

2016

Interim Report of the Rhode Island Outdoor Recreation Council

JULY 14, 2016

GOVERNOR GINA M. RAIMONDO
STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

Executive Summary

Governor Gina M. Raimondo has assembled a group of stakeholders – executives from state and municipal government, leaders in the outdoor recreation and healthcare industries, advocates, philanthropists, legislators, and others – and charged the group with creating a strategy to effectively manage our outdoor recreational assets, with the overarching goal of increasing their use and enjoyment to the greatest extent possible.

This Interim Report describes the strengths of Rhode Island’s recreation system, challenges confronting the state, and key barriers the state must overcome to reach its full potential.

Strengths:

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:

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.

Key barriers:

1. Residents and visitors do not have easy access to information about all recreational resources and amenities.
2. Lack of sustainable funding to maintain and improve State and municipal recreation infrastructure and programming.
3. Recreation is not well integrated into the lifestyles of most Rhode Islanders.
4. Rhode Island’s outdoor resources have not been sufficiently marketed or coordinated.
5. There are currently only limited workforce development efforts in the recreation sector.
6. Street design and transportation limit access to recreational opportunities.

The Council will work together over the next five months to develop strategies to address these barriers. The final report will be issued on November 30, 2016.

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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 in this thriving sector 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 Council's final recommendations will be presented to the Governor in November 2016.

This Interim Report summarizes the Council's interim diagnostic findings from its first six months of work. This report covers the following areas:

- **Strengths:** Rhode Island has effectively preserved its considerable natural resources and developed facilities and programming to enable public enjoyment.
- **Challenges:** Use of outdoor resources in Rhode Island by residents and visitors is less than optimal, and there is room to grow this sector of the state's economy.
- **Key barriers:** There are a number of barriers that inhibit the maximum use and enjoyment of recreational resources in the state.

The findings outlined here will inform the second half of the Council's deliberations, which will focus directly on identifying actionable solutions with clear metrics and goals. The Council has brought together the perspectives of a wide array of outdoor recreation stakeholders, and we are confident that this body's final recommendations will provide clear guidance on how Rhode Island can build on and benefit from the tremendous work that has already been done.

The Rhode Island Outdoor Recreation Council's public process

On January 4, 2016, Governor Gina M. Raimondo issued Executive Order 16-01, which established the Rhode Island Outdoor Recreation Council.

Council membership
First Gentleman Andy Moffit (Chair)
Nicole Alexander-Scott, Rhode Island Department of Health (Vice-Chair)
Janet Coit, Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (Vice-Chair)
Mayor Scott Avedisian, City of Warwick
Eric Barry, REI
Mark Brodeur, Rhode Island Commerce Corporation
Jim Cole, RI Canoes and Kayaks Association
Celeste Corcoran, Coastal Medical
Jessica David, Rhode Island Foundation
Kevin Essington, Trust for Public Land
Rupert Friday, Rhode Island Land Trust Council
Grover Fugate, Coastal Resources Management Council
Joshua Giraldo, Central Falls Office of the Mayor
Jonathan Harris, Johnson & Wales
Susan Henrikson, United Healthcare
Saeed Hydaralli, Roger Williams University
Alex Krogh-Grabbe, Rhode Island Bike Coalition
Rajiv Kumar, Shape-up Rhode Island
Steve Medeiros, Rhode Island Saltwater Angler Association
Larry Mouradjian, Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management
Andrew Nota, City of Jamestown
Julie Oakley, Rhode Island Department of Transportation
Mia Patriarca, Rhode Island Department of Health
Tina Shepard, One Neighborhood Builders
Jonathan Stone, Save The Bay
Terry Sullivan, The Nature Conservancy
Representative Teresa Tanzi, Narragansett
Charlie Vandemoer, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Raymond Watson, Mt. Hope Neighborhood Association

Executive Order 16-01 further directed that the Council should hold public meetings on a bimonthly basis. In line with this directive, the Council has met three times over the course of 2016, and will meet three more times before a final report is issued on November 30, 2016.

Council past meeting dates	Future meeting dates
January 26, 2016: Save The Bay, Providence	July 28, 2016: Location to be determined
March 30, 2016: The Casino at Roger Williams Park, Providence	September 29, 2016: Location to be determined
May 26, 2016: The Aspray Boathouse, Warwick	November 30, 2016: Location to be determined

Taking stock of Rhode Island's strengths

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. This year, Governor Raimondo has proposed a “Green Economy Bond” that will provide substantial additional funding for recreation-related investments if it is approved by voters in November. 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 \$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

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.

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

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.

Challenges

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

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.

⁷ Centers for Disease Control

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.

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

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.

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

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.

Former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently released a proposal to double the size of the nation's outdoor economy, and restore thousands of local parks throughout the country.¹² Regardless of whether this plan comes to fruition, 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.

Key barriers

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 six months, the Council has drawn on the expertise and experience of its members, subject

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.

¹² Hillary Clinton, "Hillary Clinton's Plan for Conservation and Collaborative Stewardship of America's Great Outdoors," June 2016.

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. The Council has identified six primary barriers that must be addressed:

1: Residents and visitors do not have easy access to information about all recreational resources and amenities

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. Most 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.

Rhode Islanders and out-of-state visitors alike need a “one-stop,” user-friendly portal to access information about recreational assets and programming. 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, there is no one 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.

2: Lack of sustainable funding to maintain and improve State and municipal recreation infrastructure and programming

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 community recreation grant program for capital investments, but gaps still remain.

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.

Central Falls presents a key example of the challenges that such constraints can place on a community. Central Falls has adopted many innovative approaches to creating recreational opportunities within an urban setting, but nonetheless contends with financial issues that limit resources available for recreation investments. The city has the lowest percentage of green space in the state, lacks a community center, and has only two regulation sized fields to support a high school, four middle schools, and the entire town population. The city can only fund one playground per 1000 children, and necessary cuts to public safety have increased drug usage and trash in the spaces that are accessible, significantly limiting their usage.

3: Recreation is not well integrated into the lifestyles of most Rhode Islanders

As we all know, it can be difficult for families and individuals to integrate recreation into their busy lives. 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. 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.¹³ There are policy measures that have contributed to this outcome. In Rhode Island, students are required to receive an average of 20 minutes of health and PE instruction per day combined, while nationally the daily recommendation for PE alone is 30 minutes in elementary school, and 45 minutes in middle and high school.

Rhode Island has also historically fallen short on following best practices with regard to recess policies. In June 2016, Governor Raimondo took a step forward by signing legislation mandating 20 minutes of recess per day in public elementary schools, but gaps remain. For instance, very few districts prohibit withholding recess. Intramural sports programs have been diminished in many schools, and programs encouraging students to walk or bike to school are sporadic.

¹³ RI Kids Count, “Presentation at the Second Outdoor Recreation Council Meeting: Physical Activity in Schools,” March 2016.

When one becomes an adult and leaves the space where it is relatively commonplace to participate in structured athletic activities, incentives for recreation become even scarcer. Many residents and businesses would benefit from additional recreation and a healthier workforce, but not all employers offer workplace incentives for healthy behaviors. Some progressive healthcare providers are encouraging patients to engage in outdoor recreation activities and participate in community-based recreational initiatives, but a scaled-up, systematic approach to facilitate prescriptions of outdoor recreation activity to patients could have a significant effect on practices for both adults and children alike. Health insurers could also play a role by providing additional incentives for recreational activities.

4: Rhode Island's outdoor resources have not been sufficiently marketed or coordinated

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.

5: There are currently only limited workforce development efforts in the recreation sector

For young people and adults looking to launch into a career in the recreation sector, the path forward is not always clear. State and municipal recreational departments are an obvious first place to look for longer-term jobs, but as a result of budget cuts, the Department of Environmental Management now relies heavily on temporary seasonal employees to manage state parks and beaches, reducing opportunities for new generations of Rhode Islanders to find a stable career in the outdoor economy. On the community level, environmental workforce programs do exist, but they do not have the scale of a broad-based collaboration between community and municipal leaders, non-profits, and state government.

There are opportunities to expand, and young individuals hunger for the chance to work in these sectors. According to the Department of Labor and Training, openings in recreation-related occupations are expected to grow by at least 10% between now and 2020, and summer workforce development programs for youth related to outdoor recreation are heavily oversubscribed.¹⁴ A vibrant recreation sector will require a more robust pipeline to bring new talent into the industry.

¹⁴ Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training, "Presentation at the Third Outdoor Recreation Council Meeting: Governor's Workforce Board Summer Youth Program," May 2016.

6: Street design and transportation limit access to recreational opportunities

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 General 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 well-suited to facilitation 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.

Conclusion

The Council includes a diverse group of stakeholders whose collective expertise and experience will continue to inform this effort to diagnose challenges for outdoor recreation in Rhode Island and identify potential reforms. The Council's final report, which will be released in November, will present a strategic plan that contains a comprehensive set of solutions to eliminate the barriers that have been identified thus far.

In addition to a final set of solutions and potential initiatives, the report will outline metrics to measure the success of the Council's recommendations upon implementation in the short, medium, and long run. These metrics will ensure that the state is being held accountable for progress on the many dimensions of the Council's work.

As the work of the Council moves forward, we will consider options for a multi-stakeholder institutional structure that can effectively sustain our efforts as the state transitions from the recommendation to implementation phase. The Council will continue to solicit public input as the process of formulating recommendations progresses.

This is an exciting time for outdoor recreation, with a number of innovative approaches being pioneered across the country. We hope to see Rhode Island at the forefront.