Transportation Backgrounder

RIPEC Study: Transportation at a Crossroads (2002):
[Link to Study]
The Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council undertook this early analysis of transportation funding in Rhode Island to highlight the lack of an integrated system for transportation policy decision-making and the unsustainable method of funding road and bridge infrastructure as well as transit capital and operations. Some selected quotes follow:

- “State policy-makers need to reinvent the way Rhode Island’s transportation infrastructure will be financed in the future”.
- “Current state transit funding is inelastic and insufficient to sustain the existing statewide transit system even in a no-growth mode”.
- “To further diversify RIPTA’s revenue base, it is also suggested that a portion of the revenue collected from motor vehicle registration and driver license fees be earmarked for mass transit”.

[Link to Report]
In April 2006, Providence Mayor Cicilline created the 27-member Transit 2020 Working Group comprised of business and community leaders, government officials, Smart Growth advocates, transit users and environmentalists to develop strategies for enhancing and expanding the region’s public transit system. The group’s work culminated in a report that was released in March 2007. The Transit 2020 report stresses the need for a broad commitment to the policy changes and investments that are necessary to development and sustain a robust transportation system. The report, released in February 2007, sets forth a series of recommendations including the following:

- Rhode Island is fortunate to have an excellent base on which to build its transit future, RIPTA, which needs to receive advocacy and support from the public and private sector
- Transit use must be proactively encouraged through incentives, and automobile use must be discouraged in the public and private sector
- New and expanded transit options must be developed to serve current users and those who choose not to use transit
- A robust transit system must be seamlessly intermodal and regional
- Land use policies must encourage the expansion of transit and increase the use of transit in everyday life

Special Legislative Commission to Study Transit in RI (2007):
[Link to report]
On May 25, 2004 the Rhode Island General Assembly authorized, by Resolution, the creation of a Special Legislative Commission to Study Transit Services in the State of Rhode Island. This Resolution was a response to the perennial financial problems faced by the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA)
and the Commission was charged with identifying ways to optimize the functionality of a legacy transit system. When the Commission was established in March 2006, however, numerous current events had combined to dramatically alter the Commission’s perspective on transit. These events included: rising energy costs, traffic congestion, shifts in demographic trends, urban design renewal and the extension of commuter rail service. All members concluded that restructuring, reinvestment and creative financing would enable RIPTA to become Rhode Island’s “Mobility Manager”. Transforming RIPTA into the State’s Mobility Manager calls for the Authority to serve as a major resource in the solution of Rhode Island’s transportation problems rather than as a limited service provider. The Commission released its report on May 29, 2007 with recommendations intended to guide RIPTA’s transformation from an agency perpetually struggling to balance a budget into a public transit system able to respond to rising energy costs, make transit an integral part of community design statewide and provide mobility options that meet the different needs of a diverse population. Among the recommendations were:

■ Require RIPTA, RIDOT and Statewide Planning to develop a public transit strategy for Rhode Island that maximizes financial investments and connects all forms of transit such as pedestrian, bike, rail, ferry, bus, etc.

■ Reduce the reliance on the state gasoline tax as a primary source of state funding to support operating expenses of public transit providers.

■ Plan public transit services and connections as the defining element of new construction and redevelopment rather than as an auxiliary part of communities.

Link to audit Executive Summary
Commissioned by the Rhode Island State Budget Office, the national transportation management consulting firm of Abrams and Cherwony conducted a Management Performance Audit (MPA) of the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA). The purpose of the audit was to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of the overall performance of the transit system and to identify actions that could be undertaken to achieve improvements. The audit consisted of three major areas of review. (Peer group analysis comparing RIPTA to similar sized transit systems throughout the United States, a detailed audit of each of the 13 functional areas of RIPTA, and a feasibility study to determine whether RIPTA could be transferred into the State Department of Transportation. The audit results were published April 12, 2007. The executive summary noted the following:

■ RIPTA performs better than its peer group in all five measures related to maintenance performance.
■ Better than peer averages on 15 out of 27 measures of performance indicators.
■ Its trends were generally favorable and comparable to the peer average in the cost per passenger measure and outperforming or coming very close to the peer average in per capita measures.

Areas for improvement included insurance costs, operations/employee ratios and administrative costs, all of which are being addressed by management and the RIPTA Board.

Governor’s Blue Ribbon Panel on Transportation Funding (2008):
Link to Blue Ribbon Panel documents and proceedings, including its final report.
In recognition of the serious reduction in transportation funding and an aging transportation infrastructure in critical need of repair or replacement, Governor Carcieri established a Blue Ribbon Panel in March of 2008 to assess Rhode Island’s transportation needs and to identify options for potential funding sources.

The mission of the panel was:

■ To fully understand the needs of transportation financing in Rhode Island;
■ To analyze and assess funding options, and
■ To recommend funding mechanisms and inform the public of the plan.
Over the course of 10 months, the Panel met 12 times, and held four public meetings. Initially, the panel indicated that public transit (RIPTA) would not be addressed within the scope of study. However, during the NuPTA summit on September 23, 2009, RIDOT Director and Blue Ribbon Panel Co-Chair Michael Lewis indicated that transit would indeed be integrated as part of the panel's scope of study. The final report included two funding strategy scenarios (one more aggressive than the other) that included a mix of proposed revenue sources to sustain both, the needed investments to bring Rhode Island’s roads and bridges into good repair as well as resources to sustain a more robust multi-modal public transit system. Although the Governor did recommend the transfer of 1 cent of gas tax revenue from the General Fund to RIDOT (which was approved by the General Assembly), the Administration did not act on any of the recommendations in the report. The General Assembly did implement a two-cent increase in the motor fuel tax effective July 1, 2008, designating the proceeds to RIPTA.

[Link to report]
This document was updated by the RI Division of Planning in August 2008, following a public comment period. The plan addresses Rhode Island’s transportation needs over the next twenty plus years. This latest plan update was developed with a commitment to public involvement in the transportation planning process, and is based on input from a variety of planning efforts and exercises. The Plan has been prepared to ensure compliance with the Safe Accountable Flexible and Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) of 2005. The scope of the plan includes surface transportation for both passengers and freight, and connections to other modes. Revisions from the 2004 Plan include a scenario analysis using the State’s Land Use Plan (2006), funding scenarios, enhanced operational strategies such as access management, an enhanced Congestion Management Process, a more thorough fiscal constraint analysis, and detailed mapping for environmental justice analysis and natural resources.

The plan has two main purposes:

- It is a key element of the State Guide Plan, setting direction for state transportation policy and action. It complements elements dealing with land use, economic development, greenspace and greenways, and other related topics. It provides a framework with which local comprehensive plans must be consistent.

- It fulfills federal transportation planning requirements for statewide and metropolitan planning by providing a forum for public input, providing direction to the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP, which is the list of funded projects), and providing a basis for measuring adherence to air quality standards. The time frame of the plan is a minimum twenty years. It contains goals, policies, objectives and strategies for Rhode Island’s transportation system.

New Public Transit Alliance (NuPTA)
Recommendations for Funding Public Transit in RI (12/2008):
[Link to report]
This report followed a forum convened by NuPTA on September 23, 2008. 70 businesses, civic and political leaders convened to discuss a pending financial crisis at RIPTA that threatened to decimate public transit service in Rhode Island. The forum included the Governor, Lt. Governor, State legislators, the Directors of the Departments of Administration and Transportation, RIPTA Board and staff, major employers, developers, interest groups and members of the Governor’s Blue Ribbon Panel for Transportation Funding. The consensus of the group was that the proposed public transit service cuts would be counterproductive to the state’s economic and environmental interests. Presentations made by Governor Carcieri, the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority, Grow Smart Rhode Island and the Sierra Club underscored the need for a long-term, sustainable funding mechanism to ensure that RIPTA is able to meet the growing demand for public transit among Rhode Island’s commuters and businesses. The recommendations contained in the report were derived in part from the forum and were intended to guide and support actions by the Governor and the General Assembly in reforming the method of funding public transit in Rhode Island. NuPTA deliberately presented a broad menu of options, recognizing that there is
no single solution to sustainable transit funding and that not all of the options can or need to be implemented simultaneously.

Governor’s Review of RIPTA (12/2008):

Following the Abrams and Cherwony audit, Governor Carcieri requested that a panel of state officials comprised of the Director of Administration (Jerome Williams), Director of Revenue (Garry Sasse) and Director of Transportation (Michael Lewis) conduct a further review of the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority and to develop a short and long term strategic plan for addressing persistent budget challenges. The panel recognized that RIPTA “performs overall at a level consistent with other transit peers”, however, the focus of this review was to propose revenue enhancements and expenditure reductions. Recommendations includes items such as elimination of free senior/disabled fare during off-peak hours (would require an act of the General Assembly), elimination of the Newport/Providence ferry service, elimination of advertising, reduction of overtime, discontinuation of some Ride pass products and reviewing insurance coverage (again requiring General Assembly action). The report, provided to the Governor in or around December 2008, was not widely distributed. A public request was made to obtain the document.

Metro Area Transit Study (2008-2009):

In the fall of 2008, the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority, with support from the City of Providence, initiated a Metropolitan Providence Transit Enhancement Study to meet the growing demand for transit in and around Providence. Over the last several years, RIPTA ridership has increased at a record rate and there has been increasing recognition that transit is a critical component of the state’s infrastructure. Transit is also recognized as playing an essential role in helping to promote economic growth, provide access to jobs, support public health, and maintain vibrant urban centers. As Rhode Island’s Mobility Manager, RIPTA is dedicated to meet growing demand and to plan for the future in a responsive and thoughtful manner. To that end, the Metro Transit Study has been initiated to evaluate potential transit improvements that would better serve Greater Providence and facilitate mobility between the state’s urban center and the immediately surrounding metropolitan area. The Study Area is focused on Providence and includes the adjacent, higher-density, urban areas of East Providence, Pawtucket, Central Falls, North Providence, and portions of Warwick and Cranston east of I-295. RIPTA developed specific Study Tasks based largely upon the recommendations of the Transit 2020 Coalition’s Growing Smart with Transit (as issued in February, 2007). RIPTA and the City of Providence have also established a Metro Transit Working Group to help guide the study and evaluate the potential solutions. The study will culminate with recommendations for transit improvements that may be implemented in the immediate short term, as well as several long-term alternatives for further consideration and more detailed evaluation in subsequent study phases. This study is planned for completion and release in December 2009.

Aquidneck Island Transportation Study (2009-2011)

This study project is underway by the Aquidneck Island Planning Commission (AIPC) working in close partnership with its member communities of Newport, Middletown and Portsmouth and with other local, state and federal agencies. The 24-month study will result in the development of a Comprehensive Multi-Modal Transportation Master Plan for Aquidneck Island. The Master Plan will guide the investment of future funding into the Island’s overall transportation system through a program of recommended short, medium, and long-term capital improvements suitable for inclusion into the State of Rhode Island Transportation Improvement Program. This project is seen as being critically important to the future economic viability and quality of life on Aquidneck Island. It will reach across all modes of transportation (bus, rail, bike, pedestrian, auto, etc.) and seek to make modal connections and improvements consistent with sound land use planning - all in an effort to increase overall mobility, modal choice, and safety for our residents, businesses, employees, and visitors while decreasing traffic congestion and its negative impacts on our environment, economy and quality of life.