

VIA EMAIL

February 26, 2026

Senator Louis P. DiPalma
Chair, Senate Finance Committee
SenateFinance@rilegislature.gov

Re: FY2027 Budget: Letter of Support for a Rhode Island State History Center

Dear Senate Finance Committee Chair DiPalma and Members of the Committee:

As the dean of Roger Williams University School of Law—a school that strives to defend and advance the democratic values of our state and country—I write to express my strong support for Article 6, Question 6 of the Governor’s FY2027 budget, which proposes funding for a Rhode Island State History Center through a \$45 million general obligation bond.

As one of the original thirteen colonies, Rhode Island occupies a distinctive place in American history. Rhode Island’s early and enduring commitments to freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly helped shape the constitutional values that are central to American democracy. These principles are taught in our schools and invoked in our civic life—yet many of the primary historical documents that embody these values remain inaccessible to the public because our state lacks a permanent, purpose-built facility for exhibition and education.

The proposed Rhode Island State History Center would address this gap in a thoughtful and fiscally responsible manner. As outlined in the current proposal, the project emphasizes education and tourism within a cost-effective footprint. The Center would provide dedicated exhibit space for Rhode Island’s most significant historical materials, along with a multi-purpose area designed for interactive learning and public programming. The proposed location—at the corner of Smith Street and Park Street in Providence—would naturally complement the State House and expand the educational value of State House tours.

From a K-12 education perspective, the importance of this project cannot be overstated. Rhode Island students study the American Revolution, constitutional government, and our state’s unique role in shaping national ideals. A State History Center would allow those lessons to come alive through direct engagement with original documents and artifacts. Field trips, curriculum-aligned programming, and interactive exhibits would support civic education in ways that classroom instruction alone cannot. For students across the state—particularly those with limited access to cultural institutions—this Center would be a powerful, accessible educational resource.

The need for such a facility is underscored by the fact that many of Rhode Island's most important historical treasures cannot currently be displayed safely. These include the Gaspee Commission documents (1772), the Battle of Rhode Island map from General Sullivan's 1778 expedition, the Bill of Rights (1789), a printing of the Declaration of Independence (1823), and materials related to the Dorr Rebellion (1842). These documents are foundational to our understanding and celebration of Rhode Island's civic identity and democratic traditions. These treasures deserve to be seen, studied, and appreciated by the public.

The State History Center also would serve as a meaningful driver of tourism. Rhode Island already benefits from a strong and growing historic tourism sector. A centrally located, professionally curated State History Center would enhance this sector by offering visitors a compelling entry point for the state's story—one that complements local historical sites and encourages longer stays and deeper engagement. Cultural tourism is not just an educational asset: it is also an economic one, and this project is well positioned to advance both goals.

My support for this initiative is also informed by personal experience. I grew up in West Virginia and spent the first twelve years of my life in the state capital of Charleston. In the 1970s, West Virginia invested in a state archives and cultural center that was located adjacent to the capitol building. As a child, I spent many hours at the archives and cultural center. Those early encounters with historical documents, exhibitions, and public programs were formative: they fostered in me a lasting appreciation for history, public service, and civic institutions. West Virginia's archives and cultural center remains, decades later, a public treasure and an important educational and tourism asset for the state of West Virginia. Rhode Island deserves and needs the same.

As we approach the nation's Semiquincentennial in 2026, the Rhode Island State History Center represents an exceptional opportunity for us to leave a lasting legacy. In 1976, Rhode Island marked our country's Bicentennial with the creation of the Veterans' Memorial Cemetery. The State History Center can serve a similar role for the 250th anniversary: a forward-looking investment in education, civic understanding, and cultural tourism that will benefit Rhode Islanders for generations.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the Committee to support Article 6, Question 6. Thank you for your consideration and for your continued service to the people of Rhode Island.

Respectfully submitted,



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Dean and Professor of Law
Roger Williams University School of Law