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Legislative Press Bureau at 222-2457

THIS WEEK AT THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

EDITORS, PLEASE NOTE: This will be the last weekly legislative roundup this session, since the General Assembly has concluded most of its regular business for the 2005 session. It is anticipated that there will be additional sessions to vote on unfinished matters.



STATE HOUSE – Here are some of the major pieces of legislation passed by the General Assembly during the 2005 session.

For more information on any of these items visit <http://www.rilin.state.ri.us/News/>

STATE BUDGET

The \$6.3-billion budget ([2005-H 5270Aaa](#)) includes these highlights:

- Changes to the pension plan that covers state employees and teachers is expected to result in a saving of \$44 million to the state and local communities for the '06 fiscal year;
- An increase in the exemption of the motor vehicle excise tax from \$4,500 to \$5,000 of the automobile's valuation that will result in an increase in state payments to communities totaling \$112.3 million, which is \$7.3 million higher than last year;
- An increase in General Revenue Sharing to the communities to a total of \$65,347,910, up more than \$12 million over last year;
- \$227.7 million in total state aid to cities and towns and \$666.3 million in state aid to education.

HEALTH CARE

- **Long-Term Care Reform Act**
The law addresses resident care issues at Rhode Island's nursing homes and provides more thorough oversight of their administration and financial condition. It also takes into account lessons learned from the closure of the Hillside Health Center in Providence and problems at other Rhode Island nursing homes last year.

More...

- **Medical Marijuana**

The Edward O. Hawkins and Thomas C. Slater Medical Marijuana Act will allow seriously ill patients under a doctor's supervision to grow or otherwise acquire marijuana plants in very limited quantities - up to 12 marijuana plants or 2.5 ounces of usable marijuana. The governor has vetoed the measure. ([2005-H 6052Aaa/2005-S 0710B](#))

CONSUMER/QUALITY OF LIFE

- **Sunday Sales**

Rhode Island retailers can now open for regular business hours on Sunday. Previously, retailers were only able to open between the hours of 12 – 6 p.m. on Sunday. ([2005-H 5759Aaa/2005-S 0081Aaa](#))

- **Minimum Wage**

Currently \$6.75 an hour, the minimum wage will increase twice in the next two years, to \$7.10 per hour as of Jan. 1, 2006 and \$7.40 on Jan. 1, 2007. The governor vetoed the bill. ([2005-H 5420B](#))

- **Utility Payment Plans**

Individuals who have had their heat or electricity shut off due to delinquent bills will be able to restore their service by paying 20 percent of the outstanding bill up front and the remainder in 24 monthly payments. ([2005-S 1161Aaa/2005-H 6511Aaa](#))

- **Gift Certificate Legislation**

Merchants will be required to bar fees and expiration dates from all gift certificates and gift cards sold in Rhode Island. Previously, malls and other third-party retail establishments were exempt from the law, as were VISA and American Express gift cards and companies that issue "reloadable" gift cards, such as phone cards and coffee shops. ([2005-H 5027Baa/2005-S 1221](#))

- **Housing Funds for Disabled, Homeless**

The state budget includes an increase from \$5 million to \$7.5 million for the Neighborhood Opportunities Program, which builds housing for the disabled and disadvantaged, and an appropriation of \$300,000 to help homeless individuals make the transition into housing and jobs.

PUBLIC SAFETY

- **Homicide Prevention Act**

Persons named in permanent restraining orders will be required to relinquish their guns within 24-48 hours of being served with the orders. The bill would allow police officers and active military personnel to keep their service weapons while on duty but to relinquish their personal guns. ([2005-S 0916B/2005-S 0917B/2005-H 5812Aaa](#))

- **Lead Hazard Mitigation Law**

The law will take effect November 1 to allow landlords more time to comply, and exempts certain lower-risk properties like elderly housing and owner-occupied buildings with two or three apartments. ([2005-H 6617A/2005-S 0770A](#))

- **Fire Safety Code Changes**

The Fire Safety Code has been amended to bring more clarity and flexibility to existing law and to eliminate the confusion that fire personnel around the state have encountered since the law was revised a couple of years ago. ([2005-S 1133/2005-H 6589](#))

EDUCATION

- **Higher Education Endowment Program**

The program will encourage private fundraising for URI, RIC and CCRI and allow the state to provide matching funds. The money will be used in part to provide additional scholarships. ([2005-S 0113B/2005-H 5128A](#))

- **Education Funding**

The Joint Legislative Committee to Establish a Permanent Education Foundation Aid Formula has been meeting this year to explore and develop better ways of distributing education funding in Rhode Island. The committee is scheduled to issue recommendations by March 15, 2006.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

- **Jobs Growth Act**

Will attract hundreds of new, high paid jobs to Rhode Island by offering employees a reduction on the tax on any performance-based income, which would be paid by the hiring firm, resulting in no tax revenue loss for the state. ([2005-S 1121B/2005-H 6514Aaa](#))

- **Tax Credits for TV/Movie Companies**

Tax credits will be available to companies doing all their filmmaking in Rhode Island. The credits include investment credits for Rhode Islanders and other credits for the film companies. ([2005-H 6201A/2005-S 0932A](#))

- **Small Business Advocate**

The office will be created within the office of the Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation to hear concerns raised by small businesses about new regulations and share those concerns with the appropriate agencies. ([2005-H 5775B/2005-S 0772B](#))

GOOD GOVERNMENT

- **Separation of Powers Bills**

The bills reconfigure 80 boards and commissions by removing legislators and legislative appointments from boards with an executive function. The bills address various groups, including the Lottery Commission and the Board of Governors for Higher Education.

- **Telephone Conferencing Banned**

Public bodies are now barred from using telephone conferencing during public meetings. The measure makes an exemption for active military personnel. ([2005-H 5333aa/2005-S 0274A](#))

- **Electronic Reporting**

All state agencies and authorities will be required to electronically submit their annual reports to the General Assembly for posting in the legislative website. The agencies and authorities will also be required to produce a printed copy on demand. ([2005-H 5075Aaa/2005-S 0039Aaa](#))

ENVIRONMENT

- **MTBE Ban**

MTBE, the gasoline additive responsible for the contamination that left 4,000 Pascoag residents unable to consume their water for four months in 2001, will be banned in Rhode Island beginning June 1, 2007. ([2005-H 6117B/2005-S 0770A](#))

- **Automotive mercury recycling**

Car manufacturers will be required to institute a program to collect and recycle mercury from old automobiles. The law makes changes to the Mercury Reduction and Education Act to cut down on toxic mercury that otherwise could leach into the environment when old automobiles are discarded. ([2005-H 5911Aaa/2005-S 0611Aaa](#))

- **Energy and Consumer Savings Act of 2005**

The act sets minimum energy standards for common household and commercial appliances and could save Rhode Island consumers and businesses \$225 million over the next 25 years, while cutting pollution, improving electric system reliability and easing pressure on energy prices. ([2005-H 5307B/2005-S 0540A](#))

MILITARY/VETERANS

- **National Guard Life Insurance Policies**

Rhode Island National Guard members on active duty now have up to \$250,000 in life insurance policies. The funding for the policy coverage is included in the state budget.

- **Special Legislative Commission on Defense Economy Planning**

The panel will take the place of a special House commission that was formed to protect Rhode Island from the federal base realignment and closure (BRAC) cuts. The new 25-member joint commission will include legislators, state officials and industry leaders who will work to promote the defense industry in Rhode Island. ([2005-H 5845/2005-S 0497](#))

- **National Guard Tuition Waivers**

Waivers will be available for spouses and families of Rhode Island National Guard members killed in the line of duty, for course work at URI, RIC and CCRI. ([2005-S 0001](#))

- **Free college courses**

The number of state college or university courses National Guard members can take for free during a single semester will increase from three to five. ([2005-H 5135A/2005-S 0399A](#))