



RHODE ISLAND

Rising

Executive Summary



Executive Summary

BACKGROUND

Rhode Island is a diverse state with people of many backgrounds, and communities from urban to rural. All of these people and places are needed to develop a thriving economy for generations to come based on what makes Rhode Island special. The State Economic Development plan looks forward to the next twenty years in Rhode Island, while also considering things we need to start doing today to improve our economy. This plan focuses on the economy, the environment, community vitality, social equity, infrastructure, education, public health, and more. The plan aims to make the most of our existing resources and talent, draw new development to the state, and prepare us for future growth.

This Economic Development Plan was prepared as part of RhodeMap RI, a coordinated, long-range planning effort led by the RI Division of Planning. The project was funded under a Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The goal of this planning grant program is to help communities and regions foster a more sustainable economy by coordinating planning and investment in housing, job creation, workforce training, and transportation. The planning process received additional funding from the U.S. Economic Development Administration.

This Executive Summary summarizes the economic development plan's highlights, lists its goals and policies, and outlines the types of action steps we can all take together to ensure that the state initiatives proposed in the plan are launched and that we are well underway in meeting our goals. Look for these ideas in the "Let's Get Started" sections below. Check out the full economic development plan for a listing of all the strategies.





WHAT RHODE ISLANDERS ARE SAYING

RhodeMap RI undertook a year-long outreach process between 2013 and 2014. In many ways, this was the most extensive public outreach ever conducted by the RI Division of Planning. It included traditional public forums, as well as new efforts to ask for input and ideas from people who have not participated in traditional public meetings in the past. The RhodeMap team intentionally sought out different people around the state, with different backgrounds and perspectives. While the people and locations differed we heard a lot of the same things from place to place, including:

- Pride and appreciation for the State's assets, particularly its great natural environment, architecture, long-standing institutions, and cultural resources.
- The need for clear and open standards in economic decision making, and accountability in government.
- Streamlined, coordinated, and consistently enforced regulations that continue to protect public health, safety, and well-being.
- Better customer service from state employees, along with a clearer, centralized source of information on government and business resources.
- Equitable opportunities for all Rhode Islanders to fully engage in the economy, regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender, or neighborhood of residence.
- Many people in this state are struggling to get by, and do not have sufficient access to basic needs such as food, housing, and health.
- More targeted workforce education and training to match current and future workforce needs as well as to provide both soft skills and technical skills training to ensure job success.
- A public education system that consistently prepares students throughout the state for success.
- More opportunities to live in walkable communities with access to transit, services, employment, and a range of housing options.

WHO WE ARE AND WHERE WE'RE HEADED

Like the Nation, the face of Rhode Island is changing rapidly. Communities of color are now the driving force in Rhode Island's population growth and essential to the state's economic success. Further, the population of the state is aging. As baby boomers age out of the workforce, Rhode Island's increasingly diverse youth will be essential to filling these jobs.

A shrinking middle class and uneven wage growth, coupled with wide racial gaps in income, health, and opportunity, require that the State adopt new strategies for growing good jobs, connecting unemployed and low-wage workers to job training and career opportunities, and increasing access to economic opportunity for all.

This includes ensuring a range of healthy, quality housing in all areas of Rhode Island. A new State housing plan and growth centers strategy, also developed through RhodeMap RI will identify strategies to meet the housing needs of the State and revitalize communities.



Equity

RhodeMap RI's Equity Focus

Equity and access to opportunity are critical underpinnings of the Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant Program. RhodeMap RI employed an outreach and engagement process that was significantly different from any state planning process to date. The state set out to engage individuals and groups that typically do not participate in state planning projects, with a particular focus on populations that may have barriers to participation. At the outset of the process, to assist with the engagement approach and to provide insight into the social equity issues, a Social Equity Advisory Committee (SEAC) was convened and consisted of advocates, state employees, and residents who have been instrumental in keeping the planning process focused on equity and inclusion. The SEAC developed a set of Social Equity Principles to guide the planning process and outcomes. These Principles can be found in Appendix A.



VISION, GOALS, POLICIES, & GETTING STARTED

Vision

In 2035, Rhode Island will be a state where...

- Where the state as a whole is more competitive in the regional, national, and global economy, having a business climate that is efficient, consistent, and transparent.
- Where individuals, entrepreneurs, and innovators of all backgrounds will want to come, stay and work, and are supported and encouraged.
- Where urban communities are reinvigorated with new investment bringing new jobs and new housing options, and improving the quality of life for our most disadvantaged residents without displacement.
- Where the labor force is one that is strong and diverse, has access to excellent educational and life-long learning opportunities, and can adapt to regular changes in the job market.
- Where all residents can maintain a job that supports their everyday needs, improves access to opportunity, and enriches their quality of life.
- Where the unemployment rate is sustained below the regional average.
- Where a vibrant economy supports health and well-being, and, in turn, a healthy population enhances economic efficiency, productivity, and competitiveness.
- Where a sustainable economy preserves, sustains, and restores the natural environment, improves the resiliency of our built environment, and creates green collar jobs.

Goals

- 1 Provide educational training opportunities to activate a 21st-century workforce.
- 2 Foster an inclusive economy that targets opportunity to typically underserved populations.
- 3 Support industries and investments that play to Rhode Island's strengths.
- 4 Create great places by coordinating economic, housing, and transportation investments.
- 5 Create a stronger, more resilient Rhode Island.
- 6 Make Rhode Island a state where companies, our workers, and the state as a whole can develop a competitive advantage.

1

Provide educational and training opportunities to activate a 21st-century workforce.



The outcomes of the workforce development and educational systems in Rhode Island play a pivotal role in the overall economic well-being of the state. There exists no greater opportunity to our collective prosperity in Rhode Island than our ability to raise the skill level and improve the competitiveness of our workers. Investing in the education and training of the state's workforce is a critical component of a statewide economic development strategy.

Policies

- A. Provide opportunities for career growth and assist employers to attract and retain qualified talent.
- B. Support reform of the education system to better provide the knowledge and skills necessary for success.
- C. Support apprenticeships and internships to increase access to experiential learning.

Let's Get Started

- Empower a single, cohesive workforce training system in Rhode Island, so that all of our programs are working together.
- Whether for early childhood education, our public K-12 system, higher education, or adult learning, make sure every person in the state has access to effective education and training.
- Make it easier to connect people with available internship and apprenticeship programs, partner with the private sector and schools, and consider increasing incentives for programs.

2

Foster an inclusive economy that targets opportunity to typically underserved populations.



An essential goal of the RhodeMap RI process was to address social equity, particularly looking at systems, programs, and ideas that have the effect of marginalizing certain groups of people. As ideas about job growth, investment, training, and other things were explored, discussions about equity were a constant reminder to measure potential economic strategies with the question “Who benefits?” Such questioning quickly reveals that without strategies specifically targeted at populations with greater barriers to opportunity, those barriers may never be overcome.

Policies

- A. Develop an urban core strategy to encourage job creation and other opportunities in areas of higher concentration of unemployment and to benefit those who live there.
- B. Promote opportunities for workforce training that lead to upward mobility, particularly for disadvantaged populations that have faced barriers to employment.
- C. Increase diversity in the state workforce and state contracting.

Let’s Get Started

- Reinvest in our urban communities through efforts such as local purchasing and hiring, training and support for local businesses, and policies that help make sure investments bring positive economic impacts (jobs, neighborhood improvements, etc.) for current residents.
- Locate workforce training and business development resources where people need them most, ensure that key materials are available in multiple languages, and develop targeted programs for people with the most barriers to employment, such as disabled individuals, immigrants, homeless individuals, and the formerly incarcerated.
- Diversify the state workforce at all levels so that the racial and ethnic composition of staff is reflective of the state as a whole, and intensify efforts to promote hiring and apprenticeship programs within minority populations for state and local infrastructure projects.

Support industries and investments that play to Rhode Island's strengths.



An important approach to building a healthy economy is to look more broadly at the assets and opportunities that are unique or particularly strong for Rhode Island. Rhode Island must build upon these assets and opportunities as a platform for future economic growth. This doesn't mean simply sticking to and improving what we already know. It means using our strengths in new ways to support new types of businesses and industries.

Policies

- A. Develop and enhance Rhode Island's sustainable and innovative maritime and defense economy.
- B. Strengthen and support Rhode Island's burgeoning food system businesses, which span agriculture, aquaculture and fishing, food processing/manufacturing, and sales.
- C. Invest in arts and culture to build on Rhode Island's identity as a cultural destination
- D. Fuel the manufacturing renaissance and reinvest in Rhode Island's unique built environment.
- E. Transition to a knowledge-, innovation-, and technology-driven economy geared to greener, more sustainable outcomes.
- F. Expand the economic potential of tourism in Rhode Island by developing and marketing the state as an attractive, unique destination on the national and global tourism map through conservation and promotion of our natural, cultural, and built heritages.

Let's Get Started

- State government and its partners should play the role of convener by providing in-person and virtual places where business owners, entrepreneurs, job seekers, industry groups, non-profits, and others can share information and collaborate.
- State government should serve as a central clearinghouse for data and information related to our strong industries and sectors, including local assets, suppliers, potential locations for certain types of businesses, marketing information, etc.
- Better market Rhode Island as a great tourist destination and place to live and run a business. Also "brand" and market Rhode Island produce and products around the country.

4

Create great places by coordinating economic, housing, and transportation investments.



Place matters. A job anywhere—a home anywhere—is not equal to those things in the best places. Places that balance the economy and the environment, and that provide access to all the resources that each and every Rhode Islander needs to thrive. By coordinating investment in transportation, housing, and job creation in areas with existing and planned infrastructure—sometimes referred to as “growth centers”—we can create places where residents, workers, business owners, and visitors can have access to a variety of services and amenities. These types of investments will yield economic gains, support the creation of more resilient communities, and improve our quality of life.

Policies

- A. Support state investments and incentives and provide technical assistance focused on high priority redevelopment areas and growth centers.
- B. Increase the capacity of communities to create and revitalize mixed-use, walkable village and growth centers.
- C. Promote alternative transportation that connects people to housing, jobs, and services.

Let's Get Started

- Develop a system for providing help where it is needed most, with an emphasis on struggling neighborhoods within our urban communities. Assist these areas with property assemblage, financial feasibility studies, developer negotiations, etc. and find ways to target resources such as tax credits, “tax free” zones, the Enterprise Zone Program, etc.
- Provide cities and towns with tools to help visualize what their communities might look like in the future, model zoning ordinances to make sure local regulations allow what is wanted, and tools like design guidelines that can help future development fit community character.
- Invest in transit with an eye towards increasing workforce mobility and health, strengthening our tourism industry and reducing environmental impacts. Expand bus service, the commuter rail network, and our system of bikeways.

Create a stronger, more resilient Rhode Island.



Addressing critical infrastructure needs will be essential to the economic prosperity of Rhode Island, including transportation, transit, water, stormwater and wastewater, and energy, as well as digital infrastructure such as broadband. Further, we need to ensure that this infrastructure is stable and sustainable into the future. Climate change and sea-level rise will directly impact some of Rhode Island's most important assets and infrastructure, and we need to plan accordingly. However, there are also potential economic opportunities resulting from climate change research and innovation that we should assess and pursue.

Policies

- A. Support investments in sustainable built infrastructure to support economic activity, commerce, and benefits to communities.
- B. Support investments in innovative technology infrastructure.
- C. Adopt an energy policy that keeps Rhode Island competitive.
- D. Educate and empower state and local government to increase climate change preparedness and adaptation.
- E. Strengthen regional economic resilience and harness opportunities for innovation.

Let's Get Started

- Look for new ways to fund existing and new infrastructure projects. Establish a dedicated source of annual funding, build and finance an "Infrastructure Bank," expand existing revolving funds, and aggressively pursue grant opportunities.
- Promote energy efficiency, the siting and regulation of wind turbines, removing regulatory barriers for solar power, and climate change resiliency.
- Encourage agencies and municipalities to consider the impacts of sea-level rise and other climate change concerns on economic centers, infrastructure assets, homes, and community services.

Make Rhode Island a state where companies, our workers, and the state as a whole can develop a competitive advantage.



Small businesses are the lifeblood of Rhode Island's economy. As the national economy has continued to recover it has become even clearer how important entrepreneurship and small businesses are for economic growth. Small business success is never easy, but the state can help by establishing clearer, more consistent regulations and regulatory processes, setting fair tax policies consistent with those of neighboring states, providing easier access to information about funding for small businesses, increasing access to and decreasing the costs of health care, and marketing Rhode Island businesses throughout the country and around the world.

Policies

- A. Accelerate the impact of regulatory reform throughout state and local government.
- B. Make Rhode Island's tax structure more simple, competitive, equitable, and predictable.
- C. Support small business activities to enhance operations and access to capital.
- D. Foster a healthier Rhode Island population and economy where access to care and quality of care are paramount, the health of our population is among the highest in the nation, and the increasing costs of health care are contained.
- E. Promote Rhode Island internationally.

Let's Get Started

- Investigate new governance models and tools to help communities work together and save money, such as the establishment of a statewide building and fire inspection service.
- Evaluate the impact of recent changes in our corporate and estate tax codes, analyze and reform the unemployment insurance system and the property tax system, and adjust the sales tax rate to be competitive within the region. Also, clearly define desired outcomes of all tax incentive programs, and continually monitor their performance and adjust as required.
- Create a network of "one-stop-shop" business community centers and on-line resources where business owners can learn about licensing, regulations, access to financing, taxes, mentoring, and other essential aspects of running a business.

Getting It Done

How We Go About Doing It

In this ever-changing economy, strategies that make sense today may be irrelevant two years from now. The most important thing is that we stick to a common vision and strive for everything we do to be consistent with that vision. In some ways, what we do is less important than how we do it, how we keep track of our successes and failures, and how we hold ourselves accountable for staying the course. Whatever specific strategies are pursued, everyone is encouraged to implement them with the following in mind . . .

- **Set Goals:** Before making any investments or starting a new program or policy, clearly define what the desired outcomes are and what should be achieved if successful.
- **Collect Data:** Collect the data needed to justify state spending, investments, and policies. Make this data clear, consistent, easy to track, and fully accessible to the public.
- **Be Accountable:** Use data to track outcomes of policies and programs to make sure we are achieving our goals. If there are other partners in these programs and investments, actively track their progress as well, and make sure they are adhering to any agreements made. If programs, policies, and investments are not producing the desired outcomes, the state must hold itself and its partners accountable.
- **Act Equitably:** All State agencies should work to remove barriers and eliminate disparities that limit the ability of some to fulfill their potential. This involves tracking data on race, income, neighborhoods, educational attainment, public health, etc. so that we know that our policies, programs, and investments are offering fairness and increasing opportunity for all.
- **Innovate:** The status quo will not move us forward. The State needs to be able to try new things—even if that means we sometimes fail. If we set our expectations in advance, determine the data we need to track success or failure, and hold ourselves and our partners accountable, we can explore new policies and actions, see whether or not they are doing what we want them to, and change course accordingly. Relying on data-informed decision making should not result in only trying things that have been proven to work already.

Who Can Get Us There?

The short answer is—all of us! No one person or business or industry or institution can move the state's economy where it needs to be—we need to tap the energy, talent, and skills of all Rhode Islanders. If anything in this plan inspires you or upsets you, we hope you will take action. If you see a void that you can help fill, or a problem you can help solve, give it a try! No one has all the answers.

Naturally, state government has a very large role in implementing this plan, which requires collaboration, particularly in changing the way major investment decisions are made and coordinated across all levels of government in Rhode Island.

- **Strong Leadership:** The Governor must lead with clear, consistent policy directives, making sure state agency heads are coordinating and aligning their work, and speaking with a common voice to advocate to the General Assembly for necessary changes to achieve the vision of this plan. The General Assembly itself, of course, will be responsible for legislation required for implementation, and is a key partner in moving forward.
- **State as Convener:** From businesses, to arts organizations, to housing advocates—we have heard that the State and its partners can play the role of convener—providing a hub for information across many topics and a place where different businesses, non-profits, citizens, and others can find each other and work together. Public-private partnerships are needed for many of the strategies in this plan, and the state will not succeed without such collaboration.
- **Efficient, Coordinated State Government:** Continue efforts to better coordinate State government across and within agencies, making it more efficient and customer service oriented.
- **Mindfulness of the concerns and ideas of all Rhode Islanders:** The state should strive to make sure that voices from communities not traditionally at the governance table are both heard and considered in decision making via greater representation on boards, commissions, and other positions of leadership.