



CONTACT:
 David “Jonesy” Mann, Lead Author and Coordinator
david.randall.mann@gmail.com

July 27, 2022

Dear Candidates for The Office of Governor of Rhode Island,

We, the 36 undersigned organizations, call on Rhode Island’s next Governor to make bold changes to bring our state’s transportation infrastructure into the 21st century.

Rhode Island’s outdated transportation system is failing to keep pace with the needs of our residents, our economy and our planet. We believe that Rhode Islanders deserve a transportation system that provides for their diverse mobility needs, reduces air pollution, improves local economic development, supports affordable housing development, and cuts greenhouse gas emissions.

Transportation Problems Affect All Rhode Islanders

Public Health and Safety

Gas and diesel burning vehicles are a leading cause of air pollution that causes permanent health problems in vulnerable communities. Several [RI counties receive “D” and “F” grades for ozone pollution from the American Lung Association](#), and many people, especially children, suffer from respiratory diseases as a result. In 2016 alone, the health impacts of tailpipe emissions increased healthcare costs [by \\$1.2 billion](#). According to the Department of Health, [nearly 11% of kids in Rhode Island have asthma](#), and Black and Latino children suffer asthma rates approximately 3 times more frequently than white children. Respiratory health outcomes are worst in communities near highways.

Meanwhile the roads in our cities and towns have been designed first and foremost to accommodate high speeds, which enables and encourages reckless driving. In our small state, [60 people are killed by automobile crashes and over 300 are seriously injured each year](#). One out of every four of those who are killed are struck by drivers while walking or biking. These deaths and injuries are avoidable; roads can be designed to discourage speeding and protect vulnerable road users. All Rhode Islanders deserve to feel safe on our roads, whether they are driving, walking, taking the bus, biking, or using wheelchairs or scooters.

Affordability and Freedom of Choice

Too many Rhode Islanders are stuck in traffic and stuck paying high prices for gas, insurance, and car maintenance. We have [the highest cost of car ownership in New England](#) and a [lower median income than our neighboring states](#), leaving many households overly burdened with transportation costs. Meanwhile the state has not invested adequately in alternatives that would allow people to get out of traffic and save money. Public transit does not run frequently enough or go to enough places to be a workable option for many people, despite 77% of our state’s population living within a 10-minute walk of a transit stop, according to RIPTA. Sidewalks are often crumbling or nonexistent, and are not protected from high-speed traffic. Our bicycle network is an incomplete patchwork that requires riding on dangerous roads. Most Rhode Islanders do not have freedom of choice in their transportation: if they want to get to work, school, or the grocery store, they have no choice but to pony up the cost for gas, insurance, and car payments.

Racial, Economic, and Mobility Justice

In its pursuit of a car-centric transportation system in the 20th century, the State of Rhode Island and our cities [repeatedly displaced low-income residents of color against](#)

[their will](#). Postwar urban renewal projects and highway construction demolished entire neighborhoods of predominantly Black and brown residents. Providence alone lost tens of thousands of units of housing.

Today, our car-centric transportation system leaves behind everyone who is unable to drive. This includes everyone under 16 years of age, those who cannot afford a car, people with visual impairment and mobility challenges, many immigrants and refugees, and many elders. Fully 9% of Rhode Island households do not have access to a car, according to the 2020 American Communities Survey. Many of these people are reliant on a transit system with limited hours and limited areas of service, or must walk on sidewalks or bike on streets where dangerous design leaves them in fear of being struck by a car. We all deserve to live in a state where an elder can walk safely to a corner store for milk and eggs, where a child can walk or bike to school, and where people who don't drive can take transit to work no matter what hour their shift starts.

Climate Change

Climate change presents an existential crisis for the Ocean State. Many of our coastal communities face rising sea levels and storm surges that will put neighborhoods underwater and eliminate the economic engines of our beach towns. We must take part in the global effort to reduce emissions. The legislature took a good step by passing the Act On Climate in 2021, which mandated economy-wide reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and gave state agencies the authority to create regulations to meet these targets. As transportation is the largest emitting sector, responsible for [35% of total emissions](#), Rhode Island needs a multi-agency effort to transition to a low-carbon transportation system. We must reduce our dependence on gasoline by creating better alternatives to driving and by electrifying all vehicles as quickly as possible.

Housing

Rhode Island is in the midst of a housing shortage, and car-centric development requirements are hampering our ability to build homes to meet the needs of all Rhode Islanders. Zoning requirements in cities and towns across our state require that large amounts of parking be built along with new homes, even in places where there are good alternatives to car ownership. In many new housing developments, more land area is devoted to parking than living space. Parking requirements increase the cost of new buildings and reduce the space available for housing units. This is unacceptable at a time when Rhode Islanders are struggling to find homes to live in. We need to prioritize homes for people over storage space for cars.

Local Economic Development

Our car-dependent transportation system harms economic development in our state, both in our local business districts as well as our major job centers.

Local Business Districts

The success of local business districts rests on customers who walk, bike, and take the bus. Picture any of our state's beloved business districts – Main Street in Warren, Thames Street in Newport, Westminster St in Downtown Providence, or High Street in Westerly – and you will see streets that are full of people and closely-tucked businesses, with minimal space given to parking lots. These places are both successful and adored precisely because they prioritize space for businesses and people over space for cars. Reverse the priority – put space for cars ahead of everything else – and you end up with strip malls: places with dangerous roads, many out-of-state businesses, and low economic productivity. Our neighborhood business districts and village centers will thrive and grow when we make it easy and safe for more customers to get to them on foot, by bus, and by bike.

Major Job Centers

Rhode Island's major manufacturing centers have been booming, but face a double challenge: difficulty hiring enough workers and lack of commuter transportation options. [The Providence Business News recently reported](#) that Rhode Island has been adding thousands of manufacturing jobs in places like Quonset Business Park, but that many of these jobs remain unfilled. A key challenge is their distance from where people live. The Rhode Island Manufacturers Association is partnering with cities and towns to offer public transit options that connect their residents to these jobs. RIPTA is testing commuter routes to Quonset, but this is a pilot program without long-term funding. Providing frequent, high-quality public transit options to our major job centers is a win-win-win that will fuel our manufacturing economy, connect Rhode Islanders to quality jobs, and reduce rush hour traffic and fossil fuel emissions.

Dollars lost to gasoline

Rhode Island has no crude oil reserves, nor does it produce or refine petroleum. This means the money Rhode Islanders spend on gasoline and diesel leaves our state's economy to the benefit of out-of-state oil producers. In 2019, Rhode Islanders consumed [368 million gallons of gas](#), which translates to \$800 million dollars that left the state's economy - compared to \$124 million collected in state gas taxes. A transition away from gasoline will keep these dollars in-state.

The Path Forward for Transportation in Our State

RIDOT can be a force to address intersecting issues of affordability, health, mobility, economic development, and climate change – if the next Governor will lead the way.

RIDOT made it clear in this year's "minor amendment" to the State Transportation Improvement Program that they prioritize not only repairing bridges and highways, but widening them and adding travel lanes. While maintaining a state of good repair for roads and bridges is essential, road expansion projects exacerbate air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and roadway injuries and fatalities. We saw RIDOT's priorities in effect with the 6/10 interchange reconstruction project, where the community in Olneyville called for a neighborhood boulevard that would stitch together neighborhoods that had been divided by the highway. [RIDOT overruled the community](#) and is now building an expanded highway interchange that will pollute the air in Olneyville for decades. Today, we see RIDOT making plans to [widen 5 miles of I-295](#), using \$85 million of federal infrastructure funds that are supposed to be applied in ways that will reduce emissions.

RIDOT does not currently have the expertise, capacity, or desire to prioritize projects that will address affordability, health, mobility, racial inequity, economic development, or climate change. Rhode Island's next governor must prioritize reform at RIDOT. Thankfully, there are good examples from around the country that we can learn from and emulate:

- In 2020, the Massachusetts Department of Transportation adopted a [new engineering directive](#) that requires state traffic engineers to include sidewalks, crosswalks, bus stops, and high-quality bike facilities when they design upgrades for the Commonwealth's major roadways.
- In 2021, the Colorado Department of Transportation approved [a new rule that will divert \\$6.7 billion dollars to clean transportation projects](#) in the coming decades. The rule will require the state Department of Transportation and the state's five metropolitan planning organizations to measure the climate impact of planned projects and offset them if they exceed a given amount.

Rhode Island can and must join these forward-looking states in widening our mobility choices rather than our highways.

We call on Rhode Island's next governor to take the following actions:

- Establish a **new vision for RIDOT** and restructure the department to deliver a 21st century multimodal transportation network. RIDOT should be a leading state agency for climate action alongside the Department of Environmental Management and Office of Energy Resources, and its priorities should align with state planning efforts, such as the Long Range Transportation Plan. DOT's leadership, policy makers, and senior engineering staff must be directed and resourced to build infrastructure that prioritizes walking, buses, bikes, and electric vehicles. At no time in history has more federal funding been available to improve transit, walking and biking infrastructure.
- **Fully fund** the necessary state match and execute **the state-approved Transit Master Plan** to support fast, frequent, reliable, and comfortable RIPTA service that connects the entire state. Commit to making RIPTA into a transit system that welcomes and serves the needs of all Rhode Islanders.
- **Fully fund** the necessary state match and execute **the state-approved Bicycle Mobility Plan** to help cities and towns complete their fragmented bicycle and pedestrian networks.
- Work with the MBTA to **electrify our commuter rail** and **increase its speed and frequency** of service and make necessary improvements in Rhode Island to make this transformation possible.
- Re-establish **quarterly public meetings** between the Director of RIDOT and engaged community members to identify issues of concern, establish trust, and improve transparency.
- Direct RIDOT to **deprioritize highway expansion projects** and **prioritize** (i) maintaining a **state of good repair** for our roads and bridges and (ii) integrating **infrastructure for buses, walking, and biking into all state road projects**. Every time a state road is rebuilt or repaved, it should be designed for all users as called for in state law (RIGL [24-16-2](#)).
- Direct RIDOT and Statewide Planning to establish a **Greenhouse Gas Transportation Planning Standard** that will prioritize projects that reduce emissions, as called for in [H-7851](#). Every RIDOT project should be analyzed for its climate impacts, and any projects that increase emissions should be required to be offset by projects that reduce emissions.
- Create a statewide funding mechanism for swift **sidewalk repair**.
- Create and fund a plan for **snow removal on sidewalks and bike lanes** on state-owned roads, as well as all RIPTA bus stops and bike paths.
- Work with the legislature to **reform zoning** in the state to incentivize **multi-family housing within a mile of major transit hubs**. These transit-oriented housing developments should have no parking minimums.

- Collaborate with the Governors of Connecticut and Massachusetts to put the **Transportation & Climate Initiative Program** (TCI-P) back on the table once the current fuel crisis stabilizes to make fossil fuel importers pay for the pollution that transportation fuels bring into Rhode Island and create a sustainable funding source for clean transportation investment.
- Commit to adopting all of California’s **advanced fuel economy standards** for the sale of cars, buses, and trucks, including an explicit commitment to **phase out the sale of gas-powered vehicles** no later than 2035.
- Make an executive order to **electrify all light-duty vehicle purchases** for the state fleet by 2027, and to electrify all medium-and-heavy duty vehicle purchases for the state fleet by 2040.
- Implement the **Drivers Licenses for All program** so that all drivers, regardless of immigration status, have access to insurance and safety education.
- Fund **hands-on safety education courses in all Rhode Island schools**, so that all people who grow up in our state will have guaranteed knowledge of how to navigate roads safely on bicycles, scooters, and other micro-mobility devices.

Rhode Island’s next Governor will have the opportunity to address key quality of life issues, including affordability, mobility, health, climate, and housing access by addressing the problems with our transportation system. A clear vision for transportation is needed to help Rhode Island thrive. We, the undersigned organizations, stand ready to work with Rhode Island’s next governor to make that vision a reality.

In community,

American Planning Association – Rhode Island Chapter
 Acadia Center
 Black Lives Matter Rhode Island
 Blackstone Valley Tourism Council
 Bike Newport
 Bike Tiverton
 Cityside at The Wheeler School
 Civic Alliance for a Cooler Rhode Island
 Clean Water Action
 Climate Action Rhode Island
 East Coast Greenway Alliance
 Environmental Council of Rhode Island
 Friends of the William C. O’Neill South County Bike Path
 George Wiley Center

Green Energy Consumers Alliance
Groundwork Rhode Island
Grow Smart Rhode Island
Haus of Codec
Housing Works Rhode Island at Roger Williams University
Latino Policy Institute
Local Return RI
Newport Partnership for Families
Providence Student Union
Racial and Environmental Justice Committee
RAMP: Real Access Motivates Program
Rhode Island Association of Railroad Passengers
Rhode Island Coalition to End Homelessness
Rhode Island Bicycle Coalition
Rhode Island Black Political Action Committee
Rhode Island Interfaith Coalition to Reduce Poverty
Rhode Island Organizing Project
Rhode Island Public Health Association
Rhode Island Transit Riders
Trinity Square Together
Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council
Working Families Party Rhode Island