

2016

A New Vision for Outdoor Recreation in Rhode Island

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

DECEMBER 14, 2016

A Note from the Council's Co-chairs

Dear Governor Raimondo,

The Outdoor Recreation Council is honored to present you with our recommendations for improving and promoting Rhode Island's recreation system. By adopting and implementing this strategic plan, the state can better preserve its valuable recreational resources, improve the health and welfare of all of its citizens, attract new residents and tourists to the state, more fully connect residents to their communities and one another, and ultimately further your goal of driving economic growth so that everyone has an opportunity to make it in Rhode Island.

We thank you for having brought this diverse and talented group together, and for giving us the chance to deliberate on this important issue that deeply affects all Rhode Islanders. This body of stakeholders includes leaders from federal, state, and municipal government, managers in the outdoor recreation and healthcare industries, community advocates, philanthropists, legislators, and many others – all of whom are committed to the health and prosperity of this great state. For many decades, the people in this group have worked on similar, overlapping issues related to recreation, but some of us have never had the opportunity to sit in the same room and share ideas with one another.

Rhode Islanders have long been blessed with an extraordinary endowment of natural resources and plentiful opportunities for outdoor recreation. We are indebted to the leaders, citizens, and volunteers who have worked tirelessly to properly steward these assets, and preserve them for generations to come. We must build on their success by taking action to ensure the long-term sustainability of this system, redoubling our efforts to expose all Rhode Islanders to the benefits of recreation, and lay the foundation for continued growth well into the future.



First Gentleman Andy Moffit

Chair



Dr. Nicole Alexander-Scott

Co-Chair



Janet Coit

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Acknowledgements

The Council's Co-Chairs would like to first thank the individual panel members, all of whom served as volunteers and dedicated their personal time to attending Council meetings, deliberating on recommendations, and providing their input and perspective throughout the process.

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In addition to the 30 members of the Outdoor Recreation Council who were appointed by the Governor, there are many organizations and individuals that contributed to the work of the Council and the ultimate creation of this strategic plan.

The Council as a whole would like to thank the many organizations and individuals who came to meetings to present and discuss various subjects of interest. The development of these recommendations would not have been possible without their depth of experience, passion, and commitment to making Rhode Island a healthier, more connected, and more prosperous place.

A number of entities throughout the state also graciously hosted the Council members as they traveled to various locations throughout the state for meetings. These include Save the Bay, the Casino at Roger Williams Park, the City of Warwick, and the Bristol Health Equity Zone.

Finally, the Council wishes to recognize the many state staff members from the Governor's Office, Department of Environmental Management, Department of Health, and Commerce RI who have supported the Council's activities over the past year.



From Left: First Gentleman Andy Moffit, Governor Raimondo, and DEM Director Coit at the announcement of the Outdoor Recreation Council at the Goddard Park Pavilion in Warwick.

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Introduction

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

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

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.

Executive Summary

This 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. This report proceeds as follows:

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.

The Council's Vision for Outdoor Recreation

Rhode Island parks and outdoor recreation areas are part of a broad system of connected greenways, green spaces, facilities and public spaces that are vitally important to Rhode Island's economy, environment and its people. They are among our most important tools in conveying to the nation that Rhode Island is a desirable place to live, work and play.

The Outdoor Recreation Council envisions a recreation system for Rhode Island that:

- Supports the state's economic prosperity and is fully within the Governor's ongoing economic development and tourism promotion efforts.
- Offers ample, safe, affordable and diverse outdoor recreation opportunities for all, thereby promoting healthy lifestyles and communities.
- Engenders stewardship of our natural, cultural and historic outdoor resources for this and future generations to enjoy.
- Inspires an outdoor recreation culture that connects people to each other and to their communities, heritage and nature.

Rhode Island has a strong recreation system

As the Council looks towards the future of Rhode Island's outdoor recreation system, we recognize that we must first take stock of the existing recreational situation to determine where the state should go from here. We find that Rhode Island has been endowed with considerable natural beauty, and that numerous stakeholders in the state have done a laudable job of preserving these resources. Over time, various entities have collaborated to develop facilities and programming that enable the public to enjoy these resources, and attract spending and employment to the state. The Council has made five observations to support this conclusion:

(1) Rhode Island has an outstanding network of outdoor recreational resources and programming

Rhode Island residents and visitors enjoy high quality outdoor recreational opportunities in a diverse network of natural, cultural and historic facilities ranging from rustic hiking trails and natural areas, to ocean beaches, to well-maintained state parks, bike paths and golf courses, to local play fields and playgrounds. Multiple partners manage this network, including federal, state and local government, and private for-profit and non-profit entities. The partners work in unison to avoid duplication of effort and gaps in the variety and scope of recreation facilities, areas, and offerings.



The Department of Environmental Management (DEM) is a major provider of outdoor recreation areas and facilities. DEM manages over 8,500 acres of parkland in 68 areas: 88,000 acres of state

forest and wildlife management areas, 200 boat ramps, numerous fishing areas, over 400 miles of hiking trails, and 30 miles of bike paths. These facilities attract six to seven million visitors each year, including many from out-of-state. The Department also offers numerous programs to encourage participation in outdoor recreation and enjoyment of natural, cultural and historic resources.

Programs such as the Rhode Island Great Outdoors Pursuit, Aquatic Resource Education and Hunter Education aim to reconnect people, especially youth, with the outdoors. Rhode Island state parks also host numerous events each year ranging from local charity walks to farmers' markets to large, international events like the Newport Folk and Jazz Festivals.

In addition to DEM, other state departments with outdoor recreation responsibilities include the Department of Transportation, which designs and builds bike paths, and the Coastal Resources Management Council, which manages tidal areas, maintains a public access guide, and actively develops new public access ways through a number of different programs.

Municipalities work hand in hand with the state to preserve outdoor resources. The state's 39 cities and towns manage over 10,000 acres of recreation facilities with nearly 600 parks, beaches, and fishing access areas. Local recreation facilities also include multi-purpose parks, playgrounds, community centers, sports fields, and courts. Municipalities also offer a wide variety of recreational programming for team sports, summer recreation programs and camps, instructional classes, concerts, and cultural events.

Federal agencies operate facilities and provide funding to both state and local agencies in support of recreation. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFW) welcomes more than 424,000 visitors annually at the five conservation and wildlife refuges that it operates in the state. The National Parks Service (NPS) operates the 4.5 acre Roger Williams National Memorial in Providence and the newly designated John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor, which stretches through 24 cities and towns in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. USFW and NPS, along with the Federal Highway Administration and the US Department of Agriculture, provide federal funding in support of recreational acquisition and development, as well as fish and wildlife habitat protection.

Private non-profit organizations and local land trusts also play an important role in the state recreation system. The Nature Conservancy, the Audubon Society of Rhode Island, and land trusts own or protect over 37,000 acres of property in the state. Much of this property is open to the public for hiking, nature watching, and spending time outdoors in general. These organizations also play a pivotal role in advocacy for state bond funding and recreation-related laws and regulations. Organizations such as Sail Newport, the Community Boating Center in Providence, Partnership for Providence Parks, One Neighborhood Builders, the Golf Foundation of Rhode Island and Newport Festival Foundations operate programs and offer special events that enhance recreation at public facilities. Others, such as Coggeshall Farm Museum and the Fort Adams Trust, work to protect and preserve important historical assets of the recreation system.

The private sector also plays a significant role by offering facilities such as golf courses, marinas, beaches, campgrounds and other tourist attractions.

2: The value of this network is recognized nationally and internationally

Rhode Island's wide array of resources don't just appeal to residents of the state, they are also sufficiently renowned to attract visitors from across the nation and the world. Much like the state's culinary industry, recreational assets are core elements of the state's identity, and form a large part of what makes Rhode Island's economy, culture, and environment attractive.

Those who laud Rhode Island's recreational opportunities include the most respected travel authorities in the world. National Geographic magazine, for instance, included Narragansett Bay as one of its top ten adventure destinations in the world for the Bay's unparalleled sea kayaking. Similarly, TripAdvisor, one of the largest travel-related websites in the world, named Misquamicut State Beach in Westerly to its list of the top ten U.S. beaches for families — Misquamicut was the only beach in New England to make the list.

Rhode Island's natural heritage is so recognized internationally that high-profile national and international events are held in the state year after year. Popular concerts such as the Newport Jazz Festival and the Newport Folk Festival have long been fixtures in the state and are held in historic parks like Fort Adams, drawing fans from around the world and contributing to Rhode Island's economic vitality. Sailing events such as the America's Cup and the Volvo Ocean Race have also been drawn to the state as a result of its outdoor beauty.

It is no surprise, then, that the New York Times named Rhode Island to its list of 52 places to visit in 2016. These accolades promise to drive Rhode Island further into the national eye, and the state already ranks seventh in the nation for tourist visitors per capita, and is first in New England.

3: Rhode Islanders have relatively good access to recreational opportunities

A core goal of this Council is to ensure that all Rhode Islanders have the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of outdoor recreation, regardless of socio-economic background or geographic location. In many jurisdictions throughout the nation, access to recreation sites varies dramatically by demography, and lower-income households or minority groups are often less able to take advantage of these opportunities. Proximity to green space is key to a healthy population — research shows that living near green space is linked to a whole host of positive outcomes, including significant mental health benefits, stronger community ties, dramatically increased rates of physical activity, and improved local environmental quality.

Disparities in access do exist in Rhode Island, and in some cases vary significantly between different localities. However, the state has nevertheless succeeded in ensuring that the vast

majority of residents live within reasonable proximity to green space and recreational sites. According to an analysis done by Providence Plan, 86% of Rhode Island residents live within .25 miles of an outdoor public recreation facility in urban areas, or within 5 miles of such a facility in non-urban areas. In core cities, between 77% and 100% of residents live within .25 miles of a green space.

This trend of inclusivity is also borne out by survey data on state parks usage. According to a 2015 survey conducted by DEM, 92% of park users come from households that earn less than \$75,000 a year, even though only 62% of Rhode Island households fall within this income bracket. The same survey found that 30% of park users identified as part of a minority group, even though only 25% of Rhode Islanders are members of minority groups. This data suggests that our public parks system does largely serve populations that might otherwise not have access to green space and other recreational opportunities, and that these recreational sites could serve as ideal vehicles for programming that is intended for lower-income and minority populations.

4: Partnerships between federal, state, local, and non-governmental entities have enabled this progress

Rhode Island's ability to provide adequate recreational opportunities for residents and visitors relies heavily on partnerships between federal, state, local and non-governmental organizations.

Some recreational lands including Roger Williams Park have been donated by civic minded community leaders. Others have been acquired by leveraging state bond funds with private land donations and funding from federal agencies, local land trusts and non-profits such as The Nature Conservancy and the Audubon Society of Rhode Island. In FY2014 for example, DEM reports that it preserved \$6,849,000 in land value and only used \$1,831,500 in state funds, leveraging 73% funding from federal and local partners.

The state has also invested \$66.5 million in municipal recreation spaces since 1988 by providing 427 grants to cities and towns. The grants are funded by state bonds and require matching funds from the local communities. Recent projects funded by these grants include the renovation of Slater Park in Pawtucket and Jenks Park in Central Falls, as well as the development of the Coventry Greenway and Thomas Park in Bristol. All 39 cities and towns have benefited from this grant program.



The state bond measures that have been critical to funding these programs have traditionally benefitted from exceptionally high voter support and advocacy from a diverse array of stakeholders, including many organizations that are represented on the Council. In 2014, voters approved a “clean water, open space, and healthy communities” bond that included \$18 million for renovations to Roger Williams Park and the Park Zoo and \$4 million for DEM’s local recreation grant program. Most recently, in 2016 Governor Raimondo proposed, and voters approved, a “Green Economy Bond” that will provide substantial additional funding for recreation-related investments. These include \$10 million for state bikeway development, \$5 million for local recreation grants, \$4 million for state park capital improvements, \$4 million for state open space land acquisition, and another \$4 million for local open space protection grants.

State agencies and municipalities have also collaborated with non-profits and community-based organizations to create shared management structures for public lands. The redevelopment of Rocky Point State Park is one example. The site was purchased and cleaned up using a combination of state and federal funds and resources. The Park is managed jointly by DEM and the City of Warwick and further development will be a collaborative process, involving numerous stakeholders and partners including the non-profit Rocky Point Foundation. Tillinghast Management Area in West Greenwich, popular for hiking and paddling, is another example where collaboration helped protect a critically important recreation resource. In 2006, the State joined with The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the Town of West Greenwich, the Champlin Foundations, federal agencies, and other donors to protect the 2000-acre property. DEM, TNC, the Town, and the West Greenwich Land Trust jointly manage Tillinghast.

The cleanup of Riverside and Donigian parks in Olneyville is an example of a prominent urban redevelopment project where partnerships were critical. The City had closed Riverside Park and Donigian was frequented by drug users and nicknamed “Needle Park.” The parks were revitalized using funds from Environmental Protection Agency, the Roger Williams Park Conservancy and from state recreation grants. The City worked with local law enforcement and used design principals to create spaces less conducive to crime, and also hired local youth to cleanup, landscape, and build the facilities. As a result of these efforts, neighborhood residents now heavily use these parks, and community volunteers continuously organize programming, services, and events.

In fact, volunteers and volunteer organizations have played a critical role in supporting the state’s recreational system. Appalachian Mountain Club volunteers have developed and are maintaining miles of trails on state properties, and also lead walks on a monthly basis. Volunteers from the West Greenwich Land Trust have been essential to the stewardship of the Tillinghast Management Area. Aside from resource development and maintenance, hundreds of volunteers across the state manage sports leagues that enable children to participate in outdoor recreation. Volunteer organizations have also been primary purveyors of information about recreational opportunities — the Blueways Alliance, for instance, developed the “Explore RI” website to promote canoe and kayak launch sites, and it was this website that attracted the attention of National Geographic for their spotlight on Narragansett Bay.

*5: Our focus on preserving and developing recreational resources
has paid significant dividends for the state economy*

The state has not merely acted to preserve its outdoor asset endowment, it has also proactively developed an infrastructure around those resources to ensure that individuals and families can enjoy them in a manner that contributes to the state’s economic growth.

Recreation-related investments tend to have outsized impact on job growth and net tax income. A study done by the Trust for Public Lands in Massachusetts showed that every \$1 million invested in local parks yielded almost 14 jobs, with an average labor income of roughly \$50,000 per job.¹ A national study of pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure projects had similarly strong results, showing that every \$1 million invested created 9 jobs.² Open space and other conservation-related land acquisitions also tend to provide cost savings to local communities — the American Farmland Trust found that nationally, farmland and other open space lands require

¹ The Trust for Public Land, “Return on Investment in Parks and Open Space in Massachusetts,” September 2013.

² Heidi Garrett-Peltier, “Pedestrian and Bicycle Infrastructure: A National Study of Employment Impacts,” June 2011.

\$0.35 in services for every \$1 paid in local taxes, while the average residential home requires \$1.16 in services for every dollar paid.³

The outdoor recreation industry is therefore a powerful component of our nation's economy, and is especially strong in Rhode Island. The Outdoor Industry Association estimates that this sector generates \$2.4 billion in consumer spending and \$145 million in state and local tax revenue in Rhode Island every year. Furthermore, the sector directly supports an estimated 24,000 Rhode Island jobs, which provide \$737 million in wages and salaries.

This economic product is generated by a wide variety of firms in different industries throughout the state, and is not just concentrated in a few marquee destinations and activities. For instance, a 2015 study that was jointly conducted by the National Recreational Parks Association and George Mason University found that local and regional parks in Rhode Island alone accounted for roughly \$180 million in economic activity, and supported 1,500 jobs and more than \$67 million in labor income.⁴ A 2006 study of just one of the state's five National Wildlife Refuges found that every dollar invested in the Refuge's budget returned \$6.25 to the local economy.⁵

The Volvo Ocean Race is a particularly strong example of the way in which recreational investments have enabled our state's economic growth. In 2015, the Race – one of the world's grand prix sailing events – held its North American stopover in Rhode Island for the first time. The Race Village at Fort Adams State Park in Newport drew nearly 130,000 fans over the 13-day event – with more than half traveling to Rhode Island from other U.S. states and abroad. The economic impact of the 2015 stopover on Rhode Island is estimated over \$47 million,⁶ and race organizers hailed it as the most successful North American stopover in the race's history.

On October 30, 2015, the Volvo Ocean Race announced its return to Newport for the 2018 race's only North American stopover. Race organizers cited Fort Adams State Park and the allure of the state's history and culture as leading factors in their decision to return to Rhode Island. Investments in Rhode Island parks continue to make headlines like this possible — landside and pier upgrades at Fort Adams in recent years positioned Rhode Island well in its bid for the Volvo Ocean Race. They also provided a permanent home for the state's Tall Ship Oliver Hazard Perry and dockage for ferries, water taxis, and harbor shuttles – increasing the appeal of Fort Adams for future events and tourism.

³ American Farmland Trust, "Cost of Community Services Studies," August 2010.

⁴ Andy Nota, "Presentation at the Second Outdoor Recreation Council Meeting: Municipal Parks & Recreation," March 2016.

⁵ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, "The Economic Benefits to Local Communities of National Wildlife Refuge Visitation," September 2007.

⁶ Sail Newport, "Volvo Ocean Race: Economic Impact on the State of Rhode Island," October 2015.

Significant challenges remain

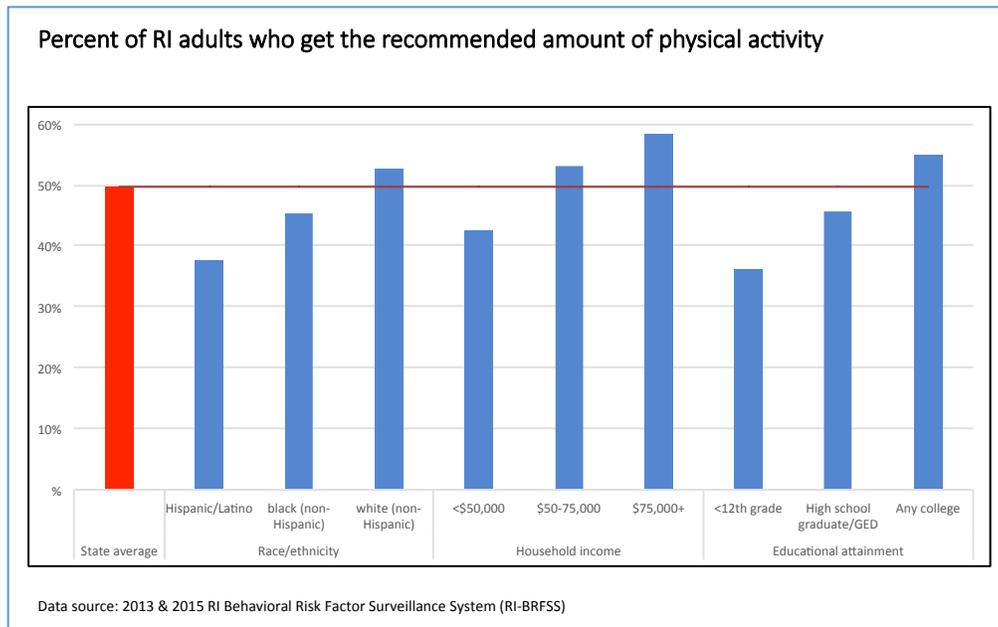
Although Rhode Island has done much to preserve and develop its outdoor recreational resources, the state must do more to steward, enable, and encourage use of these resources, and promote the outdoor recreation sector of the economy to residents and out-of-state visitors. The Council has identified three core challenges that should be the focus of continued improvement:

1: Too few Rhode Islanders are regularly engaged in outdoor recreation activities

Outdoor recreation and spending time in nature play a vital role in improving people's health and wellness and in building cultural commitment to public parks and other recreational sites. Despite many excellent recreational opportunities and high visitation in parks, Rhode Island struggles to ensure that all of its residents spend time outdoors and get sufficient physical activity to support their health and wellbeing. This problem is particularly acute for less privileged Rhode Islanders.

The Centers for Disease Control recommends that adults get at least 150 minutes of aerobic activity per week, and that children and adolescents get at least 60 minutes per day.⁷ Unfortunately, national public health surveys have shown that half of Rhode Island adults participate in less than the recommended amount of physical activity, and over a quarter of adults report no leisure physical activity at all within the past year.

⁷ Centers for Disease Control



Adults who have household incomes below \$50,000, do not have any college education, or are black or Hispanic are much more likely to get insufficient physical activity than other groups, although all demographic groups in the state exhibit poor outcomes in this regard. A whopping 67% of adult Rhode Islanders without a high school diploma get less than the recommended amount of activity. Individuals in urban areas are also less likely to be physically active than those in non-urban areas.⁸

Beyond health and wellness benefits, encouraging more people to experience outdoor recreation opportunities will help build support for long-term protection and stewardship of the natural, cultural, and historic resources that are integral to the state's public recreation system.

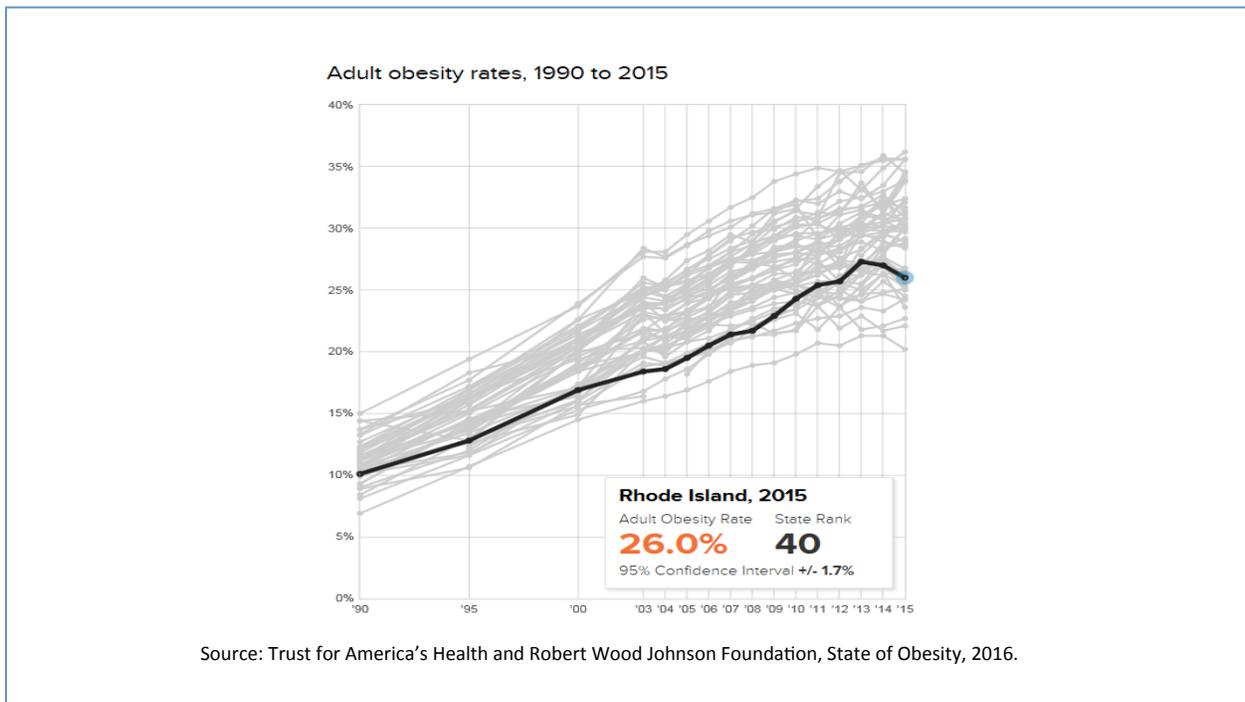
2: Insufficient physical activity has negative health impacts that disparately affect less privileged demographic groups

The state's inability to mobilize large segments of residents to recreate or get outdoors comes at a high price for citizens and taxpayers. Aside from the intrinsic joy that many people derive from participating in physical activity, inactivity is strongly associated with a whole host of negative health outcomes, including obesity and chronic illnesses such as diabetes. It is now estimated that obesity costs Rhode Island almost \$600 million per year in increased healthcare spending.⁹

⁸ RI Department of Health, "Presentation at the First Outdoor Recreation Council Meeting: Outdoor Recreation, Physical Activity, and Health Equity," January 2016.

⁹ Centers for Disease Control

In Rhode Island, 27% of adults are obese as of 2014, narrowly beating the poor national average of 35%. This figure has seen a dramatic rise since 1990, when the obesity rate was only 10%. We are doing better with children aged 10-17, where the average is about 13%, but even this statistic varies dramatically based off of income and other demographic statistics.



28% of Rhode Islanders with annual household incomes less than \$50,000 are obese, compared to 24% of those with incomes greater than \$50,000. For children, the differences are even more stark — 20% of children from households that earn less than 200% of the Federal Poverty Level are obese, whereas the figure is only 9% for children from households that earn more than 200% FPL. Blacks and Hispanics are more likely to be obese than whites, and blacks are significantly more so.

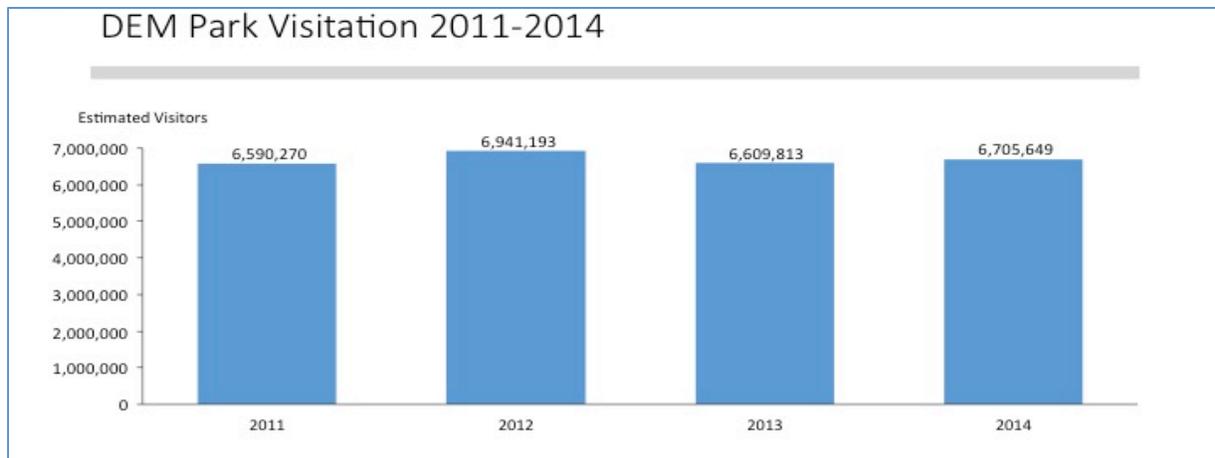
Given the tremendous impact of these health issues on individual and societal wellbeing, the RI Department of Health is committed to reducing the incidence of obesity and chronic illness as part of its strategic plan. An increased emphasis on ensuring the utilization of outdoor recreation resources by all demographic groups could go a long way toward reducing these health disparities, and improving the wellbeing of all Rhode Islanders.

3: Rhode Island is not recognizing the full economic potential of the outdoor recreation sector

Outdoor recreation is a core part of Rhode Island's culture, and these activities contribute substantially to the State's economy. Nevertheless, there is a growing sense that increased investment in operations, infrastructure and programming would help ensure that this sector

remains vibrant and grows further. The Council would like to see Rhode Island emerge as a national leader in recreation-related employment and visitation.

Rhode Island enjoys a high visitation rate relative to its size, but the number of visitors has plateaued, and the state ranks 49th in the nation on expenditure per visitor.¹⁰ And while some locales such as Newport and Narragansett have become widely recognized as havens of recreational activity, the fruits of recreational infrastructure have not been distributed evenly across the state.



A vibrant recreational sector does not just mean higher employment or tourist visitation, it is also a key component of improving Rhode Island's quality of life so that businesses and individuals find Rhode Island attractive. Governor Raimondo has trumpeted her commitment to bringing commerce and talent to the state, and improving opportunities for outdoor recreation is critical to that effort. One study from Massachusetts found that recent college graduates consider opportunities for outdoor recreation to be a determining factor in deciding whether they will remain in the state for employment.¹¹ Research has consistently found that quality of life concerns can significantly enhance or diminish the attractiveness of a job offer, and that access to recreation is integral to that decision, particularly for workers in emerging industries such as technology.

There is clearly a growing emphasis on outdoor recreation in the policy world, and Rhode Island must position itself in the best possible way to emerge as a national leader and take advantage of new resources that become available in this space.

¹⁰ National State Park Directors, "Statistical Report of State Park Operations: 2014-2015, Annual Information Exchange," September 2015.

¹¹ Mount Auburn Associates and Yellow Wood Associates, "Parks and Beaches: Common Cents for the Common Wealth," 2007.

Strategic recommendations

The Council has observed that Rhode Island enjoys a great advantage in its recreational resource endowment, but is nonetheless failing to maximize utilization of these resources. Over the last year, the Council has drawn on the expertise and experience of its members, subject matter experts who work in and around the state, and experiences from other states to diagnose the specific issues that are holding back outdoor recreation in Rhode Island and develop recommendations to address them. Five distinct areas of recommendation have emerged from this work:

1: Preserve and expand recreational opportunities in Rhode Island

Context

The State cannot achieve its core goals without a strong infrastructure for recreation for all Rhode Islanders. State and municipal recreation departments require reliable funding to ensure that existing infrastructure and programming can be maintained, and that targeted new investments can be made.

On the state side, reductions in funding at DEM have meant a 67% decline in parks staff since 1990, and there are limited resources available to maintain state parks, campgrounds, and other facilities. The situation is no less acute for municipalities — a 2015 DEM survey showed that nearly 35% of municipal recreation budgets saw a decrease in funding levels since 2009, and that 73% of municipal recreation departments don't receive adequate funding for maintenance.

Municipal budgets have been supplemented by DEM's highly successful local recreation grant program for capital investments, but this program's reliance on bond funding creates uncertainty, and need far outpaces funding availability. In the most recent grant round, 35 municipalities submitted 92 proposals for a total request of \$17 million, but only \$4 million was immediately available for disbursement.

The decline in resources has coincided with increases in utilization across all different types of recreational facilities. State beach parking lots reach capacity on many summer days, while total nights booked in state campgrounds has increased by 13% over the last three years.

Municipalities report a 39% increase in tourist use of recreational facilities over the last five years, and find that multipurpose fields, outdoor sports facilities, passive parks, and trails have all experienced significant increases in use.

These dynamics have had significant impacts on the quality and quantity of recreational facilities and programming. State and local facilities have gone without needed maintenance, in some cases resulting in outright closures of popular facilities like beaches. In some communities, local recreation spaces have fallen into disrepair and may have also become sites of criminal activity, particularly in less privileged communities with a high proportion of low-income residents. Even

in less severe cases, an aging infrastructure dampens the attractiveness of recreational resources to the public. New, reliable funding sources must be secured in order to adequately sustain a vibrant outdoor recreation sector.

Major recommendations

Recommendation 1.1: Establish a statewide sustainable funding stream for recreation-related investments and programming

The Council has identified a need for a sustainable funding stream that would support recreation-related investments for state and local infrastructure and programming, and would supplement biannual bond requests for capital funding. We encourage the State to work with the legislature and other interested stakeholders to explore options for dedicated revenue streams, including:

- **Assessments on unhealthy behaviors**
 - One way to derive revenue for recreation investment is to raise fees on consumption that poses significant costs for individuals and society, such as the purchasing of cigarettes, alcohol, or highly unhealthy foods. This would align with the goals of the Council, as linking the two would simultaneously dis-incentivize unhealthy behaviors while creating new exercise opportunities for all Rhode Islanders, including those populations most at risk of obesity and other chronic health issues.
 - As an example, in previous years, Governor Raimondo has sought to create a healthier Rhode Island by proposing a \$0.25 increase in the State's cigarette tax. Although the legislature has not yet approved such an increase, health advocates generally agree that such policies can have a significant impact, and in fact support still higher increases. The Governor and the legislature could consider passing an increase and dedicating a portion of these funds to support the efforts of the state, cities, and towns to enhance recreation.
- **Tasteful and appropriate advertising**
 - State parks and beaches and large local facilities could consider allowing advertising at certain sites, or pursuing increased sponsorship of signature recreation events. Stewards of the recreation system are understandably concerned about pursuing sponsorships that would dilute the experience of citizens and visitors. However, there may nevertheless be opportunities for partnerships with private entities that advance shared interests while sustaining the parks system.
- **A public-private endowment fund**
 - The state could work with local municipalities, private businesses, and non-profits to establish a charitable endowment fund that would support parks and other recreation facilities. In Rhode Island, such models have previously been pursued with success on the municipal level, and Vermont recently established "Vermont Parks Forever" — a private fund that supports their parks system.
- **Community enabling legislation**
 - Explore community-enabling legislation that would enable citizens of cities and towns to elect to raise funds for recreation and conservation investment, similar to Massachusetts' Community Preservation Act.

Recommendation 1.2: Conduct a facilities, programming, and staffing gap analysis

Rhode Island policymakers and recreation stakeholders require a clear picture of where recreational opportunities are falling short or are at risk of decline. A comprehensive analysis of facilities, programming, and staffing needs across state and local recreation sites is a critical first step to allow the state to identify and prioritize needs for investment.

- **State assets:**
 - The State Division of Capital Asset Management and Maintenance (DCAMM) is currently studying maintenance needs across all state facilities, including current conditions of facilities in State parks and beaches. Once the aspects of the study relating to state recreational facilities are complete, and the cost of necessary facilities improvements is quantified, DEM should work with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to identify sources of capital funding for improvements.
 - We recommend that OMB also work with DEM to identify funding for an external staffing and operations analysis that would help determine appropriate staffing levels for state parks and beaches and opportunities to expand services and programming for residents and tourists. This study should particularly explore whether present limitations in staffing are resulting in lost revenue to the State and localities due to facility closures or inability to provide adequate programming.
- **Local & private assets:**
 - The State should provide municipalities and interested non-profit stakeholders with the models used for gap analysis, so that these entities may similarly assess local facilities and programming needs. To the extent possible, state staff should provide technical assistance to local entities that request help with such analysis.

Recommendation 1.3: Properly steward State parks and recreation assets

The Council has identified several potential opportunities to ensure that State parks and beaches in particular are properly recognized as assets that deliver value to the state, and supported commensurately. We recommend that OMB:

- Work with DEM to evaluate whether sufficient Rhode Island Capital Asset Program (RICAP) funding is being allocated to State parks and beaches, and to prioritize such investments in the FY18 proposed budget if applicable.
- Examine whether user fees that currently flow into the State's general fund should instead be reinvested into the recreation system, especially those for beach parking and the use of campgrounds. Some of these fees were previously restricted receipt accounts that flowed back into the system, but were later directed to the general fund. In the most recent fiscal year, roughly \$5 million in fees that were collected by the DEM Parks & Recreation department went to the State's General Fund.
- Simultaneously, we recommend that DEM analyze whether current levels of user fees are equitable and commensurate with benchmarks from neighboring states.

Potential Metrics

To track progress against these areas, the state should consider monitoring metrics and targets that include the following:

- Increase the number of recreational facilities in the state, including trails
 - Increase the percentage of trails that are ADA accessible
- Reduce closures of service at recreation sites that are associated with inadequate maintenance and staffing
- Increase park-generated revenues for reinvestment in the recreation system
- Increase the number of communities with adequate recreation facilities

2: Inspire all Rhode Islanders to engage in healthier lifestyles, regardless of socioeconomic status

Context

The Council has noted how insufficient physical activity has a significant negative impact on health outcomes, particularly for less privileged communities. This is a problem throughout the United States, and Rhode Island can be a leader in working towards a solution.

Even where recreation opportunities are plentiful, it can be difficult for families and individuals to integrate recreation into their busy lives, particularly if they are not generally aware of recreational opportunities in their immediate vicinities. By the time someone becomes an adult, adopting a new habit of engaging in recreational activity becomes daunting. Therefore, a core element of a healthier, happier population is instilling the habit of recreation into our children when they are young, so that they can carry it throughout their lives.

Unfortunately, Rhode Islanders are not fully encouraged to incorporate recreation into their lives at a young age — a situation that is not necessarily helped by the modern proliferation of screens. Over the last 10 years, surveys have consistently shown that only about half of Rhode Island middle and high school students participate in at least 60 minutes of physical activity per day — the national standard.¹²

When one becomes an adult and leaves the space where it is relatively commonplace to participate in structured athletic activities, and must take on additional work-life responsibilities, incentives for recreation become even scarcer. We must take a multi-pronged approach to improving these outcomes for all Rhode Islanders.

Major recommendations

Recommendation 2.1: Adequately prioritize under-resourced communities for investment

In order to ensure that all Rhode Islanders have reasonable access to a diverse range of recreational opportunities, the Council recommends that the state ensure that resources for

¹² RI Kids Count, “Presentation at the Second Outdoor Recreation Council Meeting: Physical Activity in Schools,” March 2016.

recreation-related investments are equitably distributed to all communities, including those that face significant socio-economic challenges.

To further this, we recommend that the state work with DEM, the Division of Planning, DOT, and other relevant external stakeholders to review the membership of key recreation-related boards, councils, and commissions to ensure that all of Rhode Island's communities are adequately represented. These include:

- The SCORP planning committee
- Recreation Resources Review Committee
- The Trails Advisory Council
- Other advisory committees related to State transportation planning

We also recommend that DOH, DEM, Planning, and DOT collaborate to identify additional opportunities to increase equity in resourcing of recreation programs, such as by modifying scoring criteria for grant disbursements or transportation project selection.

Recommendation 2.2: Expand collaboration between recreation advocates, employers and the healthcare industry

We recommend that all stakeholders support the RI Land Trust Council's efforts to work with progressive healthcare providers to scale the Park Rx program, which enables doctors to refer patients to recreation activities in their communities that will improve relevant health outcomes. The Westerly Land Trust and South Kingstown Land Trust have pioneered by piloting this program in conjunction with the South County Health Equity Zone. A systematic program throughout the state could have a significant effect on habits and practices for both adults and children. Partners in this effort could include the Rhode Island Medical Society and the Rhode Island Recreation and Parks Association. We specifically recommend that:

- Major state health insurers and other health stakeholders consider funding an expansion of the program through the provision of care coordinators, support of staff time, and support for program evaluation.
- Partners collaborating on Park Rx work with academic institutions to rigorously evaluate the program's effectiveness and demonstrate outcomes.

We also recommend that the State work with the business community and external stakeholders to identify additional opportunities to incentivize employees to engage in recreational activity. Many residents and businesses would benefit from additional recreation and a healthier workforce, but not all employers offer significant workplace incentives for healthy behaviors, particularly the small and medium-sized businesses that employ most Rhode Islanders, but are not self-insured and do not always feature comprehensive wellness programs. In particular, we recommend that:

- Health insurers and non-profits explore the possibility of creating an incentive fund for small and medium businesses to support their efforts to get employees active.
- The State work with the private sector to develop evidence-based, voluntary guidelines for the workplace that would help keep employees healthy, while also improving productivity.

Recommendation 2.3: Adopt a Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights

We recommend that Rhode Island join over 20 other states in adopting a Children’s Outdoor Bill of Rights. By doing so, the state can signal its commitment to fostering a culture of outdoor recreation among all Rhode Islanders at a young age. The first such bill of rights was adopted by California, and it provides that all children should have the opportunity to perform a number of activities, including the following:

- Play in a safe place
- Camp under the stars
- Explore nature
- Learn to swim
- Play on a team
- Follow a trail
- Catch a fish

Recommendation 2.4: Increase the variety of recreational programming in State parks and beaches, blue-ways, and other protected open spaces

Expand the use of parks and protected open spaces for physical activity programs that consider the needs of all users, including factors such as age, gender, ability, and culture.

Recommendation 2.5: Support efforts to develop a statewide food plan

We support the efforts of Rhode Island’s Director of Food Strategy and associated partners to develop and implement the state’s first statewide food plan, which will improve access to healthy food options for all Rhode Islanders. We encourage the Director of Food Strategy to continue to engage with recreation-related stakeholders to explore potential areas of collaboration on this issue. In particular, the Council recommends further analysis of:

- Potential requirements for food vendors or providers based in state and local recreation facilities to provide healthy and nutritious food options, and also for healthy food to be served at recreational programming.
- Opportunities to expand support for community gardens, which have been shown to increase participation in recreation among many populations in neighboring states.

Potential Metrics

- Increase rates of physical activity by all populations, regardless of socioeconomic status.
 - Particularly focus on physical activity rates among children.
- Increase the number of Health Equity Zones participating in Park Rx.
- Increase # of communities where Park Rx is supported by patient care coordinator and programming.
- Ensure that all recreation-related grant programs incorporate community socioeconomic factors and need into funding criteria.

3: Harness recreation to attract new tourists and prospective residents

Context

The Council has noted that the state’s tremendous recreation system is a key asset in Governor Raimondo’s drive to attract businesses, residents, and visitors to the state by making Rhode Island a better place to live and work.

Recreational tourism in certain parts of Rhode Island is strong, such as the marquee destinations of Newport and Narragansett. However, messaging and branding for the state’s outdoor recreation sector has been inconsistent and uncoordinated across different municipalities, regions, and recreational interest groups. As a result, the benefits of both in-state and out-of-state visitation have not necessarily trickled down to other, less well-known parts of the state.

The state is the one actor that could coordinate efforts and incorporate the various marketing efforts for the outdoor recreation sector into a systematic campaign. Although recreational assets are a key part of the draw of Rhode Island, the recreational community has not yet been fully engaged in a unified effort to draw residents and tourists to a wide range of recreational sites throughout the state.

Part of the problem is access to information. A wealth of information about Rhode Island’s recreational assets exists in books, guides, and on the web through the hard work of many of our state’s outdoor enthusiasts. However, this information is not drawn from a common database and is spread across multiple sites that cover blueways, hiking trails, shore points, bikeways, and other asset types.

Some of these sites also lack a modern and accessible user interface, especially for those individuals who may be unfamiliar with the state’s recreational resources. For example, a survey conducted by the Department of Health found that over 50% of RIPTA riders were not familiar with any of the state’s four major parks. Additionally, the recreational experience is not just about access to static assets — there is no centralized location to highlight public events, campaigns, and other programming related to outdoor recreation.

Major recommendations

Recommendation 3.1: Create a unified outdoor recreation web portal and mobile application

Rhode Islanders and out-of-state visitors alike need a “one-stop,” user-friendly portal to access information about recreational assets and programming. We recommend that recreational stakeholders develop a comprehensive partnership between non-governmental and governmental entities to provide one, modern portal for tourists and residents to access information about recreation sites and organizations providing outdoor recreation opportunities.

When a resident gets an inkling to go on a bike ride, or a businessman traveling through Providence wants to get out of his hotel room and run in a park, they will then have a clear source of information that will enable them to quickly identify, sort, and pursue nearby recreational opportunities. A website or smartphone application that aggregates information from the various recreational data sources throughout the state would help enable individuals with limited information to make spontaneous recreational decisions, and thereby increase utilization of Rhode Island's asset network.

- Partners could include Sea Grant (creators of "Shoreline RI"), the RI Land Trust Council and RI Blueways Alliance (creators of "Explore RI"), RI DEM, Commerce RI, and other stakeholders who organize and sponsor outdoor recreation opportunities.
- The website would be supported by one, centralized database of recreation assets with linkages to partner websites with accurate data on sites and opportunities, and could eventually expand to include an interactive "challenge" component to incentivize Rhode Islanders to continue to recreate and involve their friends and family.
- We recommend that local municipalities, DEM, CRMC, DOT, and non-governmental partners work together to ensure that updated, appropriate assets and information are displayed, and to establish geo-markers to track visitation at local recreation sites.
- Additionally, we recommend that Commerce integrate this new web portal within the State tourism website, and promote it as part of the tourism campaign.

Recommendation 3.2: Expand collaboration between state tourism campaign and recreation advocates

As the Commerce department re-launches the state's tourism initiative, we recommend that Commerce coordinate closely with other agencies and external stakeholders to ensure that State and local assets are appropriately featured. Specifically, we recommend that Commerce:

- Explore creation of a unified merchandising brand
 - The state has not yet attempted to create a statewide recreation merchandising brand and pursue an associated marketing campaign. Such a campaign could simultaneously market the state's assets while also generating revenue for new investments. New Hampshire has found success with its "Explore New Hampshire Parks" Plate.
 - We recommend that the Commerce Department work with interested stakeholders to further explore the viability of such an initiative.
- Develop an outdoor recreation themed day that can be heavily promoted across all beaches and parks, similar to the Governor's Bay Day.
- Make a targeted effort to specifically highlight the state's recreation assets as part of a media campaign to be launched in early May.

Potential Metrics

- Achieve significant use of online recreation portal
- Increase in-state and out-of-state visitation at state and local recreation assets

4: Connect Rhode Islanders to their communities and each other by improving built environment and recreation-related transportation

Context

To adequately connect our communities, Rhode Island must achieve greater integration of paths, trails and lanes such that residents have the option of walking or biking from place to place.

One example is the State's system of bike paths. While we have many miles of beautiful trails and paths, the various segments of the system are not seamlessly connected, and are not necessarily integrated with on-road bike lanes in cities and towns, creating discontinuity from community to community. Bikeway advocates have identified approximately \$200M in total bikeway project needs, including design and construction. Between state bond funding for bike paths and funding allocated through the State's transportation improvement plan, about \$85 million has been made available for bikeway development over the next 10 years. While this commitment by the state is substantial, more will need to be done to ensure that the state has a clear long-term plan for integration.

Much of the street-level planning that occurred in Rhode Island over the last five decades has not incorporated "Complete Streets" design principles. A Complete Street is a road system designed to accommodate pedestrians and bicyclists in addition to automobiles and other transit options. Such systems should be safe and responsive to all users, and thereby create a more multi-modal street network that promotes livable communities.

In 2012, the Assembly passed a law to encourage Complete Streets design, and the Department of Transportation issued a policy directive that has resulted in numerous road safety audits, many miles of new bike lanes and new lane markings on roadways, and over 30 intersection improvements. 10 municipalities have now adopted resolutions supporting Complete Streets. Both governmental and non-governmental partners have worked together to improve street design in the state's Health Equity Zones, and seven of these zones have built environment goals.

However, there are still significant implementation challenges for Complete Streets in Rhode Island, including issues of funding prioritization for what are often expensive projects, disputes over property ownership and appropriate technology, and a need to balance the different modes of transportation. At present, municipal and state design decisions are not strictly required to incorporate the complete streets approach, and more can be done to systematically create more walk-able and bike-able communities.

A related issue is that transportation shortfalls can often serve as a barrier to recreation space utilization. A Department of Health survey of public transit riders found that respondents are generally highly interested in engaging in a variety of recreational opportunities and enjoy visiting parks, but are often inhibited from doing so by inadequate transportation opportunities and information. The traditional bus-based public transit system is not necessarily suited to transport to recreation spots, which sometimes require significant route diversions away from high-density population areas. Over 60% of respondents to the transit survey indicated that they

would be interested in a more flexible “shuttle” service to outdoor recreation spots, contingent upon factors such as frequency of service, route directness, and affordability.

Major recommendations

Recommendation 4.1: Improve connectivity of biking and walking paths

We recommend that the state pursue the ultimate integration of all biking and walking paths in the state, both within parks and routes that connect to parks. Rhode Island is a geographically small state, and could feasibly become one of the first in the country to truly connect all of its constituent communities with a statewide trail system.

- DEM, DOT, and the Statewide planning council should establish an overall state bike path and trail plan with a timeline for achieving interconnection between external paths and paths within parks throughout the state.
- These actors should also ensure that new funding for bike paths and trails through the Transportation Infrastructure Plan and the Green Economy Bond prioritize projects that achieve greater integration in the near-term.

Recommendation 4.2: Further support the adoption of Complete Streets principles

The state can further accelerate the incorporation of complete streets principles into the built environment of all Rhode Island communities by leveraging partnerships on the local level.

- **Data tracking:** The Council recommends that State develop metrics for tracking the progress of complete streets implementation along state and municipal streets, and report annually on progress among the jurisdictions that receive state transportation funding.
- **Complete streets resolutions:** The Council recommends that the state support municipalities and Health Equity Zones that wish to adopt Complete Streets resolutions or, more significantly, ordinances by increasing technical assistance through DOH and non-governmental partners such as Grow Smart RI. Rhode Island can also leverage the capacity of Health Equity Zones to operationalize Complete Streets principles in planning decisions in all communities that have adopted relevant resolutions and ordinances, and create benchmarks and timelines for relevant renovations.

Recommendation 4.3: Improve transportation to major recreation sites

The State can work to ensure that all Rhode Islanders have reasonable access to popular recreation sites through public transportation. Specifically, we recommend that:

- **Expand transit survey:** The State should work with RIPTA, academic institutions, and other relevant stakeholders to expand data collection on recreation-related transit needs, building off of the earlier survey conducted by the Department of Health.
- **Consider pilot program:** Based off of the results of this data collection process, the state could consider a pilot program for a RIPTA flexible shuttle service that will help transport individuals both to and within State parks.

- As part of such a pilot, RIPTA could consider increasing the frequency of service to state parks on weekends, or adding additional public transit loops within state parks to ease convenience for visitors.

Potential Metrics

- Increase percentage of roadways that have bike lanes and sidewalks.
- Increase number of miles of traffic-separated bike lanes and off-road bike paths.
- Increase the number of municipalities with Complete Streets resolutions and ordinances.
- Increase the percentage of Health Equity Zones that have successfully incorporated Complete Streets into comprehensive planning and transportation plans.

5: Build a cohesive constituency for outdoor recreation

Context

Although Rhode Island has a vibrant and active outdoor recreation stakeholder community, the various interests in this space have not traditionally been organized into a cohesive constituency that advocates for recreation-related interests. Other constituencies that work on issues related to natural resources, such as agricultural interests and food advocates, have achieved great success in coordinating with policymakers to advance key priorities.

Additionally, broad continued stakeholder involvement will be necessary to ensure that Rhode Island executes on the key recommendations that have been identified in this strategic plan, that specific targets for metrics of success are identified, and that relevant actors are held accountable for reaching these goals.

Fortunately, the state has much to build on. Existing recreation stakeholders groups including the Trails Advisory Council, the Association of Parks & Recreation Directors, the State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Planning Committee, and the Outdoor Recreation Council have laid the foundation for stronger coordination between state and local government, private business, non-profits, community organizations, and other advocates for a strong recreational system.

Major recommendations

Recommendation 5.1: Continue robust stakeholder engagement

Rhode Island could create a permanent structure to facilitate ongoing collaboration between governmental and non-governmental recreation stakeholders and implementation of key statewide initiatives.

Unlike previous recreation-related councils or committees, such a structure would not be focused on one discrete function (such as the disbursement of transportation funding). The Council instead recommends that this entity coordinate broader efforts to improve the recreation system

as a whole. Like the Outdoor Recreation Council, this structure should also have a more diverse array of members than committees that are exclusively focused on recreational planning.

Options for creating this structure include re-convening a new recreation stakeholder group several times a year, or by modifying the Executive Order that created the Outdoor Recreation Council to extend the tenure of the Council.

Recommendation 5.2: Consider a staff position for advancing recreation

To truly facilitate cross-stakeholder collaboration on the advancement of the recreation system, Rhode Island would benefit from a dedicated individual with the expertise necessary to regularly convene relevant stakeholders and create accountability.

With support from non-governmental partners, the State could consider creating such a position to help promote the outdoor recreation system and coordinate implementation of this strategic plan across all stakeholders. Several other states, including Utah and Washington, have already established such positions, and some of our neighbors in New England are already moving in this direction. If support for such a position could be garnered from actors across the recreation space, then this would serve as a tremendous signal of Rhode Island's commitment to leading on outdoor recreation.

If a formal recreation stakeholder group continues on past the life of the Council, then this dedicated position would be available to staff those activities and ensure that progress is made against goals.

Conclusion

Over the past year, the Outdoor Recreation Council has traveled the state, learning about the myriad ways in which recreation impacts and enhances the lives of Rhode Islanders of all stripes. We have heard and discussed presentations from state and local officials, economic analysts, healthcare professionals, conservationists, advocates for children, and many more. Together, they have painted the picture of a recreation system that is vital to all of the people of our state — one that sustains our communities and brings us prosperity.

Preserving and advancing our recreation system requires effective stewardship of our parks and beaches, but it is also much more than that. Our vision is one where all communities have equitable access to investment in recreation, where doctors, businesses, and schools work hand in hand to promote an active and healthy populace, where communities are built to accommodate pedestrians and bicyclists, and where we are connected to one another through a well integrated system of trails and other transportation networks.

We must build on the successes of past leaders and begin to take the steps that will allow us to achieve this vision. By doing so, we can ensure that Rhode Island remains at the forefront.