

Peter Trafton MD, Providence, RI  
Written testimony in favor of H7022  
House Committee on Environment and natural resources, March 21, 2024

Dear Chair Bennett and Honorable Committee Members,

I write on behalf of the Environment Council of Rhode Island to support passing Rep Spears and Sen. Gu's Act on Coasts – Coastal Resiliency, H7022.

Please forgive the length of this letter. I would like to offer a few suggestions for the Act.

It seems fitting and proper to flesh out the role of Rhode Island's Chief resilience officer since the current iteration, replacing a previous administration's Chief Resilience Officer is based on the governor's executive order. There are some differences. The executive order had the department of environmental management (DEM) hire the current CRO. Various duties were assigned, including working closely with the Rhode Island infrastructure bank and the CRMC, collaborating with them on the small ocean state climate adaptation and resilience fund (OSCAR). The executive order did not focus the CRO's responsibilities and roles solely on coastal issues. In some places the CRO appeared to be primarily an agent of the DEM on primarily inland projects.

The proposed legislation, as emphasized by its title, focuses the CRO's work on coastal issues related to sea level rise, flooding and storm surges, though the assigned tasks include the creation of a **statewide resilience plan**, working with the EC4 to coordinate state agencies and local jurisdictions to support community and economic recovery efforts beginning with addressing risk and vulnerability reduction.

The plan is to be science-based, working to address responses outlined in the act on climate. The CRO's office is to develop, implement, and maintain the states resilience plan. It coordinates and strengthens efforts to reduce losses from future disasters. The CRO is expected to consult with various agencies that are primary responders to emergencies and disasters. On page 2, line13, the CRO is to ensure a participatory process including a variety of groups including most of the state's likely leaders. I was disappointed that no mention was made here of disadvantaged groups, since they are typically the ones who are affected "first and worst" by climate related disasters. Further down the page, on line 31, some of the same stakeholders were mentioned again and environmental justice communities were included. I would urge that disadvantaged groups, those with the most limited resources and the most likely to suffer deprivation, be mentioned at the outset of stakeholders and their groups – at line 13 etc. as well as line 31. The CRO's first statewide resilience plan is to be ready in mid-2025, in time for the state's first act on climate comprehensive plan which is due the following December.

The CRO is also responsible for a **coastal resilience plan, to be included within the statewide resilience plan**. This plan focuses on coastal problems and responses. On line 25 page 3 the text states that the statewide climate change resilience plan shall be reviewed at least every two

years by the CRO. Presumably this includes the coastal resilience plan as well. On page 3, line 27 an “interagency council” is to assist. This is unclear and should be named precisely. For instance, is this council the EC4?

Next follows a paragraph on an Advisory board on resilience for ocean and riverine coasts. This board has 14 members with varied appointments, presumably all from various pertinent Rhode Island areas of expertise. The advisory board will meet at least quarterly and advise the EC4 on plans and strategies for adaptation and resilience in various environments: urban, coastal, riverine, and sea rise. It appears that the primary role of this advisory board is to advise and assist the EC4 with resilience issues. It’s not clear what this advisory board’s relationship is with the CRO, their office, and their responsibilities. It would be helpful if this were spelled out.

I think that this Act brings necessary attention and focus to the needs of coastal Rhode Island and also to our state’s developing the necessary skills, plans, and resources – particularly funding – all the necessities for adequate resilience planning. I would urge that the CRO be supported in efforts to define and achieve necessary funding to invest in a resilient coastal Rhode Island. I would further urge that major attention be paid to experiences and the lessons that can be learned from the past, present, and future coastal disasters in other states and other parts of the world – there is much to be learned outside of Rhode Island which will be of great value to our efforts to become and stay resilient, in our coastal regions and in land as well.

Thank you very much for allowing me to comment on this worthwhile and important act. I hope that the above suggestions might aid its passage and long-term success.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter Trafton". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Peter Trafton