

# A New Vision for Outdoor Recreation in Rhode Island (Executive Summary)

A REPORT TO GOVERNOR RAIMONDO  
FROM THE RHODE ISLAND OUTDOOR  
RECREATION COUNCIL

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## Introduction & Executive Summary

Outdoor recreation is a core part of the lives of many Rhode Islanders. The Ocean State has been blessed with an outstanding network of recreational assets, and this bounty has not been lost on the residents of our state. Rhode Islanders enjoy the quiet pleasure of a ride along one of the state's many bike paths or a hike in one of our beautiful parks. Many of our families cherish time spent together on camping and fishing trips and look forward to the summers when they can visit our iconic and accessible ocean and bay beaches.

And while many Rhode Islanders derive substantial individual satisfaction and fulfillment from their participation in such recreational activities, a strong culture of outdoor recreation also has significant benefits for our state as a whole. When residents recreate more and spend more time outdoors and in nature, they become healthier, driving down obesity and chronic disease rates and healthcare costs for all of us. Recreational institutions such as parks and even schools become pillars of local communities, drawing neighbors closer to one another. States that preserve their outdoor resource endowments and invest in accompanying infrastructure reap the economic benefits of increased participation from both in-state residents and out-of-state tourists.

Rhode Island has done a remarkable job of protecting and stewarding its valuable network of recreational assets, but we must do more to ensure that these opportunities are preserved for future generations of Rhode Islanders. Federal, state, municipal, and non-governmental stakeholders must work together to ensure that all Rhode Islanders can participate in these activities, and to grow this critical sector of the state's economy to its fullest possible extent.

That is why Governor Gina M. Raimondo signed Executive Order 16-01 in January 2016, which created the Outdoor Recreation Council, and charged this group with developing a strategic plan to grow and promote recreation in Rhode Island.

### The Rhode Island Outdoor Recreation Council's public process

Executive Order 16-01 directed that the Council should hold public meetings on a bimonthly basis. In line with this directive, the Council has met six times over the course of 2016. Per the Executive Order, the Council submitted an interim diagnostic report in July 2016 that identified key barriers that are inhibiting the maximum use and enjoyment of recreational resources in Rhode Island. Issuance of this report fulfills the final requirement of the Executive Order.

Council past meeting dates	Future meeting dates
<p><b>January 26, 2016:</b> Save The Bay, Providence</p> <p><b>March 30, 2016:</b> The Casino at Roger Williams Park, Providence</p> <p><b>May 26, 2016:</b> The Aspray Boathouse, Warwick</p>	<p><b>July 28, 2016:</b> The Quinta-Gamelin Community Center, Bristol</p> <p><b>September 29, 2016:</b> The Department of Environmental Management, Providence</p> <p><b>November 30, 2016:</b> The State House, Providence</p>

## Executive Summary

The Final Report summarizes the Council’s diagnostic findings, and lays out a strategic vision with recommendations on how to advance the recreation system across five key areas.

**Strengths:** Rhode Island has effectively preserved its considerable natural resources and developed facilities and programming to enable public enjoyment.

1. Rhode Island has an outstanding network of outdoor recreational resources and programming.
2. The value of this network is recognized nationally and internationally.
3. Rhode Islanders have relatively good access to outdoor recreational opportunities.
4. Partnerships between federal, state, local, and non-governmental entities have enabled this progress.
5. Our focus on preserving and developing recreational resources has paid significant dividends for the state economy.

**Challenges:** Use of outdoor resources in Rhode Island by residents and visitors is less than optimal, and there is potential to further grow this sector of the state’s economy and attract more residents and visitors to the state.

1. Too few Rhode Islanders are regularly engaged in outdoor recreation activities.
2. Insufficient physical activity has negative health impacts that disparately affect less privileged demographic groups.
3. Rhode Island is not recognizing the full economic potential of the outdoor recreation sector to generate business activity and attract potential residents to the state.

**Recommendations:** By adopting policy recommendations and improving coordination in five different areas, Rhode Island can reduce the barriers that inhibit the maximum use and enjoyment of recreational resources in the state.

1. Preserve and expand recreational opportunities in Rhode Island
  - 1.1. Establish a sustainable funding stream for recreation-related investments in state and local infrastructure and programming. Potential options for funding include assessments on unhealthy behaviors, a public-private endowment fund, merchandising, and others.
  - 1.2. Conduct a needs assessment of gaps in facilities, staffing, and programming across state and local recreation sites.
  - 1.3. Properly steward State parks, beaches, and other state recreational assets by examining whether sufficient Rhode Island capital funding is allocated for these assets, whether some Parks & Recreation user fees should be reinvested into the recreation system, and whether current levels of user fees are appropriate.
2. Inspire all Rhode Islanders to have healthier lifestyles, regardless of socioeconomic status

- 2.1. Adequately prioritize under-resourced communities for recreation-related investment by ensuring that relevant boards, councils, and commissions are sufficiently diverse, and by reviewing criteria for grant disbursements.
  - 2.2. Expand collaboration with the healthcare industry by scaling and evaluating the “Park Rx” program, which enables doctors to refer patients to recreation activities in their communities.
  - 2.3. Work with the healthcare industry help small and medium businesses develop employee wellness programs and encourage participation.
  - 2.4. Signal the state’s commitment to fostering a culture of outdoor recreation by adopting a Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights.
  - 2.5. Increase the variety of recreational programming in parks, blue-ways and other protected open spaces to accommodate the needs of users of different age, gender, ability, and culture.
  - 2.6. Support the Director of Food Strategy’s efforts to develop a statewide food plan, including by exploring opportunities to expand healthy food offerings at recreational sites and community gardens.
3. Harness recreation to attract new tourists and prospective residents
    - 3.1. Create a unified outdoor recreation website and smart application that provides one, comprehensive portal for tourists and visitors who seek to access information about recreation assets and organizations providing outdoor recreation opportunities.
    - 3.2. Expand collaboration with the state’s tourism initiative by developing a unified merchandising brand for the state’s recreational assets, and highlighting these assets in an upcoming media campaign.
4. Connect Rhode Islanders to their communities and to each other
    - 4.1. Improve connectivity of bike paths and trails throughout the state by establishing an overall bike and trail plan with a timeline for achieving interconnection, and by prioritizing projects that achieve greater short-term integration for funding.
    - 4.2. Further accelerate the incorporation of “complete streets” principles into the built environment of Rhode Island communities and improve data tracking.
    - 4.3. Explore ways to improve public transportation to major recreation sites through new RIPTA program pilots.
5. Build a cohesive constituency for outdoor recreation
    - 5.1. Create a permanent stakeholder structure to facilitate ongoing collaboration between governmental and non-governmental recreation stakeholders and monitor the implementation of key initiatives.
    - 5.2. Consider working with non-governmental partners to secure support for a dedicated staff position to help promote the outdoor recreation system and coordinate implementation of this strategic plan across all stakeholders.