalize the open carrying of loaded rifles and shotguns in public.
- The General Assembly approved legislation that allows the Division of Motor Vehicles to issue driving privileges to undocumented residents in the state.
- The General Assembly approved legislation to allow wiretaps for suspected human trafficking investigations.
- The General Assembly approved legislation to allow hotels to evict guests who verbally abuse or threaten hotel staff or other guests.
- The General Assembly passed legislation that increases the age of children who are able to utilize recorded forensic interviews when testifying before grand juries in cases of child sexual abuse.
- The General Assembly approved legislation to punish those in positions of authority who engage in sexual relations with minors.
- The Assembly approved legislation establishing the Address Confidentiality Program, which would enable a victim of domestic violence to apply to the Secretary of State to have an address designated by the Secretary to serve as the person's substitute address.
- Legislators voted to regulate the use of sexual assault evidence kits and enumerate the rights of victims in relation to those kits.

## **ENVIRONMENT**

- Legislators voted to substantially increase renewable energy production and supply by requiring that 100 percent of Rhode Island's electricity be offset by renewable production by 2033.
- Rhode Island will open the door to significantly more renewable energy for the state under legislation passed by the General Assembly seeking the development of 600 to 1,000 megawatts of new offshore wind capacity.
- The General Assembly approved the Plastic Waste Reduction Act, which is designed to reduce the use of plastic checkout bags by retail establishments by offering recyclable bag options and providing penalties for violations.
- The General Assembly approved legislation prohibiting per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) from food packaging made or sold in Rhode Island beginning in 2024.
- Lawmakers approved legislation that would provide for the Department of Health to take action to establish maximum contaminate levels for PFAS in drinking water and set interim standards.
- Voters will be asked in November to approve a \$50 million "green bond" authorizing \$38 million in borrowing for conservation and recreation projects and \$12 million for an education center at Roger Williams Park Zoo.
- Lawmakers allocated \$25 million from American Rescue Plan Act funds for grants to help low-and moderate-income households and community organizations to purchase and install electric heat pump systems.

- The legislature amended dam safety standards to require the State Building Code Standards Committee to take into account the effect of climate change on inundation areas below dams classified as high, significant, or low hazard.
- The Assembly passed a law to authorize the Department of Environmental Management to assess administrative penalties for failure to comply with emergency action plans relative to significant or high hazard dams.
- Legislators voted to rein in the use of neonicotinoids, a class of neuro-active insecticides that have come under increasing scrutiny over their environmental impacts, particularly their threat to the bee population.

## **HEALTHCARE**

- Lawmakers included in the budget numerous increases to providers of health care, home and community services for children, elderly, developmentally disabled individuals and low-income Rhode Islanders, and asked the Office of the Health Insurance Commissioner to conduct a study on appropriate reimbursement rates in the future.
- The budget included \$168 million for upgrades to Eleanor Slater Hospital, including \$108 million to construct a new long-term acute care hospital at the Zambarano campus in Burrillville.
- The General Assembly strengthened the hospital merger review process, prohibiting an expedited review under the Hospital Conversion Act when the combined hospitals after a merger would account for 20 percent or more of the hospitals in the state.
- Private health insurers will be required to cover biomarker testing, which helps a cancer patient's medical team pinpoint the most effective course of treatment for that patient.
- The General Assembly passed legislation to require insurance coverage for the treatment of pediatric autoimmune neuropsychiatric disorders associated with streptococcal infections and pediatric acute onset neuropsychiatric syndrome.
- Legislators passed a bill to provide health care coverage for laparoscopic removal of uterine fibroids.
- The General Assembly passed a bill to create a way to redistribute unused medication to aid people who cannot access or afford their prescriptions.

## **MENTAL HEALTH**

- The budget includes \$30 million from American Rescue Plan Act funds to support community behavioral health care clinics.
- The budget also funded two full-time positions for a mental health treatment court pilot program.
- The General Assembly passed legislation that would address the shortage of mental health counselors by creating a two-tiered licensing structure to allow applicants as mental health associates to practice under supervision prior to becoming a licensed counselor or therapist.
- The General Assembly passed legislation that would authorize the governor to enter into the Psychology Interjurisdictional Compact and would designate an office to administer it.
- The General Assembly passed legislation that would provide procedures to prevent problem gamblers on the state's self-exclusion list from collecting their winnings at Rhode Island's two casinos.

- Legislators established a core state behavioral health crisis services system, which would include establishing and administering a 9-8-8 suicide prevention hotline.
- The budget includes \$1 million to study the feasibility of erecting suicide barriers on the three bridges that connect Aquidneck Island and Jamestown to the mainland.
- The General Assembly passed a law providing that no applicant for a license as a clinical social worker shall be required to take or pass a standardized written examination, prior to Aug. 15, 2025, in order to qualify for the license.

## **EDUCATION**

- The budget fully supported the state education funding formula, providing \$17 million more than the previous year.
- The budget makes a commitment to nearly double the number of voluntary, free, high-quality pre-kindergarten seats to 5,000 statewide over five years.
- Voters in November's election will be asked to approve a \$250 million bond for kindergarten through Grade 12 school construction projects. An additional \$50 million was committed in the budget for school construction.
- A second ballot question in November will seek approval for \$100 million in borrowing for new construction and repairs at the University of Rhode Island Narragansett Bay campus. Another \$12 million out of capital funds will be used for construction at the Community College of Rhode Island.
- The General Assembly approved legislation that provides that in developing alternative-learning plans, consideration would be given to the unique difficulties and interruptions that many students have experienced because of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The General Assembly passed legislation to temporarily suspend the cap on the number of days retired educators can work without penalty due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The General Assembly approved legislation to allow speech therapy services to be provided in school to children who need them, regardless of age.
- The General Assembly approved a resolution that creates a commission to study, review, and make recommendations on how to most efficiently and effectively administer the governance of the pre-K through 16 public education system in Rhode Island.
- The General Assembly approved legislation to require the state's higher education institutions to accept for college credit an Advanced Placement (AP) test score of three or better.
- The Assembly passed legislation which requires guidance departments to ensure that notices are provided to students and their parents or guardians regarding the FAFSA form and the Rhode Island alternative financial aid application form.

## **CHILDREN and FAMILIES**

- The budget funded increases for families in Rhode Island Works, raising the monthly income disregards, raising the resource limit from \$1,000 to \$5,000, increasing the lifetime limit from 48 to 60 months, expanding eligibility to more families and allowing parents to remain in the program while finishing a second year at CCRI.
- Lawmakers increased the rates the state pays for child care services and expanded eligibility for child care assistance.

- Legislators included a pilot program to grant SNAP recipients a 50-cent credit for to their EBT card for every dollar used to purchase fruits and vegetables, subject to limits.
- The state budget includes \$12 million to expand existing in-state capacity at private psychiatric facilities for girls and initial design of a new state girls' facility, as well as \$45 million toward its construction.
- The General Assembly passed legislation that would require the Department of Children, Youth and Families to determine the military status of the parents of any abused child and report the matter to the appropriate military authorities, including the Military Family Advocacy Program.
- The General Assembly passed legislation that would establish felony penalties for parents or guardians convicted of child endangerment.
- The General Assembly approved legislation to implement trauma-informed practices in schools throughout the state.

### **BUSINESS/ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

- Legislators added a provision to dedicate \$100 million to the unemployment trust fund to reduce businesses' unemployment tax rates for 2023.
- The General Assembly approved legislation that will permanently allow restaurants and brewpubs to sell wine, beer and mixed drinks with takeout food orders.
- Legislators approved a bill to provide protections to allow restaurants to continue approved outdoor dining during the pandemic until April 1, 2023.
- Lawmakers budgeted \$70 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds for Blue Economy investments, including ports and shipping defense, marine trade, ocean-based renewables, aquaculture and tourism; another \$60 million from ARPA to support infrastructure at the Port of Davisville; and \$46 million from capital plan funds for rehabilitation of the Port of Galilee.
- The budget includes broadband infrastructure planning work, including a needs assessment, statewide mapping of broadband access and cost, and one new broadband director position at the Commerce Corporation, along with the creation of a broadband advisory council.
- The budget includes \$30 million in American Rescue Plan Act funds for new bioscience investments including a wet lab facility for both academic and private sector research
- Another \$35 million from American Rescue Plan Act funds is dedicated to early-phase development of the South Quay Marine Terminal on the East Providence waterfront, which has been proposed as a staging area for the assembly of wind turbines.
- Legislators approved a cottage food program to allow individuals to sell food items such as baked goods prepared from their own homes, with certain health and safety requirements and permits.
- The budget provides \$28 million to recapitalize the Historic Tax Credit Fund to reach more projects in an existing queue.

### **CONSUMER PROTECTION**

- Lawmakers approved consumer protections for solar energy system consumers providing the rights concerning disclosures, cancellation and liens.

- The Assembly approved legislation developing standards and enforcement protocols for the use of online or remote assessment mechanisms to conduct an eye assessment or to generate a prescription for contact lenses or visual aid glasses in Rhode Island.
- The General Assembly approved legislation designed to help curb the theft of catalytic converters.

### **LABOR/WORKFORCE**

- The General Assembly gave its approval to legislation to extend by one year changes to unemployment regulations to put Rhode Islanders back to work and allow them to make more money.
- Legislators approved a measure forbidding employers from receiving any portion of the tips given by customers to their tipped employees, with limited exceptions for credit card service charges on them.
- The General Assembly passed legislation to repeal a law allowing employers to pay workers with disabilities below the minimum wage.
- Lawmakers passed legislation to require that janitors and security guards employed, pursuant to state contracts, be paid a standard compensation rate.
- Legislators approved a requirement that construction projects worth more than \$10 million pay their construction workers the prevailing wage if they receive state tax credits through the Rebuild RI or historic preservation programs.

### **ELECTIONS and GOOD GOVERNMENT**

- The General Assembly allocated \$61.8 million from general revenues to the state pension system to pay off the liability remaining from when the state's contributions to its employees' pension fund were deferred in the fiscal crisis of 1991 and 1992.
- The General Assembly passed the Let RI Vote Act to improve access and opportunities to vote in Rhode Island. The legislation expands voter access while ensuring the integrity of Rhode Island elections.
- The General Assembly approved legislation to allow for the early certification of mail ballots. The law would also establish a new and more comprehensive mail ballot voter signature verification process.
- The General Assembly approved legislation to reapportion House, Senate and congressional districts.
- The General Assembly has approved legislation to authorize the secretary of state and the Board of Elections to conduct a cybersecurity assessment of Rhode Island's elections system and create systems to protect future elections from cyberattack.

### **SENIORS**

- The General Assembly approved legislation to lower the age at which a victim can be considered an elder under the state's elder financial exploitation law from 65 to 60.
- The General Assembly passed legislation to make it easier for senior citizens to apply for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits by requiring the Department of Human Services to develop a plan to streamline the application, certification and recertification process.

### **VETERANS**

- Legislators eliminate state income taxes on military pensions.

- The General Assembly approved legislation to make it a crime to fraudulently represent oneself as an active or veteran member of the military or armed forces for the purpose of obtaining money, property or other tangible benefits.
- The General Assembly approved legislation that creates a special motor vehicle registration plate for recipients of the United States Bronze Star Medal.
- The General Assembly approved legislation to exempt veterans from pet adoption fees at public animal shelters.

## **TRANSPORTATION**

- The budget includes a year-long pilot program to provide free service on the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority's busiest route, the R line that runs from Pawtucket to Cranston.
- Lawmakers approved a waiver of the fee for newly redesigned license plates.
- Legislators increased the length of time automobile buyers have to obtain their new registration from the Division of Motor Vehicles to 30 days.
- The General Assembly passed legislation to authorize and regulate peer-to-peer car sharing programs in the state.
- Another \$5 million was included in the budget to enhance the planned Pawtucket/Central Falls bus hub, adjacent to the new commuter rail station, with passenger restrooms, waiting areas and a customer service area.

## **MISCELLANEOUS**

- The General Assembly approved legislation to allow police dogs injured in the line of duty to get emergency first aid from EMTs and be transported by ambulance to veterinary hospitals.
- The General Assembly passed legislation to exempt nonprofit and not-for-profit food banks from the registration requirements under the "solicitation by charitable organizations" statute.
- The General Assembly passed legislation to establish new requirements for the provision of care to abused animals.
- The General Assembly gave its approval to legislation on behalf of a teenage constituent to designate the trilobite Rhode Island's state fossil.