



Testimony - House Finance Committee
May 14, 2024 - Resolution H – 8195

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee,

I am testifying in support of Resolution H- 8198, that will continue the work at the Visitor Center in Pawtucket. Since 1999, the Center has been the first *Welcome to Rhode Island* for travelers coming from the north on Interstate I-95. It was collaboratively constructed by the National Park Service, the City of Pawtucket, RIPTA and my agency. The Visitor Center has been “the center” of the downtown Pawtucket community. It is not only the place where visitors come to learn about Rhode Island, but they come to learn about a city that is eager to grow and regain its vital status as an economic engine for our state. On weekends, we are the place where new investors and new residents come to learn more about Pawtucket and its living and investment opportunities. Through the years we have become the warming center and the cooling center. We host RIPTA drivers and offer an indoor RIPTA waiting area for their passengers. We are the place where the community comes to gather for public meetings and exhibits. With the nation’s 250th in two years, we want to be positioned to welcome visitors from all over our country, along with the thousands who will be coming from the North visiting Rhode Island before or after their World Cup experience. Our Center is 15 minutes from Gillette Stadium.

As we look forward to the Rhode Island Football Club playing its first game in Pawtucket in 2025, the excitement and interest grows in the city. More people are interested in what is taking place in Pawtucket. The new MBTA station continues to draw more focus on our ability as a city to offer the amenities that young people desire in a place to live. The Visitor Center is the place where we make the difference in encouraging newcomers to invest. Weekends are when people go out to explore what they have been hearing about.

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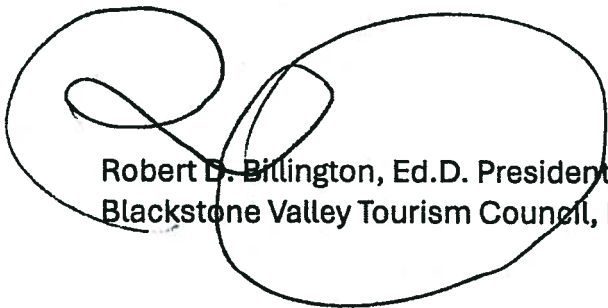


The Blackstone Valley Tourism Council has managed the Center since its construction. We continue to be encouraged by what the Visitor Center brings to our state. The City of Pawtucket has so many opportunities for its development. Our agency has as well. To sustain even a minimal operational schedule at the Visitor Center, the Tourism Council has invested approximately \$60,000 since July 1, 2023. This investment comes at the expense of other opportunities and programs in the 10 communities we represent, but we feel we had to keep the Center open. The city of Pawtucket and its Pawtucket Redevelopment Agency has been so dedicated to keeping the Visitor Center open and welcoming visitors to our state.

Our dream is that in the future, the Visitor Center becomes an integral part of the Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park, based at the Old Slater Mill Historic Site, across the street from the Visitor Center. As a community we have accomplished part one of our dream; that is Slater Mill became a part of the National Park Service. The second part is that the National Park Service sees the Visitor Center as an important part of their new National Park and brings it under their auspices.

We look forward to the Visitor Center being better supported by our state, due to the work it does for every city and town. Our theater and interpretive materials all need to be updated, and we will seek out these funds for improvement in other ways.

Respectfully,



Robert D. Billington, Ed.D. President
Blackstone Valley Tourism Council, Inc.

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