



Rhode Island Turnpike and Bridge Authority
P.O. Box 437 | Jamestown, Rhode Island 02835-0437

May 15, 2024

The Honorable Marvin Abney
Chair, Committee on Finance
Rhode Island House of Representatives
Room 35 – State House
Providence, RI 02903

Re: **House Bill No. 7858**

Dear Chairman Abney and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony concerning House Bill No. 7858, which would require that safety barriers be constructed on the Newport Pell, Mount Hope, and Jamestown Verrazzano Bridges by August 1, 2025. The Rhode Island Turnpike and Bridge Authority (“RITBA”) offers this written testimony to address some of the key considerations, including feasibility and timing.

The safety of our bridges is paramount to RITBA. To move ahead with safety barriers, we must first determine whether they are feasible from an engineering perspective. Altering the structure of bridges that are nearly 95 years old, 55 years old, and 32 years old, respectively, requires careful study. Any kind of fence, steel mesh net, or other barrier could affect the integrity and safety of the bridge on which it is installed. Studies must be done to determine the structural effects of a barrier, the load bearing effects, wind/aerodynamic effects, and the impact on access to the bridge for routine maintenance, inspections, and capital improvements and repairs, as well as access by first responders to bridge incidents.

To determine whether barriers are possible on our bridges, RITBA has awarded a contract to the engineering firm of Atkins Global for conceptual study services related to suicide deterrents. RITBA has been awarded \$1 million in ARPA funding for the feasibility study of the Mount Hope and Jamestown Verrazzano Bridges, and an additional \$750,000 in ARPA funding to do a feasibility study of the Newport Pell and the Sakonnet River Bridges. Atkins is expected to deliver the final study of the Mount Hope and Jamestown Bridges on or about June 1, 2024.

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In the meantime, to further address the matter of safety on our bridges, RITBA staffs its operations center 24/7/365 with traffic management technicians who monitor the bridges. The traffic management technicians are trained to operate an interactive camera system designed to detect, at the earliest opportunity, the presence of an unauthorized individual on a bridge. This camera/communications system serves as part of our Automated Traffic Management System ("ATMS") and has other uses, but its primary purpose relates to its suicide-prevention features. In addition, we have worked closely with various groups involved with suicide prevention efforts and have posted signs on our bridges for the Samaritans of Rhode Island, E -911, and the East Bay Community Action Program/ Bristol Health Equity Zone.

For the past several years, RITBA has had a contract with the Rhode Island State Police that calls for a RITBA post that gives us a police presence on the bridges. Since the establishment of the post, RITBA has noted significantly lower suicide statistics, with no suicides on either the Jamestown or Sakonnet River Bridges since 2022.

Significant issues must be addressed before barriers can be considered. RITBA is proceeding with the feasibility studies. It is unrealistic to require RITBA to meet the deadlines set forth in House Bill No. 7858 before RITBA has the comprehensive results that would guide the selection of any appropriate barrier type, the preparation of a request for proposals to design and build the barriers, and the actual retrofitting of our bridges with the barriers.

RITBA remains ready to continue to work with the bill sponsors and the Committee on Finance to identify and consider the many factors and challenges associated with public suicide prevention efforts.

Respectfully,



LORI CARON SILVEIRA
Executive Director