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Legislative Press Bureau at 222-2457

THE YEAR IN REVIEW AT THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

STATE HOUSE – Here are some of the major pieces of legislation passed by the General Assembly during the 2009 session. For more information on any of these items visit

<http://www.rilin.state.ri.us/News/>.



BUDGET AND ECONOMY

- The 2010 state budget bill, signed into law in June, closes a \$660 million deficit while **avoiding cuts to school aid, pharmaceutical assistance to the elderly and disabled, and welfare and dental benefits for the poor.** The \$7.81 billion budget includes **\$60 million in pension savings and \$58 million in cuts** across state office budgets. It also avoids increasing the sales or income taxes or creating any new taxes on services.
- The Assembly approved legislation to **reconfigure the Economic Development Corporation** by increasing the number of members from nine to 13 and allowing the state to offer a three-year contract to the executive director of the agency.
- A new law enters the state's largest electric utility into long-term contracts to purchase power from locally based **renewable energy producers.**
- The Assembly approved legislation to create a **Green Jobs Task Force** to develop a statewide action plan to optimize the growth of the green economy in Rhode Island. The measure was vetoed by the governor.
- A new law makes **blended biodiesel motor vehicle fuel** that is manufactured in Rhode Island eligible for exemption from state fuel taxes.

BUSINESS

- Since its creation earlier this year, the Senate **Task Force on Small Business** Growth and Development has met several times, hearing from small-business owners as well as three general offices and the Economic Development Corporation as the panel attempts to improve government's interaction with small businesses.
- Legislation has been approved to establish a chapter in law for **small business regulatory fairness** in administrative procedures, intended to reduce the burden and cost of unfair regulations on small businesses.
- Legislation has been enacted into law to cap the amount **health insurance premiums** can be raised from year to year for small employer groups.
- The Assembly created a joint commission to study the consolidation of **retail business permits** and fee collection forms.

PUBLIC SAFETY AND JUSTICE

- The General Assembly closed a loophole that previously allowed **prostitution** indoors, expanded and strengthened the ban on **human trafficking** and **banned strip clubs from employing minors** in any capacity.
- Legislators prohibited the reading or writing of **text messages or e-mail while driving**.
- The Assembly allowed police to seek **search warrants for blood, breath or urine** samples from those suspected of driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs who refuse chemical tests in collisions resulting in death or serious injury.
- The legislature approved a measure, later vetoed, that will prevent people from being sent back to prison for **probation violations** when the state doesn't convict them of the charge that resulted in the violation, and voted to **eliminate mandatory minimum sentencing** for drug possession to allow judges discretion and reduce the prison population and its cost.
- A new law will help **protect survivors of domestic violence and their families** by exempting the home address of voters who live with victims of domestic violence from open records disclosure.
- A new law will crack down on **drinking by underage boaters** by stripping them not only of their right to operate a boat, but also of their right to drive a car.
- Legislators amended a law that previously allowed cities and towns to ban **pub crawls** to prohibit them statewide.

- New law that took effect Nov. 1 makes a number of changes to the “**Dig Safe**” program law that regulates excavation near underground utility facilities, including increasing the amount of notification time.

CONSUMER AFFAIRS AND QUALITY OF LIFE

- Overriding a veto, lawmakers approved the creation of three **compassion centers** statewide where patients and caregivers registered with the state’s medical marijuana program will be able to safely purchase the drug.
- The Assembly gave domestic partners, whether of opposite genders or the same, the right to make **funeral arrangements** for their deceased partners. The governor vetoed the measure.
- Legislators required banks to notify homeowners in peril of foreclosure of where they can access no-cost Housing and Urban Development-approved **mortgage counseling**. The governor vetoed the bill.
- The Assembly approved legislation to establish licensing procedures and full disclosure requirements for Stranger-Originated Life Insurance contracts, otherwise known as “**life settlement**” plans.
- New law is expected to add more protection for auto insurance policyholders by raising, from \$1,000 to \$1,500, the **damage claim limit** below which an insurance company is prohibited from canceling a policy.
- Legislators passed bills calling for the creation of a **Department of Veterans’ Affairs**, to replace the small Division of Veterans’ Affairs that now exists in state government.
- Bills have been passed providing that any **medals awarded to military personnel** delivered to the General Treasurer as part of any unclaimed property may not be sold but must be returned to the owner or his/her heirs.
- Legislation approves the creation and sale of **specialty license plates** to recognize victims and survivors of **breast cancer**, with a portion of the cost to be donated to the RI Breast Cancer Coalition, and for the **New England Patriots**, with proceeds going to the New England Patriots Charitable Foundation.
- The Assembly enacted a new law preventing utility companies from installing unsightly **gas meters** on the facades of homes, particularly those in historic districts.
- Legislation will require **residential oil heat contracts** to be disclosed in a way that clearly defines the terms and conditions of the plan, with a written contract provided within 14 days of any solicitation.

ENVIRONMENT

- Under the **Water Conservation and Competitiveness Act**, water suppliers will promote conservation through price structures that make basic water use affordable while encouraging conservation. The act also requires communities to consider water availability in development planning so the state's water supply remains an economic development advantage.
- Legislators increased fines for **industrial polluters** from \$1,000 to \$25,000 per day to ensure swift cleanup. The new law grew out of a situation in Tiverton where pollution by manufactured gas wastes contaminated 100 properties.
- The Assembly approved a measure that requires major public building construction or renovation projects to comply with **energy-efficiency and environmental design standards**.
- **Dumping out-of-state trash** at the Central Landfill, under legislation OK'd by the Assembly, will now carry a fine of \$50,000, up from the current \$5,000 fine.
- Cities and towns will be able to take advantage of a **leaf and yard debris cap-and-trade** pool to allow municipalities to borrow from each others' excess allotments of tonnage for compostable leaf and yard debris at the Central Landfill to avoid extra costs when they collect more than they're allowed to dump.

HEALTH CARE

- Enacted into law is legislation that amends the current **HIV/AIDS testing and screening** process to reduce vulnerability to transmission of the disease.
- Bills have been passed requiring health insurance companies to provide coverage for FDA-approved **smoking cessation** medications.
- Legislation was approved establishing licensing requirements and providing for state inspections of **adult supportive care homes**, facilities that house between two and five adults.
- A new House commission will study reducing the cost of **healthcare coverage for government employees** (state and local), with the goal of developing alternatives to the present way RI and its municipalities provide coverage.
- Legislation calls for the Department of Health and the Department of Education to develop a plan to raise public awareness and to promote early intervention in the **treatment of autism**.
- A Senate commission created this year has held several hearings as part of a comprehensive study and analysis of the **Hospital Conversion Act**.

EDUCATION

- The **Degree in Three** Program act will give students enrolling at RIC and URI the option of completing their degree in three years by applying advanced placement, dual enrollment and other credit-bearing courses taken in high school.
- A new law allows school districts, school departments and school committees to accept **grants, gifts and donations** from individuals and public or private entities to be used for an educational purpose specified by the donor.
- A newly created commission consisting of 20 of the state's top education officials and educators will explore ways to transform **training and support** of new teachers.
- Bills passed the House and Senate creating the Rhode Island **After School and Summer Learning Program Act**, intended to pave the way for high quality after school and summer learning programs for public school students.

GOVERNMENT

- The legislature approved a bill, later vetoed by the governor, requiring a **special election to choose a successor for any U.S. senator from Rhode Island** who steps down, dies or is removed from office before the end of his or her term.
- The Assembly voted to place a question on the 2010 state ballot asking voters whether they wish to change the state's constitution to eliminate the words "and **Providence Plantations**" from references to the state.
- The Assembly voted to create two commissions to study ways to reduce costs for municipalities. One commission will study all aspects of **municipal pensions within the state** and the other will study ways to **pool resources and share services** among Rhode Island's cities and towns.
- Legislation makes it permissible to use matching campaign funds for communication access expenses to ensure participation by **deaf and hard-of-hearing** voters.

