

## **2011 LEGISLATIVE ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

### **BUDGET**

- The \$7.7 billion 2012 state budget reduced the state's structural deficit without a major sales tax expansion and gave municipalities new tools for reducing costs, including a measure allowing them to require Medicare enrollment by eligible municipal retirees. It ends new longevity bonuses for state employees and addresses the state's unfunded transportation infrastructure spending share to reduce annual borrowing. The plan includes a provision asking voters whether to allow table games at Twin River in Lincoln, institutes a study of whether Rhode Island would benefit from combined reporting and requires the Division of Taxation to issue a report on who gets state tax breaks and whether those breaks benefit the state.

### **EDUCATION**

- The budget fully funds the first year of a 10-year phase-in of a new school aid formula adopted last year, amounting to \$17 million in new funding for elementary and secondary education. It also includes a \$4 million increase for public higher education.
- Legislation approved by the General Assembly creates the "Safe Schools Act," which directs the R.I. Department of Education to create and implement a statewide policy for cyberbullying prevention.
- With the support of state school officials and educators, the legislature passed bills to require compulsory school attendance until the age of 18, changing current law that requires attendance to age 16.
- Legislation passed by the Assembly authorizes the Commissioner of Education to create and operate, for two years, a pilot Recovery High School, a public school or special education program designed to serve students diagnosed with substance use disorders or dependencies.
- Legislation passed by the Assembly instructs the Department of Education to help local schools teach students about genocide as a critical component of civic education.
- Bills passed by the Assembly will create a 21-member R.I. Family Engagement Advisory Council to promote family involvement in the education process. The council – teachers, administrators, parents – will make recommendations on developing policies to make families more active in the life of their children's schools.

## **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT / BUSINESS**

- The Assembly approved legislation establishing an I-195 Redevelopment District Commission that will have responsibility for the disposition of land in Providence becoming available as a result of the relocation of I-195. Development of the I-195 corridor provides Rhode Island with an opportunity to attract investment to the capital city, create good paying jobs and invigorate new industries.
- Legislation was passed to speed up the issuance of building permits, decreasing the time from 60 to 45 days for residential dwellings as well as smaller commercial building projects.
- Bills were approved to ensure that career and technical education programs address the changing needs of local businesses and industry. The bills direct the Board of Regents for Higher Education to maintain relationships between educational institutions and business/industry and to promote workforce development through various career and technical educational programs.
- The legislature gave a nod to creating a Rhode Island Seafood Marketing Collaborative, which will provide resources and information to support the state's local fishermen and small businesses and to create more locally produced seafood.
- The Fiscal Year 2012 budget preserves the state film and television tax credit program, which provides a 25-percent tax credit to TV and motion picture companies doing their filming in Rhode Island. The budget provides up to \$15 million in credits.
- Legislation was approved to allow the creation of low-profit limited liability companies (L3Cs), which are organized to further charitable or educational purposes, allowing private foundations to make program-related investments in the corporations.
- Early in the legislative session, bills were approved to use \$1.9 million in available federal funds to help the Department of Labor and Training to ensure continued staffing at the unemployment call center, which was facing high demand as a result of the state's double-digit unemployment rate.

## **PUBLIC SAFETY**

- A new law makes the failure to wear seatbelts by adults a primary offense in Rhode Island, punishable by an \$85 fine.
- The Assembly approved legislation prohibiting anyone who has a third traffic violation in a one-year period from paying their fine by mail, instead requiring that he or she appear before a judge so the charge is not disposed.

- A new law expands the state’s domestic violence statute to include cyberstalking and cyberharassment as punishable actions.
- The state will spend the next six months studying potential reforms to the law that allows prisoners time off their sentences for good behavior under a resolution approved by the House of Representatives.
- The sale of rolling papers and several forms of cigars to minors was banned by the Assembly.
- A new law authorizes school districts statewide to operate real-time, digital video camera systems on bus exteriors to detect and monitor school bus law traffic violations.
- The Assembly passed a bill increasing the penalties for home invasion of a house or apartment occupied by a person who is severely impaired from two to five years in prison.

### **JUSTICE SYSTEM**

- A new law gives law enforcement agencies power to subpoena information from Internet service providers about the distribution or storage of child pornography.
- Minors who submit sexually explicit photos or videos of themselves electronically will be charged with a new, lesser offense created by the General Assembly, rather than child pornography, which can carry a five-year prison term.
- A new law allows judges to prohibit animal abusers from owning or living with animals for five years if the abuse is considered a misdemeanor, 15 years if it is a felony. Violations of the ban are punishable by up to a year in prison and a fine of up to \$1,000, along with confiscation of the animal or animals involved.
- To ease overcrowding at the J. Joseph Garrahy Judicial Complex in Providence, the Assembly enacted legislation moving District Court cases from a number of towns – Foster, Glocester, Johnston, Lincoln, North Kingstown, North Providence, North Smithfield, Scituate and Smithfield – to the new Gov. Philip W. Noel Judicial Complex in Warwick.
- Under a new law, possession of a cell phone by an Adult Correctional Institutions inmate is a crime punishable by a \$5,000 fine, a maximum of five years more in prison or both.
- The Healthy Pregnancies for Incarcerated Women Act now limits physical restraints on pregnant prisoners.

- A task force created by the General Assembly will investigate and develop policies and procedures for electronically recording custodial interrogations.

## **ELECTIONS**

- A new law will require voters to present identification at polls in Rhode Island.
- Polls statewide will close an hour earlier, at 8 p.m., under a new law.
- Legislation approved by lawmakers would allow all candidates for general office to be eligible to participate equally in the matching public funds program. Under current law, the matching funds are available only to nominees of political parties.
- Rhode Island's presidential primary elections laws were brought into compliance with federal law and the date of the primary will move from early March to late April.
- The Assembly passed legislation to make it easier for people to vote by mail ballot.

## **GOOD GOVERNMENT**

- The General Assembly, for the first time, placed all floor votes online in real time and also began posting the results of committee votes.
- The General Assembly approved legislation to repeal a section of state law that allows pension credits for each year a city or town council member serves on that elected body.
- Legislation has been approved by the General Assembly to give Rhode Island cities and towns a chance to pool funds for short-term investment purposes – the same opportunity available to municipalities in every other New England state – and improve the investment performance on their short-term liquid assets.
- The Assembly took the first step toward the constitutionally required redistricting of House, Senate and congressional districts in Rhode Island, creating an 18-member reapportionment commission to propose new district lines based on the 2010 census.

## **ENVIRONMENT**

- A package of renewable energy-related bills was enacted to facilitate and promote installation of grid-connected and distributed-generation renewable energy; diversify the state's energy-generation sources and stimulate economic development.

- The Assembly passed legislation to establish the Rhode Island Renewable Energy Coordinating Board to develop and recommend a strategic renewable energy implementation plan for the state.
- The General Assembly passed legislation to require all waste cooking oil generated by commercial operations, such as restaurants, to be recycled beginning in January.
- The General Assembly approved legislation allowing the Rhode Island Resource Recovery Corporation to accept recyclable materials from out-of-state at the recycling facility in Johnston.
- Under legislation approved by the Assembly, property owners who are required to replace cesspools with sewer connections or septic systems will get an extra year, until 2014, to replace them or, in the case of owners of cesspools located in a community that is designated to be sewerred, until 2020.
- The expiration date on the legislation establishing the state's Renewable Energy Fund was extended, and the Assembly made a technical change necessary for the implementation of existing law requiring utilities to invest in energy efficiency when it's less expensive than the energy it would save. The legislation is expected to increase renewable energy production and create green jobs.
- The Assembly set a \$500 fine for releasing invasive animal species in freshwater bodies and asked the Department of Environmental Management to study the feasibility of a sticker program for boats to fund aquatic invasive species control programs.

### **CONSUMER/QUALITY OF LIFE**

- The Assembly instituted civil unions for same-sex couples in the state.
- A new law allows adult adoptees born in Rhode Island to obtain non-certified copies of their original birth certificates.
- The General Assembly passed the Henry Shelton Act, creating a program that will help low-income Rhode Islanders pay what they can afford to prevent shutoffs and pay down utility debts.
- Legislation to expand the state's Social Security privacy laws by expressly prohibiting the use of or request for any part of an individual's Social Security number was approved.
- Lawmakers expanded eligibility for the Military Family Relief Fund to active-duty members of the military who live or entered the service in Rhode Island.

- The Assembly approved legislation reactivating the permanent Interagency Council on Homelessness.

## **HEALTH CARE**

- A new law requires insurance companies to provide coverage for the diagnosis and treatment of autism.
- The Assembly passed legislation to establish a cardiovascular disease screening and lifestyle-intervention pilot program for at-risk women in the state's urban communities.
- Legislation was approved to allow pharmacists to administer injections to Rhode Islanders between the ages of 9 and 18, with proper parental consent.
- Legislation requiring attending physicians of newborns to test them for harmful and potentially fatal disorders that are not otherwise apparent at birth was approved by the Assembly.
- The Assembly voted to create a Commission on Health Advocacy and Equity, charged with coordinating and communicating with various state agencies to develop a comprehensive equity plan to eliminate health care disparities.
- The Assembly passed the "Rhode Island All-Payer Patient-Centered Medical Home Act," a model of health care that promotes more efficient payment to physicians and better value, accountability and transparency to patients.
- The Assembly passed a bill requiring hospitals to participate in a high-quality comprehensive patient discharge planning and transitions improvement project to significantly decrease patient readmissions.
- The Assembly voted to expand the student athlete concussion law encouraging each school district in the state to have student athletes take a test before the start of each athletic season to determine their normal neurocognitive functions.

## **OTHER LEGISLATION**

- Acting at the request of resolutions passed by the House of Representatives and Senate, the governor pardoned John Gordon, an Irish immigrant who was tried and subsequently executed in 1845 for the murder of a wealthy mill owner. Recent research raised questions about the fairness of the trial and death sentence. John Gordon was the last person executed by Rhode Island.
- The Assembly approved the issuance of two new specialty license plates. Now available are Red Sox Foundation plates, with a portion of the registration fee to be used by the Foundation to support Rhode Island charitable organizations. Also

soon to be available is a license plate to support the Bristol Independence Day celebration.

- The Assembly passed legislation revising and updating the state's Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Act, the first substantive changes to the law since it was enacted in the 1980s. The changes are intended to make the comprehensive planning system more efficient and effective.
- The General Assembly updated existing law dealing with the preservation and protection of historic cemeteries, including establishing a register of cemeteries in each city and town and restructuring the membership of the Permanent Advisory Commission on Historical Cemeteries. The Assembly also strengthened penalties for vandalizing cemeteries and monuments to include higher fines and full restitution.
- Legislation approved by the Assembly will clarify Department of Environmental Management regulations to make it clear that while commercial fishing operations must be licensed by the state, crew members on the boats do not have to be.