

**ELEMENT 651: RHODE ISLAND WATERBORNE PASSENGER  
TRANSPORTATION PLAN**

**01 INTRODUCTION**

The State Planning Council adopted the Rhode Island Waterborne Passenger Transportation Plan as Element 651 of the State Guide Plan on August 13, 1998. The purpose of the plan is to provide for the appropriate use of the State of Rhode Island's bays, harbors, and rivers for passenger transportation, and to develop a plan for waterborne passenger transportation in Rhode Island for the year 2010.

In Rhode Island, as in many areas, the need to consider alternatives to private auto use is growing. Increasing traffic volumes, and the resulting congestion, will place greater strains on the roadway network, both in the urbanized areas of the state and, in summer, at the access points to Rhode Island's beaches and recreational areas. Opportunities to expand roadway capacity are limited for community, environmental, and fiscal reasons. Consequently, the development of enhanced public transportation services, including waterborne passenger transportation, will be an appropriate means of improving the transportation system.

**02 ISSUES ADDRESSED**

This waterborne passenger transportation plan for Rhode Island:

- Recognizes that Rhode Island is unique in its geography and waterborne passenger transportation needs and opportunities.
- Respects the different functions and users; the different marine, geographical, and environmental constraints; the unique set of public and private policies and relationships; and situation-specific financial realities. What may work for another city or state may not work for Rhode Island.
- Reflects the importance of learning from previous waterborne passenger transportation development experiences. While Rhode Island is unique, there is still substantial benefit from reviewing and analyzing experiences of systems and technologies employed elsewhere.
- Acknowledges the importance of early and continual public participation in the planning process. Waterborne passenger transportation-like other modes in a balanced transportation system-requires the support of multiple agencies and groups. To be successful, waterborne transportation must be deeply rooted in public policy and the services designed to satisfy the needs of its potential riders.

The feasibility of waterborne transportation was investigated as a function of:

- the suitability of different vessel technologies, particularly high-speed ferries, to conditions in Narragansett Bay and on Rhode Island/Block Island Sound,
- the availability of strategically located landing/terminal locations accessible by both land and water,

- the passenger demand for the type and frequency of service that can be provided on alternative routes,
- the costs of providing the services,
- the feasibility of publically and/or privately financing and operating services, and
- the ability to minimize any adverse impacts of siting new terminals and other support facilities.

The study was guided by the goals of state agencies, the federal government, and local governments, as well as the interest expressed by private ferry operators, interest groups, and the public. It draws upon a vast array of published materials, current and recent studies, and coastal management plans. Policies that have been articulated by Rhode Island agencies across the spectrum of transportation, the environment, historic preservation, economic development, and tourism shaped the study as well.

### **03 GOALS AND POLICIES**

#### **Goals:**

1. Promote the value of existing waterborne passenger transportation operations in the state, and implement measures to preserve and enhance them through the other program elements below.
2. Focus on the most feasible markets for service development:
  - Providence-Newport
  - Providence-Pawtucket
  - Newport-Martha's Vineyard
  - Block Island-Point Judith
  - Block Island-New London
3. Assure that waterborne passenger transportation services support and complement the state's roadway, public transit, bicycle, and pedestrian systems.
4. Review proposed waterborne passenger services to identify needs for improved access to marine terminals via new or revised RI Public Transit Authority bus services.
5. Develop major shoreside waterborne passenger transportation terminals for tourist and commuter traffic in Providence and in Newport using as examples the conceptual terminal designs in this report.
6. Encourage the development of satellite shoreside waterborne passenger transportation terminals for tourists and commuters at any marine terminal constructed or modified to accommodate cruise ships.
7. Encourage development of Quonset Point/Davisville as a future waterborne transportation site.

8. Cooperate in the development of a state policy on dredging, including the identification of long-term disposal sites.
9. Work with the City of Providence and the involved federal agencies to complete the dredging of the Providence River channel from the Providence Hurricane Barrier to the Crawford Street Bridge to ensure navigability to Waterplace Park in Providence.

**Policies:**

1. Waterborne passenger transportation services should be operated by private enterprises. The state should not assume that role, but rather the Rhode Island Department of Transportation, working cooperatively with the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority, should seek ways to assist private-sector initiatives.
2. Waterborne passenger transportation facilities should be built or funded with state assistance where those facilities would serve the public interest by improving the function of the state's transportation system and by accommodating large numbers of people. Where the state participates in the development of facilities, it should retain some property interest in the facilities to assure their continued use for transportation purposes.
3. Waterborne passenger transportation services and facilities can be most effective when developed and operated in a coordinated way. The Rhode Island Department of Transportation must participate in service development and enhancement, as well as in the construction and improvement of facilities, by providing guidance, information, and encouragement to both private companies and other public agencies that are involved in waterborne passenger transportation. RIDOT's role in coordination will be fundamental to system development.
4. The Rhode Island waterborne passenger transportation program that is supported by these principles includes policy initiatives, service development, facility improvement, and funding measures.

**04 STRATEGIES**

The Rhode Island Department of Transportation will undertake a program to develop and enhance water transportation services. The program is based upon several principles:

Waterborne passenger transportation services should be operated by private enterprises. The state should not assume that role, but rather RIDOT, working cooperatively with the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority, should seek ways to assist private-sector initiatives.

Waterborne passenger transportation facilities should be built or funded with state assistance where those facilities would serve the public interest by improving the function of the state's transportation system and by accommodating large numbers of people. Where the state participates in the development of facilities, it should retain some property interest in the facilities to assure their continued use for transportation purposes.

Work with other public agencies, private businesses, nonprofit organizations, tourism organizations, and local governments in the development and improvement of waterborne passenger transportation services as a component of the state's transportation system that complements highways and public transit.

Promote and encourage, in cooperation with the Economic Development Corporation, the use of waterborne passenger transportation by tourists, commuters, and the general public.

Seek to locate terminal facilities in places where intermodal connections can be easily made between waterborne transportation and automobiles, RIPTA buses, tour and charter buses, bicycles, and pedestrians.

Help owners of waterfront property seeking to develop terminals for use by passenger ferries by providing information on permitting, design, and/or construction.

Develop policies and regulations, in cooperation with the Coastal Resource Management Council and the Department of Environmental Management, that encourage the development of environmentally compatible marine terminals for tourist and commuter use, and that provide for thorough and efficient review of facilities devoted to such purposes while assuring compliance with clean air and congestion management requirements.

Pursue vigorously all available sources of federal funding, especially funds for alternative transportation projects and air-quality projects, to promote and develop waterborne passenger transportation.

Develop state funding mechanisms that will leverage private investment and match federal funding sources to develop waterborne passenger transportation.

Work with the Economic Development Corporation to pursue funds for demonstration projects for the construction of vessels suitable for high-speed passenger transport in Narragansett Bay and offshore.

Establish a clearinghouse to provide information and guidance to present and potential providers of waterborne passenger transportation in identifying and obtaining funding to support the operation of demonstration routes with the potential to serve significant numbers of people.