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Legislative Press Bureau at 222-2457

## **THE YEAR IN REVIEW AT THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

**EDITORS, PLEASE NOTE: This will be the last legislative roundup this session, since the General Assembly has concluded its regular business for the 2008 session.**



STATE HOUSE – Here are some of the major pieces of legislation passed by the General Assembly during the 2008 session. For more information on any of these items visit <http://www.rilin.state.ri.us/News/>.

### **BUDGET AND REVENUE**

- The Assembly passed a **balanced 2009 state budget without broad-based tax increases**, reducing state spending by \$85 million from the current year.
- A new law prohibits municipal employee contracts from requiring the use of a specific health care provider so **municipalities will be free to choose the insurance provider** that most efficiently meets their needs.
- Twin River began **24-hour gaming on weekends and holidays** under a new law that is expected to raise \$13.6 million for additional education aid.
- The budget includes **pension reform** for new judges and state police.

### **HEALTH**

- The Assembly approved legislation calling for quarterly reporting to the Department of Health on **hospital-acquired infections**.
- Legislation was passed to allow trained, volunteer school personnel to **administer injections to diabetic students** in the event of an emergency and in the absence of a

school nurse.

- Legislation was approved to create a Patient Safety Organization aimed at promoting patient safety and encouraging **better reporting of medical/surgical errors** and related incidents.
- The Assembly approved legislation to protect a woman's **right to breastfeed her child in public**, and creating a right to sue for relief and damages.
- The Rhode Island Health Information Exchange Act of 2008 was approved to facilitate and safeguard the **secure exchange of patient medical information** among doctors.

## EDUCATION

- The Assembly authorized the creation of a **mayoral academy**, a regional charter elementary school proposed in Cumberland by a group of mayors and town administrators.
- The state's **law protecting schoolchildren with peanut and tree nut allergies** was refined to give schools more flexibility.
- The Assembly requested that the Department of Education create a plan to increase middle and high school **students' personal financial literacy**.
- The legislature created a commission to strengthen CCRI's position as a key institution in Rhode Island's effort to create a **21<sup>st</sup> century workforce** prepared for the high-wage job opportunities created by knowledge-economy companies.

## CRIMINAL JUSTICE

- The Assembly strengthened several laws aimed at **preventing underage drinking**, including closing a loophole in the "social host" law so adults can be charged if they allow underage drinking parties anywhere on their property, not just inside their house.
- The legislature approved a change to probation law that will prevent people from being sent back to prison for **probation violations** for which they have been exonerated. The governor has vetoed this measure.
- The Assembly voted to **eliminate mandatory minimum sentencing** for drug possession. The legislation is aimed at bringing about more flexibility in sentencing and reducing Rhode Island's prison population and its cost. The measure has been vetoed by the governor.

- Legislation was passed to expand the list of offenses that require registration in the **sex offender registry**, strengthen reporting requirements and ensure that offenders are classified before their release from prison.
- The Assembly allowed more non-sex-offender inmates to earn time off the end of their sentences for **good behavior** as a cost-saving measure.

## GOOD GOVERNMENT

- Legislation was passed to **improve access to public records** by hastening their release and specifying the information from arrest records that police must make public. The governor vetoed this measure.
- As a result of Assembly action, businesses receiving **tax credits** or other financial incentives from the state will be required to prove, through detailed reporting, that they are living up to their jobs-creation promises.
- The Assembly passed legislation to define, limit and restrict the use of **eminent domain powers** by state agencies or municipal governments for purely economic development purposes.
- To clarify a disputed section of the law governing the **Judicial Nominating Commission**, legislation was passed to prohibit anyone from serving more than one term on the panel.
- Legislation was passed to commit Rhode Island to a **National Popular Vote compact** with other states, assigning the electoral votes from those states to the presidential candidate who wins the popular vote nationwide. The governor vetoed this measure.

## ENVIRONMENT

- The Assembly approved a bill that would **promote private financing of large renewable energy projects** through a long-term commitment that the energy output would be purchased by National Grid. It would be privately managed, through National Grid, with state oversight by the Public Utilities Commission to ensure ratepayer protection. The legislation was vetoed by the governor.
- Three other renewable energy bills passed the Assembly, one known as the Renewable Energy Investment Coordination Act, which would coordinate all of the state's policies, priorities and investments to promote the **development of renewable energy**. A second bill would **require existing state buildings to purchase a percentage of their energy from renewable sources** at a rate that directly coincides with the state's current renewable-energy standards. Another bill addresses net-metering, or the offsetting of utility costs of small energy producers by the amount of energy that they produced.

- The legislature has given its approval to a package of bills containing **major recycling initiatives** that will increase environmental quality in the state and extend the life of the Central Landfill in Johnston. The bills increase the types of plastics that can be recycled, set a course for consideration of a 5-cent deposit on bottles, set a 35-percent minimum recycling standard for municipalities, require cities and towns to plan for the diversion of half their solid waste from the landfill and require larger employers to contract for recycling services. In addition, they establish programs to recycle electronic waste and yard waste.
- The Assembly approved a **\$2.5 million open-space bond referendum for preserving farmland.**

## CONSUMER AFFAIRS

- Homeowners applying for a reverse mortgage will be protected under a new law that makes it mandatory for them to complete a **counseling program on the financial implications of entering into a reverse mortgage.**
- Legislation was approved that **prohibits businesses from charging any additional fees to gift cards or gift certificates.**
- The Assembly passed legislation to further strengthen the laws regulating builders and contractors by **clearly outlining the powers and duties of the Contractors' Registration Board.**
- The Assembly approved the Truth in Music Advertising Act, a measure aimed at **protecting consumers from copycat musical groups** by requiring all live musical performers that use the names or songs of another group to acknowledge their act as a tribute or salute.
- Farms or wineries that hold a farm-winery license may now **sell wine by the bottle or glass for consumption on the premises.**

## QUALITY OF LIFE

- The legislature voted to **prohibit utility shutoffs for any homes in which there is a child under 2 years old.**
- The Assembly approved legislation to **raise from 70 to 75 the age at which Rhode Island drivers are required to renew their license every two years,** rather than the standard five years.

- The number of **in-person visits a food stamp applicant must make to file paperwork to receive benefits has been limited to one per year**, under legislation passed by the Assembly. The governor has vetoed this measure.
- To relieve the waiting list for the state program at the Community College of Rhode Island, private companies will now be allowed to provide **motorcycle-rider education programs** that satisfy requirements for a motorcycle license.

## **MILITARY/VETERANS**

- Legislative leaders helped broker an agreement between Woonsocket officials and the Department of Environmental Management to **keep World War II Veterans Memorial Park open**.
- Efforts by a number of legislative leaders convinced the Rhode Island National Guard to rescind a decision to discontinue providing a **firing squad salute** at all but a limited number of military funerals.
- The Assembly passed two pieces of legislation dealing with **veterans' license plates**. One creates a special decal for war veterans on veterans' license plates. The other allows the widow or widower of a veteran to continue using the license plate.