

Scott Wolf's STIP Prepared Comments

September 11, 2025 RI State Planning Council Meeting

I want to acknowledge first that the proposed STIP reflects a lot of excellent staff work and outreach, and contains some significant, high impact projects, including improvements to the Westerly Train Station platforms, the Mount Hope Greenway Project, the Woonasquatucket Greenway and Wakefield's Main Street.

But I and Grow Smart Rhode Island, along with many of our community partners, view this STIP as mainly a status quo roadmap, if you will, for Rhode Island's future transportation priorities —at a time when, for multiple compelling reasons, we need to move in a more transit and bike and ped friendly direction. Instead, we are still facing proposed transit service cutbacks on more than 40 RIPTA routes, service cutbacks which could be completely avoided through a reallocation of one tenth of one percent of the current state Budget.

Other evidence that Transit and Bike and Ped are being shortchanged is that, based on statistics we have been able to access, these sectors represent only 12% of the projected multiyear STIP spending on transportation projects.

We need to reverse this serious underinvestment in non-car-centric transportation projects for several reasons, including, as our Attorney General has noted, because the current lack of investment in Transit and Bike and Ped options imperils Rhode Island's ability to meet the ambitious, essential goals of our own Act on Climate. Expanding on this point, I want to share with you two of the Attorney General's brief observations about the proposed STIP.

"The Draft STIP should identify more projects aimed at 'reducing vehicle miles traveled', 'reducing greenhouse gas emissions', and promoting public transportation". The AG goes on to say : "As currently drafted, the STIP fails to take a forward-looking approach to achieving the State's long-term goals, and falls far short of meaningfully furthering compliance with the Act on Climate."

Beyond the obvious climate and overall environmental benefits of encouraging and investing in mode shift, adjusting the STIP's priorities is also important for our State to make good on Governor McKee's highly laudable goal of substantially increasing Rhode Islanders' incomes. If we're going to be aggressive about pursuing this goal, we need to be providing increased, affordable access for Rhode Islanders to jobs, education and childcare. Doing so can help a significant number of our fellow Rhode Islanders both increase their incomes and reduce their daily cost of living.

In addition, more robust transit and bike and ped infrastructure should enhance RI's ability to retain and attract higher income young professionals, who along with their employers, appear to place a higher premium on these services than some other participants in our economy.

And if we want to advance aggressively another sound priority of the Governor's, that being improved public health, we should be making it much easier and safer to walk, bike, roll and in other ways get physical exercise on our streets, sidewalks and paths. And that requires a bigger investment in Bike and Ped infrastructure.

Moreover, to go all in on addressing still another front burner RI issue- our housing crisis --we need to be encouraging the proven synergies between increased transit service and increased location efficient housing production. But we can't reach a critical mass of this so-called TOD if we have an inadequate level of the T.

What's especially frustrating to us about the contours of this proposed STIP is that we have an excellent long range state blueprint for a more user-friendly, integrated, and high impact public transit system through the Transit Master Plan; and for a more robust, health and tourism enhancing bike network through the State Bicycle Mobility Plan.

And, as I've noted previously, what we're advocating is not a transportation funding revolution, but a transportation funding reset. If we were to, for example, see a doubling of the State's commitment in this STIP to both Transit and Bike and Ped infrastructure, the vast majority of federal and state dollars combined spent on transportation in RI would still be going to road and bridge repair and other road and bridge related construction activities.

And I want to make it clear that we support continued vigilance and emphasis on "State of Good Repair" initiatives, and commend RIDOT for making significant advances in this aspect of our transportation system.

Overall, we believe strongly that it's time Rhode Island joined many of our other Northeastern neighbors, and States further afield, in acknowledging the multiple benefits of increased investments in public transit and bike and ped infrastructure, and demonstrate the political and civic will, as well as enlightened self-interest, to prioritize these outlays—all urgently needed for a healthier, more economically vibrant, opportunity rich and marketable state.