

## 2006 Legislative Accomplishments

### TAX RELIEF

- The state budget continues the **auto excise tax phase-out**, hiking the state's share of the tax payments from \$5,000 to the first \$6,000 valuation of each car.
- The state budget includes an increase in the "**circuit breaker**" **tax credit** from \$250 to \$300 for elderly and/or disabled homeowners with a household income of \$30,000 or less.
- The Assembly passed legislation to **ease local property taxes** by gradually reducing a community's tax levy cap and establishing a cap on school budgets and by eliminating unfunded mandates.
- The budget includes a provision to **reduce Rhode Island's highest marginal tax rate** to make Rhode Island more competitive with other states.
- The budget includes an increase from 10 percent to 15 percent for the refundable **Earned Income Tax Credit**, which is a tax reduction and wage supplement for low- and moderate-income working families.
- The budget includes approximately \$1 million for an **airport impact fund** to be distributed to communities that house a state airport, with \$822,000 for Warwick and the remainder to be shared by Westerly, Newport, New Shoreham, North Kingstown, Lincoln and Smithfield.

### HOUSING

- The state budget contains a \$50 million **housing bond referendum** that will go toward building affordable housing if voters approve it in November.
- The state budget contains \$7.5 million for the **Neighborhood Opportunities Program**, which builds affordable housing for the disabled and disadvantaged.
- The non-profit **Rhode Island Housing and Mortgage Finance Corporation will have the first option to purchase homes put up for tax sale** to prevent situations like that of Madeline Walker, the elderly Providence woman evicted from her home over a \$500 sewer bill.
- Rhode Island Home Loan Protection Act will **protect borrowers from predatory mortgage** lending practices. It was the result of an Assembly commission that conducted an investigation of the effects of predatory mortgage lending on the state.

- The Assembly amended the **Affordable Housing Preservation Act**, to prevent the loss of Section 8 housing to private development.
- The Assembly increased from \$200,000 to \$300,000 the **homestead exemption** in state law – a provision that protects homeowners from judgments that could otherwise cost them their homes or inhibit their ability to sell the property.

## EDUCATION

- The budget includes a **4.8-percent increase in State Aid to Education** to every school district.
- The Assembly passed legislation aimed at cutting local school costs by getting **school districts to pool their purchasing power** for such items as office supplies, textbooks and general insurance products.
- Legislation passed by the Assembly establishes guidelines for the sale of **healthy snacks and beverages in schools**, promoting the sale of water and fruit juice instead of sugar-sweetened drinks and promoting snacks that are high in nutritional value and low in fat, salt and added sugar.
- The budget provides a mechanism for business **tax credits for entities that make contributions to tuition** assistance for non-public K-12 students from households with an annual income not more than 250 percent of the federal poverty level.
- The budget restores \$6.8 million for **asset protection projects** – efforts to maintain buildings to keep them useful and prevent deterioration – for the three public higher education institutions, funding that was not in the governor’s budget. It also includes \$1.2 million to complete the Independence Hall renovation project at the University of Rhode Island.
- The budget contains \$200,000 to support the implementation of a statewide science curriculum in kindergarten through Grade 12, \$250,000 to provide physics textbooks and lab equipment for high schools participating in the Physics First program, and \$300,000 for professional development activities in **mathematics and science throughout elementary and secondary education.**
- The Assembly approved two **higher education bond issues** to be placed before the voters in November. This includes a \$65 million project at URI to construct a new School of Pharmacy building and \$7.8 million at Rhode Island College to complete renovations of the former DCYF facilities.

## HEALTH CARE

- As part of the work of the Joint Committee on Health Care Oversight, the Assembly passed a six-bill **Health Insurance Affordability Act** designed to address the affordability of health insurance for individuals and small employers.
- The Assembly voted to override the governor's veto of last year's bill legalizing the **medical use of marijuana**.
- The Department of Human Services will issue a report on large companies whose **employees are forced to use public health insurance** programs because they are not offered affordable health insurance at work.
- The Assembly passed a first-in-the-nation initiative to create a central purchasing and dispensing **program for adult flu vaccine**, similar to the state's childhood vaccination program.
- The budget passed by the Assembly reinstated cuts that the governor made that would have knocked 6,800 parents and 2,400 children off the **Rite Care** insurance rolls.
- **Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island will be allowed to sell other insurance products** so that the nonprofit insurer can keep its health insurance premiums as low as possible.
- The Assembly voted to require health insurers to cover **smoking cessation treatment**.
- A bill approved by the Assembly increases the minimum coverage insurers must provide for **hearing aids**.

## **PUBLIC SAFETY**

- A measure has taken effect to **reduce drunken driving by strengthening penalties on people who refuse to take breath tests**. The legislation doubles the infractions for first-time offenders and makes second and third refusals a criminal offense rather than the current misdemeanor.
- The "**Jessica Lunsford Child Predator Act of 2006**" has been signed into law and gives law enforcement more tools to monitor sexual predators, including requiring them to wear electronic monitoring devices.
- Adults who allow underage drinking parties to be held in their homes will be held criminally responsible, under the so-called "**Social Host**" bill.
- **Minors will be prohibited from using a cell phone** or hands free device while operating a motor vehicle.

- Legislation was passed to expand on a law adopted last year to increase protection for consumers against **identity theft**.
- The state will be required to develop separate fire codes for places of worship so that **churches will not necessarily be required to install sprinklers**.
- Any individual leaving the premises of a gas station **without paying for their gas will be guilty of larceny**. The measure was passed to acknowledge the high cost of gas and the loss being incurred by gas station owners as a result of gas theft.
- Any individual who has **registered as a sex offender in another state** or jurisdiction and moves to Rhode Island must also register here.

## ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- The Assembly passed the **Biotechnology Jobs Growth Act** to attract biotechnology and biomanufacturing firms to Rhode Island by means of a tax credit program. Amgen announced 450 additional jobs as a result of this legislation.
- The legislature approved a constitutional amendment referendum to go before voters in November, passage of which would allow the construction of a **resort casino** in West Warwick.
- The budget includes \$200,000 for funding of a **Science and Technology Council** to finance specific initiatives focused on improving the business climate in Rhode Island and promoting the science and business sector.
- Updates were made to the state's **film and television tax credit program**, which directly resulted in the filming of several movies and two television series entirely within Rhode Island this year.
- The budget includes \$1.5 million for participation in the National Science Foundation's Experimental Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (**EPSCor**).

## ENVIRONMENT

- Consumers and businesses will save money as a result of legislation that **sets minimum energy standards** for new sales of several commercial and residential appliances.
- A measure aimed at reducing air pollution will prohibit operators of diesel engines from allowing those **engines to idle for more than five consecutive minutes**.

- The **Electronic Waste Prevention, Reuse and Recycling Act** will provide a comprehensive system to regulate electronic waste and protect the environment and the health and safety of all Rhode Islanders.

## CONSUMER/QUALITY OF LIFE

- A **comprehensive energy bill** that provides a mechanism to address the state's long-term energy needs and costs and that addresses the plight of low-income households in the face of rising heating costs was passed by the Assembly and has since been signed into law.
- Legislation to increase the **minimum wage** in Rhode Island from \$6.75 to \$7.10 in March 2006 and to \$7.40 in January 2007 was enacted into law.
- The budget includes funding to **keep all the Division of Motor Vehicle branch offices open**. The Governor's budget recommended closing the offices in West Warwick, Wakefield, Woonsocket, Warwick, Westerly, Middletown and Warren.
- The **registration of contractors** in Rhode Island will now be regulated as a result of the work of a special House commission that has been studying the issue and will make further recommendations in the 2007 session.
- Rhode Islanders will be allowed to take home unfinished bottles of wine from restaurants, under the so-called **Merlot-to-go** bill.
- A **mandatory spay/neuter program for cats** has been signed into law, making Rhode Island the first in the nation to address cat population control on a statewide basis.
- **Video lottery terminal winnings will be withheld from individuals in arrears on their child support payments**. The legislation will apply to any individual with child support arrearages of more than \$500, if the winnings exceed the federal tax reporting limit of \$1,199.
- **Selling or buying telephone records without the phone customer's express consent** will be considered a criminal offense.
- An **updated motor scooter law** has taken effect, ensuring that today's more powerful scooters are addressed in state moped laws and that their riders are not forced to get motorcycle licenses.

## GOOD GOVERNMENT

- The Assembly continued reconstituting state boards and commissions to comply with the **separation of powers** constitutional amendment passed by voters in

2004.

- The Assembly approved a statute that will be necessary if voters in November approve a ballot question allowing the **reinstatement of voting rights** to people who are serving probation or parole for a felony.
- More transparent reporting by public officials will be required to **promote accountability and public confidence in government**.
- The Assembly overrode the governor's veto of a bill designed to **open to public view government service contracts** worth \$100,000 or more with non-governmental individuals or agencies.
- School Committees may add items to their agendas, for discussion purposes only, when asked to do so in writing by a member of the public during the **public comment** section of a meeting.
- To increase voter participation, the Assembly approved a measure allowing 16- and 17-year-olds to **pre-register to vote**, so they will automatically be registered on their 18<sup>th</sup> birthdays.
- There will now be specific rules governing **reporting requirements** for people and groups who advocate for or against ballot questions.

#### **MILITARY/VETERANS**

- There will be an increase, from \$250,000 to \$400,000, in the state-funded **life insurance for every active-duty member of the Rhode Island National Guard**.
- A commission was convened to study the future of the **Rhode Island Veterans' Home** in Bristol.
- February 16 of each year will be **Gold Star Parents Day** in Rhode Island.
- The legislation requires that a veteran's funeral will include a bugler playing **"Taps"** live.