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Legislative Press Bureau at (401) 528-1743

## **THIS YEAR AT THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY**

STATE HOUSE — Here are the highlights from news and events that took place in the General Assembly this year. For more information on any of these items visit <http://www.rilegislature.gov/pressrelease>



### **HOUSING**

- The General Assembly approved more than a dozen pieces of housing legislation backed by House Speaker K. Joseph Shekarchi to help address the housing crisis. Many of the bills are aimed at speeding housing production by streamlining and removing roadblocks in permitting processes.
- Lawmakers included an additional \$39 million to support housing development. That includes \$27 million from State Fiscal Recovery funds for a new program that allows the Secretary of Housing to target projects, including \$4 million for transit-oriented development and \$4.3 million to be transferred to the Infrastructure Bank to support infrastructure necessary for housing development, such as road and utility connections.
- The legislature approved \$45 million from State Fiscal Recovery funds to increase facility capacity for individuals experiencing homelessness, three times the current level.
- When added to the \$250 million approved with last year's budget, \$321.5 million of flexible state ARPA funds are dedicated to the housing crisis. Among the housing package bills were:
  - The General Assembly approved a Low Income Housing Tax Credit program to provide a tax incentive for developers to expand subsidized housing options for low-income households.
  - Lawmakers amended the Low and Moderate Income Housing Act to modify and clarify the procedure for review of applications to build housing. It also streamlines the process of permitting from three steps to two steps and sets forth necessary submission items at each stage of the permitting process.

More...

- Lawmakers passed a bill requiring lenders to advise owner-occupant mortgagors of the availability of a mortgage mediation process before the lender can proceed to foreclosure.
- The legislature made it easier to convert commercial structures such as hospitals or mills into housing.
- The Assembly increased the percentage set aside for affordable units in qualifying projects and, in turn, increase the number of allowable units per acre for all housing projects subject to inclusionary zoning.
- Lawmakers streamlined the appeals process for comprehensive permit applications for affordable housing.
- The Assembly voted to spur more housing development in the state by amending zoning standards and making changes to dimensional variance standards.
- The General Assembly standardized and updated the way notice is provided for all land-use permitting.
- Legislators approved a requirement that all municipal land use approvals be consistent with future land use maps so long as the municipality's comprehensive plan is updated in accordance with statute. Any comprehensive plan over 12 years old cannot be used as justification to deny zoning changes.
- The General Assembly voted to promote the construction of housing units near transportation hubs, so called transit-oriented development.
- Lawmakers created a court calendar dedicated to housing and land use.

#### **LANDLORD/TENANT RIGHTS**

- The General Assembly voted to outlaw housing rental application fees.
- The General Assembly passed four bills to reduce childhood lead poisoning by ensuring landlords comply with lead-safety laws.
- Lawmakers provided for the sealing of court files in residential eviction proceedings upon the filing of a motion and the meeting of certain requirements.
- Lawmakers increased the amount of costs for repairs that a tenant may deduct from rent from \$125 to \$500 in the aggregate per year.
- The Assembly passed a law to create a handbook spelling out the rights and responsibilities of landlords and tenants.

#### **TAX REFORM AND RELIEF**

- The budget includes a \$50,000 exemption for all businesses subject to the tangible tax, viewed as an administrative burden for small businesses and for the municipalities that collect it — eliminating the tax completely for 75% of Rhode Island businesses. The state will reimburse municipalities for the lost revenue.
- The General Assembly voted to tax property owned by nonprofit institutions that is leased or occupied by for-profit persons and entities.
- The budget increases the earned income tax credit from the current 15% to 16% of the federal credit.
- The General Assembly suspended collection of the gross receipts tax on electricity and natural gas billed to consumers next winter, for a total of \$35 million in relief to households and businesses.

#### **BUSINESS/ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

- The budget includes a \$45 million investment into the life sciences sector. Funds would be used for the development of much-needed wet lab incubator spaces and support grants, loans, business development and incubation services to grow this sector.
- The General Assembly approved iGaming at Twin River, which enables Rhode Islanders 21 and over to access existing table games remotely, via a computer or a mobile app.
- The General Assembly allowed the state’s recreational cannabis dispensaries to advertise their products.
- The budget includes \$6 million in funding to establish a new minority business accelerator in coordination with minority small business associations to provide technical assistance, loans and programming space.
- The budget stabilizes the Workers’ Compensation Fund with \$4 million to prevent an increase in the premiums paid by Rhode Island businesses.
- The budget adds \$2.6 million to the Small Business Assistance Program, which connects businesses struggling to obtain lines of credit with community-based lenders.
- Lawmakers approved legislation to extend the state’s existing musical and theater production tax credit program to national tours that skip Broadway and launch right from Rhode Island.

## **HEALTH CARE**

- Lawmakers passed legislation to enact many of the consumer-protection elements of the federal Affordable Care Act into state law, providing Rhode Islanders with permanent protections, even if the federal law is ever weakened or repealed.
- The Assembly passed the Equality in Abortion Coverage Act, which will provide insurance coverage for abortion care to individuals on Medicaid as well as state employees.
- The legislature amended the Lead Poisoning Prevention Act to create a lead water supply replacement program for both public and private service lines, with a requirement that all affected lines are replaced within 10 years.
- The legislature required hospitals to adopt protocols for identifying and treating sepsis.
- The General Assembly formalized protections in state law against discrimination in health care, guaranteeing that patients shall not be denied appropriate care on the basis of age, sex, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, race, color, marital status, familial status, disability, religion, national origin, source of income, source of payment or profession.
- The General Assembly allowed the collecting of information from overdose deaths to aid in prevention strategies.
- The General Assembly extended a two-year pilot program to prevent drug overdoses through the establishment of harm reduction centers.
- The state’s struggling hospitals will receive a \$14 million injection of funds, \$5 million of which will come from general revenue and \$9 million of which will come from federal funds.

- Lawmakers voted to protect organ donors from unfair discrimination as it pertains to insurance and disability income.
- The budget includes an additional \$75 million dollars to provide support for individuals with developmental disabilities. The funding will improve community programs, raise wages for caregivers to at least \$20 per hour and help Rhode Island comply with the Olmstead consent decree.
- Legislation passed allowing the Independent Provider Program to merge with the Personal Choice program so that the state has one self-directed program for direct support services to individuals.
- Lawmakers banned private insurance companies from discriminating against seniors with pre-existing conditions shopping for Medicare Advantage plans.

## **PRESCRIPTIONS**

- The General Assembly passed legislation to authorize pharmacists to prescribe and dispense hormonal contraceptives, provided that the pharmacist has completed a training program approved by the state Board of Pharmacy.
- The legislature requires health insurers in Rhode Island to cover the full cost of life-saving epinephrine injectors.
- The Assembly limited the out-of-pocket expenses of specialty prescription drugs to \$150 per 30-day supply. Protections will kick in once the patient reaches their deductible.
- The General Assembly passed legislation to make HIV-prevention medications free and accessible to qualifying patients.

## **ENVIRONMENT**

- The General Assembly passed a comprehensive plan for the future of solar development in Rhode Island by reforming the state's net metering and renewable energy growth programs to expand solar development while protecting forests, creating well-paying jobs and stabilizing costs for ratepayers.
- The legislature clarified shoreline access by establishing that the public area of the shoreline is 10 feet landward of the recognizable high tide line.
- Lawmakers banned restaurants from using polystyrene foam, commonly called Styrofoam, for food packaging or preparation.
- Lawmakers phased out the sale of mercury-containing fluorescent lightbulbs.
- The Assembly changed the manner in which the administrator of the Coastal Resources Management Council is appointed.
- The budget fully funds the Executive Climate Change Coordinating Council (EC4), the body responsible for implementing the Act on Climate.
- The General Assembly established a joint legislative commission to study how to best reduce plastic litter and waste.
- Lawmakers approved a bill to update the state's building codes to improve efficiency and prepare for electrification.

## **PRE K-12 EDUCATION**

- The budget reforms the school funding formula by modifying poverty measures and allocates \$20 million above the governor's request, including \$6.7 million more going to multi-language learners and \$5.2 million more to special education.

- The General Assembly appropriated \$7 million for early childhood programs. This includes \$3 million for Head Start and Early Head start seats and \$4 million for a pilot program to expand eligibility for child care, at no cost, to certain child care workers.
- The budget allocates \$4 million to the governor's Learn 365 RI program for after school learning.
- Lawmakers temporarily removed the limit on the number of days that retired teachers, administrators and staff members can return to work as substitute employees during any school year.
- The legislature voted to elevate the voices of parents and teachers in the state's educational system by establishing guidelines for each public school district's special education local advisory committee.
- Lawmakers directed that services provided by school social workers and certified school psychologists are included as health care-related services eligible for federal Medicaid reimbursement.

### **HIGHER EDUCATION**

- The legislature created the Hope Scholarship Pilot Program to provide the cost of two years of tuition and mandatory fees for eligible students during their junior and senior years at Rhode Island College.
- The budget expands the Wavemaker Fellowship student loan forgiveness program to include teachers.
- The budget provides \$5 million in one-time funding for the Fresh Start Scholarship for adult students with some credits, but no degree, and supports the RI Reconnect program with \$8 million to improve postsecondary degree and credential attainment among underserved, working-age Rhode Islanders.
- The budget funds the proposed Institute for Cybersecurity & Emerging Technologies at Rhode Island College.
- For URI, the budget includes \$65.8 million to renovate athletic complexes, \$72.9 million for asset protection projects and \$20 million for water filtration.
- The General Assembly requires the state's public higher education institutions to establish ways of awarding academic credit for students' participation in registered apprenticeship programs.

### **LABOR/WORKFORCE**

- The General Assembly passed a bill to toughen penalties for wage theft, the most prevalent and costly form of theft in the United States.
- Lawmakers ensured workers have the right to report alleged incidents of sexual harassment, discrimination or illegal activity by prohibiting employers from requiring certain nondisclosure agreements.
- The General Assembly gave its approval to legislation to extend changes to unemployment regulations to put Rhode Islanders back to work.

### **JUSTICE and PUBLIC SAFETY**

- The General Assembly passed a bill to protect domestic violence victims from abusive litigation filed by abusers.
- The budget will fully fund a new cold case unit in the attorney general's office.

- Lawmakers voted to require police training to recognize and respond appropriately in situations involving individuals with cognitive or communication-related disabilities.
- The General Assembly passed a law requiring motorists to slow down or leave a buffer lane when nonemergency vehicles are parked on the shoulder of highways.
- The General Assembly passed a bill requiring the return of any bail money at the time of judgment of the case and that the money shall not be used to pay court fees.
- Lawmakers voted to require driver's education programs to include curriculum about driving under the influence of marijuana.

## **TRANSPORTATION**

- The Assembly approved legislation to better align projects so that roadways across Rhode Island aren't dug up multiple times by requiring utilities to coordinate with the Rhode Island Department of Transportation to develop a comprehensive plan that aligns planned state and utility projects.
- The General Assembly approved legislation to require that new and expanded parking lots built with any public funding include a certain percentage of electric vehicle charging stations.
- The budget includes \$20 million from State Fiscal Recovery funds for a matching grant program that will help cities and towns fund local road, bridge and sidewalk repairs. It also leverages \$87.8 million in state funding to unlock additional federal road and bridge funding.
- The General Assembly approved legislation to help align the state's transit goals for the future, and provides that the director of the Rhode Island Department of Transportation shall serve as the chairperson of the Board of the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority.
- The General Assembly passed legislation to keep motor vehicle inspections within state boundaries.
- The state legislature reduced the fee for an original driver privilege card from \$50 to \$25.
- The budget extends a pilot program to provide free bus fare on the R-Line, Rhode Island's busiest bus route.
- The Assembly established laws governing low-speed vehicles and providing for their registration for use on the road.

## **ELECTIONS and GOOD GOVERNMENT**

- The budget set aside \$55 million in a supplemental rainy day fund to better position Rhode Island to weather economic downturns.
- The General Assembly voted to permit 17-year-olds to vote in a primary election as long as they are registered to vote and will be 18 by the time of the general election.
- The General Assembly approved legislation rescheduling next year's presidential primary to April 2 to avoid a conflict with Passover.

## **SENIORS and VETERANS**

- The budget allocates \$15.3 million to nursing homes, with 80% of that allocated to wages to improve staffing and retain caregivers.

- Lawmakers approved a bill extending property tax benefits to National Guard veterans.
- The budget distributes retired public employees' cost-of-living adjustments annually instead of in larger lump sums once every four years.
- The Assembly increased the personal needs allowance of residents in nursing homes to \$75.
- The General Assembly funded the Veterans Service Officers program to assist veterans in understanding their state and federal benefits.

#### **MISCELLANEOUS**

- The budget increases funding for the Rhode Island Food Bank by \$3 million to help address food insecurity.
- Rhode Island established "Juneteenth National Freedom Day" as a state holiday that will be held annually on June 19, beginning in 2024.
- Lawmakers passed a bill to streamline the adoption process for children born through assisted reproduction, to help families who pursue adoption to better protect the rights of the parent who is not biologically related to the child.