Grow Smart RI statement in support of (H-6321) authorizing RIDOT to collect user fees from large commercial trucks traveling on Rhode Island bridges to fund sorely needed transportation infrastructure improvements

June 22, 2015 - Grow Smart Rhode Island ("Grow Smart") is a statewide nonprofit policy research and advocacy organization focused on promoting enduring and sustainable economic growth that capitalizes on Rhode Island’s many place-based assets. One of the principal ways we pursue this is by promoting responsible public investment in a 21st century transportation system that enhances our economy, safeguards the environment and provides Rhode Islanders with healthy and affordable transportation choices.

That’s why Grow Smart supports House Bill 6321 – a bold initiative to raise significant new resources to support long-overdue investments in our state’s critical transportation infrastructure, including mass transit. We believe the proposal to collect user fees from heavy trucks is fair and equitable based on the extensive wear and tear that heavy trucks impose on the state’s road and bridge system. We also commend Senate leadership and the Administration for proposing amendments that provide a measure of relief to Rhode Island based trucking companies.

We believe that user fees for transportation infrastructure investments are consistent with existing policy in several nearby states and would not represent a competitive disadvantage for Rhode Island, but actually instead provide a short and long term boost to the Rhode Island economy.

Grow Smart commends the Raimondo Administration for taking a holistic approach to transportation by including sorely needed investments in our state’s bike/ped infrastructure and mass transit system. In addition to the proposed Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project to be considered as part of reconstructing the failing 6/10 Connector, we understand that the proposed RhodeWorks plan, now under development, includes a line item of $80M for transit investments still to be determined. We’re especially pleased that these investments are “to be determined” because we believe strongly in the principle of thoughtful and long-range planning as well as public participation in decisions about how best to invest limited resources for maximum return and community benefit.

We appreciate and support the following amendments included in House Bill 6321:

1. The addition of four (4) provisions of relief to Rhode Island based operators of trucks that would be subject to tolls (property tax rebate, tax credit for vehicle registration fees, motor fuel tax rebate
program and economic development benefits for those that operate at T.F. Green Airport or Quonset Business Park).

2. The new stipulation that tolls shall be fixed only after conducting a cost/benefit analysis and providing an opportunity for public comment.

3. The new stipulation limiting the assessment of tolls to once per toll facility per day in each direction and a total maximum amount for crossing the state along Route 95.

So, how could the Administration’s proposal be further strengthened? We offer the following recommendations.

1. To ensure that transportation projects are carefully vetted and aligned with long-range transportation and land use planning, consider adding language to p. 15 (42-13-8.14. Conformance to statute, rules, and regulations) reinforcing that the forthcoming RhodeWorks action plan will align with Transportation 2030 and RIPTA’s 5-Year Strategic Plan and periodic updates to same.

2. Finally, we recommend that the forthcoming RhodeWorks action plan acknowledge, prioritize and integrate the Transit Hubs Initiative which was approved by 60% of voters in the November 2014 election.

Grow Smart looks forward to contributing its policy and communications expertise to ensure that this transportation proposal realizes its tremendous potential to achieve sustained economic growth in Rhode Island.

Respectfully,

[Signatures]

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