

Steven Sepe

From: Liza Burkin <liza@ourstreetspvd.org>
Sent: Tuesday, March 19, 2024 12:45 PM
To: House State Government and Elections Committee
Subject: House Bill No. 7181 - SUPPORT

Honorable Members of the Committee,

My name is Liza Burkin and I am the founder and lead organizer of the [Providence Streets Coalition](#), an alliance of 42 organizations, local businesses, schools, and neighborhood associations that supports safer streets, more transportation choices, and policies that advance mobility justice.

I write today to express my **strong support of HB7181** to update Rhode Island's Access to Public Records Act and increase government transparency in Rhode Island. While I support every aspect of the bill, I can speak with specific lived and professional experience to the provision which would direct the Rhode Island Department of Transportation to make its crash data, which is collected from municipal and state police departments and compiled by the state, fully accessible to the public.

From 2017-2019, I was an urban planning graduate student at Tufts University in Massachusetts, as well as a private consultant collecting and analyzing transportation data for Massachusetts municipalities. The [Massachusetts DOT's Crash Portal](#) made it very simple and easy to collect information on crashes for municipalities so they could assess where to prioritize improvements in their budgets.

I moved home to Rhode Island in 2019 and was shocked that RIDOT didn't yet have this. I requested that they create a public crash database during a statewide Traffic Safety Coalition meeting, and believed the Department was on a path to creating it, when suddenly it was shut down in 2021. RIDOT officials stopped communicating with me about it, and I had no idea why. I was frustrated, but let the issue lie.

A few years later, a group of dedicated Providence Streets Coalition volunteers suddenly wanted to focus on this issue. We APRA'd RIDOT for the crash data, intending to create the database ourselves. RIDOT refused. We appealed to the Attorney General. Their office found that RIDOT did not violate the current APRA law. Their ruling said "We have not been presented with evidence that DOT was required by law to keep these records confidential and the record before us contains evidence indicating that **while DOT had discretion to withhold the requested information, it was not required to do so. We strongly encourage DOT to consider whether it may be in the public interest to disclose the requested information.**"

We also APRA'd the City of Providence, and their police department and planning department worked with us to deliver the crash data for the City of Providence. We built out an [interactive crash map](#) analyzing more than 3,000 crashes from 2010-2022 within the City, pinpointing things like traffic signals, time of day, and other factors that are helping us in our advocacy work.

Around this time, the press took an interest in our work. Colleen Cronin, a talented reporter with ecoRI news, [APRA'd all of RIDOT's APRA requests for this data](#), and found that **the agency had denied 17 individuals or groups from obtaining this data just since 2019, almost all of them hoping to use the data for projects that attempted to evaluate or improve safety.** Some were consultants, some were academics, some were just regular people.

RIDOT's assertion of privilege presupposes that the public has no role to play in utilizing crash data to help the professionals to make our roads safer. **Our crash map demonstrates that community groups or academics can step in and assist with data projects when government agencies lack the resources or inclination to find the stories that are**

buried in the data.

Public crash portals are now normative, in other new england states like Massachusetts, but also even in the deep south of Louisiana and the midwest in Missouri. **The idea that the public should have access is not a fringe position. RI is increasingly an outlier in this area.**

While we disagree on tactics, we and RIDOT are actually on the same side here, to the extent that they see improving road safety as central to their mission. Community groups like the Providence Streets Coalition are trying to create tools to help them do their job better — specifically to make infrastructure decisions with a more scientific grounding in data.

Please support HB7181. Let the sunshine in!

Liza Burkin
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