

July 6, 2007

Legislative Press Bureau at 222-2457

THIS YEAR IN REVIEW AT THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

EDITORS, PLEASE NOTE: This will be the last legislative roundup this session, since the General Assembly has concluded its regular business for the 2007 session.



STATE HOUSE – Here are some of the major pieces of legislation passed by the General Assembly during the 2007 session. For more information on any of these items visit <http://www.rilin.state.ri.us/News/>.

HEALTH CARE

- Over the governor's veto, the Assembly made the state's **medical marijuana** program permanent.
- The Assembly passed a bill **banning hospitals from forcing nurses to work overtime**.
- A new law has created the **basic benefit health plan**, an innovative, less-expensive basic health care plan to be offered to small businesses.
- The General Assembly approved legislation to require companies with 25 or more employees to offer a "**cafeteria plan**" through which employees could purchase health insurance on a pre-tax basis.
- A bill approved by the Assembly will make **HIV/AIDS screening** a routine part of prenatal testing.

More...

PUBLIC SAFETY

- Legislation has been enacted into law making it a felony to participate in **human trafficking** – defined as transporting, soliciting, recruiting, harboring, providing, or obtaining another person for transport – for the purposes of forced sex.
- The Assembly voted to **eliminate mandatory minimum sentencing** for drug possession. The legislation is aimed at bringing about more flexibility in sentencing and reducing Rhode Island’s record-high prison population and the skyrocketing cost. The measure has been vetoed by the governor.
- The legislature passed a bill that would close the existing loophole in Rhode Island’s **“Peeping Tom” law**. The legislation would change the existing statute to ensure that all “Peeping Toms,” whether they commit the crime on their own property or the property of another, will be prosecuted accordingly.
- Legislation expanding the definition of domestic violence under the **Domestic Violence Prevention Act** was approved by the General Assembly. Under the bill, arson, burglary and the damage to or obstruction of a telephone would be added to the list of crimes considered to be domestic violence offenses.
- A measure that has been enacted into law requires a state and national criminal **background check during the licensing process of prospective foster parents**.

EDUCATION

- Passed by the Assembly and signed into law is a measure expected to save school districts money by allowing them to use **smaller vehicles**, such as SUVs and mini-buses, to transport students.
- The **“Lindsay Ann Burke Act”** named in honor of a 23-year-old North Kingstown woman who was brutally murdered, was approved by the legislature and calls on schools to provide dating violence education for middle and high school students.
- As a follow-up to a law enacted last year requiring the phase-out of **unhealthy drinks and snacks** from elementary, middle and junior high schools, legislation was approved to extend the phase-out to all senior high schools in the state.
- A study panel issued a final report on a proposed new **education funding formula**, as the legislature works to develop a school aid plan that balances students’ needs with individual communities’ resources. The study will play a vital role in legislation expected to come before the Assembly next year.
- **School discipline problems** will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, rather than at the discretion of the superintendent, for violations of the “zero tolerance” policy regarding alcohol, drugs and weapons.

More...

ENVIRONMENT

- Both chambers studied the state's **water supply** and ways to protect and develop water sources for Rhode Island's future.
- Cesspools that pose a high risk for water contamination will be phased out over the next 5 ½ years under the **Rhode Island Cesspool Act of 2007**, now law.
- The **Diesel Emissions Reduction Act**, now law, aims to curb diesel pollution in the state by prioritizing the most polluting fleets, creating a timeline for cleaning them up and establishing funding mechanisms to defray the cost of cleanups.
- The protection of water quality will have to be a priority during development, under the **Smarter Development for a Cleaner Bay Act**, now law.
- The General Assembly passed legislation mandating that Rhode Island join the **Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI)**, a cooperative between Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic states to reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

CONSUMER AFFAIRS

- The budget includes a revenue-enhancing measure to **allow auto dealers to open for business on Sundays** from noon until 6 p.m.
- A bill passed by the General Assembly and signed into law prevents the state from considering a person's **charitable donations** as evidence when determining for tax purposes whether that person's primary residence is in Rhode Island. The measure aims to encourage part-time Rhode Island residents to give to Rhode Island charities.
- The Assembly approved three bills that were developed by a special House commission studying the **effects of natural disasters on property insurance costs**. The bills all address different aspects of property insurance, but ultimately they are all aimed at protecting coastal homeowners from paying unreasonable rates to insure their homes for hurricane damage or from having their policies canceled because of their location near a coast.
- Legislation that has been enacted into law bars Social Security benefits from being considered **disqualifying income** when applying for unemployment. Prior to this new law, Rhode Island deducted half of an individual's Social Security benefit from the total of unemployment compensation.
- The Assembly voted to **prohibit gas or electric companies from shutting off service** in any home in which there is a child under 1 year old and if the customer's service had not been previously shut off due to nonpayment before the child's birth.

More...

GOOD GOVERNMENT

- Unanimously approved in both chambers and signed into law is legislation requiring the state to **divest from companies in Sudan** that support the Sudanese government's genocide in the Darfur region.
- The Assembly approved legislation to allow members of public bodies with disabilities to **participate in meetings by phone** or other electronic communications, under waiver from the Governor's Commission on Disabilities.
- **Judicial pension** regulations will be amended by legislation that prohibits Rhode Island judges and magistrates from getting credit toward their state pensions while on leave without pay.
- Beginning at age 16, **students may serve as election officials** to help them become more familiar with the election process and to provide more workers at polling places.
- A study commission looking into **transit service in Rhode Island** issued its final report and recommendations; among them, to provide predictable and long-term dedicated funding sources for a statewide public transit system.

MILITARY/VETERANS

- Legislation was approved to create a new **Department of Veterans' Affairs** to assume control of the operations and duties of the existing division that serves the state's 100,000 veterans. The governor subsequently vetoed the measure.
- Former members of the military who ride motorcycles will be able to obtain **veterans' license plates** for their bikes, similar to those now available for cars.
- National Guard members who have seen active duty since September 11, 2001, are now eligible for the **Defense Service Medal** awarded by the Adjutant General.
- Legislation passed and signed into law adds disabled veterans to those individuals eligible for **disability parking placards** for their vehicles.
- Legislation has been approved and signed into law making it a misdemeanor (\$500 fine and/or one year in prison) to **disrupt a military funeral** or memorial service.