

## 2013 LEGISLATIVE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

### **BUDGET**

- The 2014 state budget bill included no broad-based tax or fee increases.
- It restored the historic structures tax credit program by using \$34.5 million previously approved for projects that were never completed, with a \$5 million per-project cap.
- The budget implemented a statewide sales tax exemption on art, including books, paintings, performance, traditional and fine crafts and more.
- The budget included \$4.5 million, some from federal sources, for workforce development. Among the programs included is the Rhode Island Back to Work program, which will pair a person collecting unemployment benefits with a business for training at no expense to the business, which could then hire the trained employee if it chooses. It also included the enhanced Jobs Match program to use a computerized system to match employers and job-seekers and identify skills gaps in the workforce.
- It eliminated the sales tax on spirits and wine for a 16-month pilot program to see whether it will help retailers competing with liquor stores in Massachusetts, which eliminated its sales tax on alcohol in 2011.
- Legislators included a pilot program to allow families receiving state-subsidized child care to remain in the program if their income increases to exceed the current limit of 180 percent of the federal poverty level, allowing them to earn up to 225 percent.
- The budget includes a new plan to accelerate depreciation on the value of new equipment purchased by businesses and manufacturers and taxed by the state. Instead of that depreciation being spread over several years, it would be aligned with federal standards that allow much more of the depreciation the first year, reducing the business' tax that year.
- It adds \$2 million for 2013 and another \$2 million for 2014 for the Payment in Lieu of Taxes program that helps offset tax revenues municipalities lose on tax-exempt properties in their communities. It also adds \$5 million, to be distributed based on population, to municipalities as long as they comply with pension reform requirements.
- An allotment of \$7 million was made to start the Municipal Roads and Bridges Revolving Loan Fund, to help municipalities perform major road repairs at a lower borrowing cost.
- Also included is the Innovate RI Small Business Program to assist Rhode Island small businesses in applying for federal funds targeting research and innovation, to match some or all of the federal funds awarded, and to establish a paid internship program for bioscience students to help encourage the growth of that high-paying industry in the state.

## **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT/BUSINESS**

- Lawmakers restructured the state's entire approach to economic development with a commitment to draw up a new long-term economic plan, the overhaul and re-naming of the Economic Development Corporation and the creation of the Council of Economic Advisors. The General Assembly also approved a measure that allows changes to the state's strategy to fall under a new Executive Office of Commerce. The Office of Commerce would be established in 2015 to coincide with the beginning of the governor's term and would be led by the secretary of commerce, appointed by the governor. The office would absorb the Department of Business Regulation, the Office of Regulatory Reform, and functions related to Housing and Community Development, as well as the newly reconstituted Rhode Island Commerce Corporation.
- The General Assembly passed legislation to allow Rhode Island businesses to pay employees on a biweekly basis.
- Signed by the governor was legislation creating a "Made in Rhode Island" collaborative to promote locally made products. The panel of government, education and arts leaders will work with the Rhode Island Commerce Corporation and an advisory council of businesspeople and artists to market, brand and promote Rhode Island-made products.
- Legislation was passed to create a task force that will establish statewide permitting for septic and wetlands setbacks.
- Also receiving the governor's approval was General Assembly legislation revising labor laws to allow students to train during school hours in approved manufacturing career and technical programs.
- Receiving approval from both chambers was the establishment of the Code Consistency Council, which will be charged with examining the state fire, building, elevator and other related codes for consistency.
- In order to compete with neighboring Connecticut, legislators gave the green light to Rhode Island liquor store owners who want to open their doors at 10 a.m. instead of noon on Sundays.
- The General Assembly passed legislation establishing a 13-member commission to study the Rhode Island sales tax.
- The General Assembly gave final passage to legislation that will allow for an expedited noncompliance citation process by the Department of Environmental Management (DEM) for matters that carry a small monetary penalty.
- Lawmakers passed bills allowing for the creation of benefit corporations. The legislation would create a voluntary option for businesses that have a mission other than profit to allow them to pursue that mission appropriately without risk of lawsuits from shareholders.

## **PUBLIC SAFETY AND JUSTICE**

- The Assembly approved three gun safety/gun violence bills. One creates a task force to study ways for the state to address firearm safety and behavioral health. Another bars the sale and ownership of guns with altered, missing IDs. The third

increases criminal penalties for carrying a stolen firearm while committing a crime of violence.

- Approved was legislation that would place synthetic cannabinoids and synthetic cathinones (sold under such names as “herbal incense” and “bath salts”) on the highly-regulated Schedule I drug list, and would ban their manufacture, sale and use in Rhode Island.
- Legislation has been signed into law that allows failure to wear a seatbelt to remain a primary offense, but that lowers the fine from \$85 to \$40.
- Legislation has been approved that increases the penalties for texting while driving, raising a first offense to an \$85 fine or a 30-day license suspension, or both.
- Legislation has been signed into law that will require driving students to be educated and tested on the issue of distracted driving, especially the risks posed by making phone calls or sending text messages while behind the wheel.
- The Assembly has approved legislation that allows innocent victims of violent crimes to receive funds for relocation purposes.
- The legislature has approved the Kelsey Smith Act for Rhode Island. It provides that, upon request of law enforcement, a wireless telecommunications carrier must provide call location information (ping) concerning the device of a user in order for police to respond to a call for emergency services or in an emergency situation that involves the risk of death or serious physical harm.
- The General Assembly gave its approval to legislation that will crack down on graffiti by increasing penalties and holding perpetrators responsible for the damage they cause.
- Legislation has been approved that will prohibit prospective employers from including questions on job applications regarding arrests, charges or criminal convictions. Questions about those issues can be brought up by prospective employers at the first job interview.
- Bills have been passed to establish a “certificate of recovery and re-entry” program in the state’s prison system, with the documents presented to parolees who meet certain requirements attesting to their readiness to successfully re-enter society.
- The Assembly approved legislation to allow health care providers leeway to release some patient information to law enforcement in cases when it might alert them to a crime or help identify the perpetrator.
- Legislation has been approved closing a loophole in existing law that has allowed drivers under the age of 21 to avoid a criminal drunken-driving charge as long as their blood alcohol level is less than .1 percent, even when it is above the legal limit of .08 percent.
- Approved by the Assembly was legislation that will eliminate the requirement that motorists surrender suspended licenses and registration plates to the DMV unless the individual is found operating a motor vehicle during the suspension period.
- Approved and signed into law was legislation establishing criminal laws against cheating at casino games – necessary for establishing table games at Twin River - - and creating a gaming enforcement unit within the State Police.

## **ELECTIONS AND GOOD GOVERNMENT**

- The General Assembly agreed on national popular vote legislation to add Rhode Island to a compact of states agreeing to commit their electoral votes to the candidate who wins the most popular votes in presidential balloting across the country.
- Lawmakers also passed legislation to insert more transparency and accountability in the tax incentive process, calling for more data and review of how tax credits and other incentives are used year-to-year.
- The legislature introduced live web-streaming and an online bill tracker tool so that members of the public and the press can keep a close eye on the progress of legislation they care about. Capitol TV has the ability to live-stream up to four legislative events – including the House and Senate sessions – simultaneously.
- Another transparency bill winning passage in both chambers was the legislation calling for more accountability in quasi-public agencies, which will now be subject to three-year performance audits and other transparency requirements.
- Legislation passed by the General Assembly and signed into law by the governor will ensure that any voter who is in line at a polling place by poll closing time (8 p.m.) will be allowed to cast a ballot, regardless of whether or not they are inside the building in which the voting is being held.
- Lawmakers also sent a piece of legislation to the governor that would require the state Retirement Board to identify all companies in which the public fund has direct or indirect holdings in companies with business operations in Iran within 90 days of the effective date. If those scrutinized operations do not cease, the bills allow the public fund to divest from those companies doing business with Iran
- Another measure approved by the legislature this year would provide that no employee of the state Board of Education or immediate family member would receive a tuition waiver as a result of employment status without first consenting to public disclosure of the existence and amount of the waiver.

## **HEALTH**

- Legislators OK'd legislation to control health care costs for families and businesses while increasing the quality of care and transparency, as well as addressing market power.
- In order to improve financial protection for cancer patients taking oral chemotherapy treatments, the Assembly approved legislation to put chemo pills and related treatments on par with intravenous (IV) chemotherapy.
- Legislators in both chambers passed a measure that would pave the way for greater use of e-scripts. Under this legislation, the director of the state Department of Health (DOH) would be required to establish rules and regulations for adopting a system for electronic data transmission of prescriptions involving substances on the various controlled substance schedules.

- The Assembly gave final passage to legislation to guarantee the adequacy of the blood supply in the state and the availability of blood products and blood services for patients and hospitals in the state.

## **CONSUMER/QUALITY OF LIFE**

- Rhode Island became the 10<sup>th</sup> state to enact same-sex marriage. The law takes effect Aug. 1.
- The Temporary Disability Insurance (TDI) program was expanded to allow employees to receive up to four weeks' paid leave if they must take time out of work to care for a sick family member or bond with a new child.
- The Assembly raised the minimum wage from \$7.75 to \$8 beginning Jan. 1, 2014.
- The Assembly required individuals performing home inspections to meet licensing requirements by July 31.
- Legislators approved the Quality Family Child Care Act to allow child care providers participating in the state's Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) to form a union and negotiate with the state in areas such as training, development and recruitment.
- Lawmakers approved a measure to develop assessment and referral tools to help Rhode Islanders who serve as long-term caregivers for the elderly or disabled, as a means to better support them and to help those in need of care remain in their homes and communities when possible.
- In response to the abrupt closure of the Sawyer School in December, the Assembly required private postsecondary schools to provide refunds and records transfers for students, and give them 30 days' notice, should they close their doors.
- Legislators approved the Mortgage Conciliation Act requiring banks and lenders to make a good-faith attempt to negotiate with homeowners before foreclosing on homes in Rhode Island.
- Rhode Island became the 21<sup>st</sup> state to ban discretionary clauses, which are insurance policy provisions that give the insurer the sole discretion to interpret the policy and to decide whether an insured is entitled to benefits.
- Lawmakers prohibited insurers from denying, refusing to issue, terminating or restricting coverage, or adding a premium differential to a property and casualty insurance policy on the basis of the applicant's or insured's abuse status.
- Legislation was approved to create a comprehensive program to verify compliance with motor vehicle owners' and operators' mandatory liability insurance requirements.
- Legislators barred cities and towns from banning specific breeds of dogs, cats or other pets.
- The Assembly prohibited property owners from requiring devocalization or declawing of dogs and cats as a condition of occupancy.
- Lawmakers additionally expanded the definition of "animal cruelty" to ensure that pet owners and farmers raise animals in safe, appropriate environments.

## **ENVIRONMENT**

- Legislators passed a bill to allow homeowners in participating cities and towns to access a low-cost, fixed-rate loan for energy upgrades that would become an assessment on the property, much like a sewer assessment.
- Lawmakers required all No. 2 distillate heating oil sold in the state to contain a specified percentage of a biobased product beginning in July 2014.
- The state budget included a measure to allow inherited working farmland to be assessed at its use value, not its higher cash value, for inheritance tax purposes. The concept is a way to prevent family farms from being driven out of business or sold off in whole or in part when one generation passes them along to the next.
- Legislators made changes to the state's distributed generation laws, expanding the requirement for competitive pricing to drive down the cost of renewable energy being produced by the smallest projects. The bill simplifies the process to participate in the program, reduces the review period, allows for hydro power timelines and increases transparency.
- Lawmakers set up a council to establish a program for the proper recycling, reuse and disposal of mattresses, to involve mattress manufacturers in the responsibility for their disposal.

## **EDUCATION**

- The budget passed by the Assembly continues to fully fund the decade-long phase-in of the education aid formula with an allotment of an additional \$30 million for 2014. It also includes \$500,000 for early-education programs; \$250,000 to fund an all-day kindergarten pilot program, and an additional \$6 million for higher education to freeze tuition at the current level at the state's colleges and university.
- Bills were passed to improve safety measures in Rhode Island schools. One bill requires all schools to perform a safety assessment in conjunction with local police, fire and school safety teams within 30 days of enactment and every three years thereafter. The other requires the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education to certify annually that all safety and emergency plans have been reviewed and updated.
- The House and Senate adopted resolutions supporting the efforts of the Board of Education and Department of Administration to locate a nursing education center at the South Street Power Station in Providence, a planned endeavor by the University of Rhode Island, Rhode Island College and Brown University.
- Legislation was approved directing the Board of Education to establish a statewide dual enrollment program whereby eligible high school students enroll at a college or university as non-degree students and have the courses recognized toward degree completion at both the college and high school.
- Signed into law was legislation that will require high school seniors to be trained in cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and the use of an automated external defibrillator (AED) in order to graduate.

- Signed into law is legislation to require any individuals who are current or prospective volunteers of a school department and who may have direct or unmonitored contact with children or students on school premises to undergo a state criminal background check.
- Legislation was approved to allow school districts to schedule fewer than 180 school days a year as long as they provide 1,080 annual hours of instruction to students.
- The Assembly approved legislation that will create a Teachers' Advisory Council to provide a communications mechanism between teachers and the state Board of Education.

## **VETERANS AND MILITARY**

- The legislature approved creation of a 13-member Veterans' Services Strategic Plan (VSSP) advisory committee to develop, maintain and annually update a five-year plan for the delivery of government services in such areas as benefits, employment, educational attainment, job training, health services and homelessness.
- Legislation was approved calling for establishment of veteran-friendly educational programs to allow service personnel returning from a combat tour to achieve educational attainment in an accelerated manner, including recognizing a student's military training and coursework.
- Lawmakers passed bills allowing service members who are moved to a different base or otherwise deployed to terminate motor vehicle leases or rental agreements.
- The Assembly approved bills directing the Division of Veterans' Affairs to produce a comprehensive "Pocket Guide of Veterans' Services" along with an online resource application of that information.
- An act was passed to make it easier for military service members and their spouses to obtain certification and licenses to perform regulated professional services, directing the licensing boards to accept military education, training and service toward qualifications.
- An act was passed requiring state-run public higher education institutions to adopt a policy to award educational credits to veterans for courses that were part of their military training.
- An act was passed to increase the membership of the Interagency Council on Homelessness, adding a member from the Providence Veterans Administration Medical Center, and adding a current or former homeless veteran to the permanent advisory council.
- Passed was legislation to eliminate the requirement of activation or deployment for state or federal services for recipients of the Military Family Relief Fund.

## **OTHER LEGISLATION**

- The General Assembly approved legislation allowing cities and towns the option of owning their streetlights as a cost-controlling measure.
- With copper such an attractive target for thieves, lawmakers gave their approval to a measure that would require licensing for the purchase of certain types of ferrous and non-ferrous metals. It also requires purchasers to obtain identification information from the sellers of the goods and establishes a procedure for purchasers to record transactions, keep those records on file for two years and present those records for inspection by any law enforcement agency seeking to review them.
- The General Assembly adopted a joint resolution creating a commission to study construction of a parking facility in downtown Providence at the Garrahy Judicial Complex on Dorrance Street.