

MEMORANDUM

To: Portsmouth Town Council

From: Linda Ujifusa

Re: 2020 Rhode Island General Assembly Legislative Priorities

Date: November 4, 2019

On October 28, 2019, the Town Council identified five priority issues to present to Portsmouth state legislators at the November 12 joint Town Council – School Committee meeting (drawn from this [list](#) compiled from staff and Town Council members). The issues were to protect and improve: 1) roads/transportation, 2) environmental protection, 3) voter rights/security, 4) state funding, and 5) healthcare. A summary of concerns and requested actions are set forth below for final approval. I recommend we also ask legislators to provide periodic written or in-person updates to the Town Council about our requests.

1) Roads/Transportation

a) *Roads*

Concerns: On September 9, 2019, the Town Council passed a [resolution](#) seeking multiple actions to improve state road safety and implement Green and Complete Streets requirements. See [here](#). Subsequently, DOT agreed to complete an East Main Road [safety audit](#) by November 2019. While this important step is appreciated, multiple state and federal entities with overlapping jurisdictions and competing priorities make it difficult to advocate effectively for necessary road work.¹ A pilot road diet on East Main Road, for example, was approved by the RI State Traffic Commission in September 2019, but now appears scheduled for 2022 in the [State Transportation Improvement Plan \(STIP\)](#) (see most recent STIP [here](#)). In addition, [Revision #19 to the STIP](#) recently shifted funding from planned bicycle and pedestrian improvements (including those in Portsmouth) to “other RIDOT projects.”

► **REQUEST:** Help keep pressure on relevant state agencies and commissions to fund and not delay state road safety work and implementation of Green and Complete Streets legislative requirements.

b) *Transportation*

Concerns: RI Public Transit Authority (RIPTA) is in the midst of creating a [Transit Master Plan](#) (TMP) that will shape mass transit across the state for the next 20 years.

► **REQUEST:** Help Portsmouth residents, town staff, and elected officials advocate for beneficial mass transit work to be included in the TMA (e.g., more frequent service, building a “hub,” etc.).

¹ Rhode Island entities involved in state road work include: [The RI State Department of Administration \(DOA\)](#) and its [Division of Statewide Planning](#) and [RI State Planning Council \(RISPC\)](#) which also serves as the [RI Metropolitan Planning Organization](#) (MPO), see [here](#) (organization chart), the [RI Department of Transportation \(RIDOT\)](#) and its [Office of Highway Safety](#) (OHS) and [RI State Traffic Commission](#). Federal entities include: [US Department of Transportation](#), the [Federal Transit Administration](#), and [US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#).

2) Environmental Protection – support a 2020 Green Economy Bond

Concerns: Climate change is an existential threat. It is imperative that we continue to fund projects that will improve public safety and resiliency in the face of increased flooding, major storm events, and ecosystem damage. Moreover, it is vital that additional funding for a “green economy” becomes available to municipalities to promote environmental protection and sustainable economic growth.

► **REQUEST:** Please support a 2020 Green Economy Bond similar to the [one passed in 2018](#).

3) Voter Rights/Security

Concerns: Only about 50% of eligible voters in Rhode Island voted in the 2018 election and significantly more are voting by mail ballot. Voting security and cybersecurity risks are increasing at an alarming rate. Despite recommendations from the [RI Secretary of State](#) and RI Board of Elections, legislation to increase efficiency and election security was not passed last year, including “early voting” legislation.

► **REQUEST:** Please support legislation recommended by the RI Secretary of State and RI Board of Elections to improve voter rights and security.

4) Increase “State Aid” to municipalities

Concerns: Portsmouth receives relatively little of the tax dollars its residents pay to the state. See “state aid” listed in recent budgets. Moreover, continuing state budget shortfalls cause decreased funding to municipalities. To help alleviate this problem:

a) Reverse past failed “trickle down” tax cuts

In 2006, the RI General Assembly passed legislation to cut taxes for the wealthiest Rhode Islanders, and basically helped only those households making over \$336,550 annually. See <http://www.rifuture.org/ris-tax-cuts-for-the-rich-were-2nd-biggest-of-decade/> While it was argued that these cuts would improve the RI economy in some “trickle down” fashion, there is no evidence of that. Ibid. There is also no evidence of “millionaire flight.” <https://itep.org/no-need-for-the-mythbusters-the-millionaire-tax-flight-myth-is-busted-again/> All that has happened is that the state is experiencing growing budget shortfalls and the tax burden has shifted to the middle class. <https://upriseri.com/2018-10-17-who-pays/>

► **REQUEST:** Please support legislation to reverse the 2006 tax cuts to the wealthy legislation, e.g., H5399/[S21](#) (2019). See [here](#).

b) Fund RI Municipal Infrastructure grants

The General Assembly passed a bill (H-7102 / S-2239) creating the framework for a RI Municipal Infrastructure Grant Program. Unfortunately, it did not secure funding in the FY19 State Budget to implement it. The program is modeled after the very successful MassWorks Program in Massachusetts that has stimulated significant private investment in the revitalization of urban and town centers across the Commonwealth. Portsmouth could use such infrastructure grants to help fund public-private partnership projects, e.g., in a “Town Center.”

► **REQUEST:** Please advocate for annual funding of the RI Municipal Infrastructure Grant Program as recommended by GrowSmart RI and RI Infrastructure Bank.

5) Protect our health and welfare

a) Protect Medicaid

Concerns: Currently in RI, federal Medicaid covers about 1 out of 4 children and 3 out of 5 nursing home residents. <https://www.kff.org/interactive/medicaid-state-fact-sheets/> Federal cuts of Medicaid severely threaten these vulnerable populations, as well as low income and disabled people. Moreover, private insurance companies (“Managed Care Organizations”) take about 60% of the state’s funds for Medicaid (in 2018, about \$1.7 billion) and there is significant evidence of insufficient MCO oversight and accountability. See [here](#).

► **REQUESTS:** 1) Please do not vote to further cut Medicaid funding. 2) Please support legislation asking the Auditor General to investigate private insurance company management of Medicaid funds. See [S. 584](#).

b) Support single payer improved “Medicare for all” health insurance

Concerns: According to 2017 US Census data, approximately 623 Portsmouth residents under the age of 65 do not have health insurance. See [here](#). In 2018, [approximately 28% of those with health insurance were “underinsured,”](#) meaning they had high health plan deductibles and out-of-pocket medical expenses relative to their income and were more likely to struggle paying medical bills and skip care because of cost. So, in Portsmouth, about 4,484 people are potentially “underinsured.”

The United States is the only industrialized nation in the world not to offer guaranteed universal health insurance under a single payer Medicare-for-all type system. Americans also pay about twice as much per capita for worse health outcomes. We are paying for universal coverage – we are just not getting it. For more information, see: www.pnhp.org. Rhode Island’s economy would significantly improve if current burdens on employers and employees due to health insurance costs are reduced and government entities (including Portsmouth) are relieved of Other Post Employment Benefit (OPEB) obligations.

► **REQUEST:** Please support bills (e.g., RI [H. 5368](#) and [S. 289](#)) urging RI FEDERAL legislators to support and more strongly advocate for single payer improved “Medicare-for-all” health insurance legislation, [HR 1384](#) and [S 1129](#). Note: Only Senator Reed currently has not signed onto to support a federal single payer Medicare-for-all bill.