Testimony of Scott Wolf, Executive Director, Grow Smart Rhode Island, Submitted to the House Committee on Finance in support of H-7102
May 15, 2018

Grow Smart RI is a non-profit public interest group representing a broad coalition of groups and concerned citizens committed to strengthening Rhode Island’s economy in a sustainable and equitable way.

We promote such growth by advocating for best practices in compact mixed use development and redevelopment in revitalized urban, town and village centers, investment in multimodal transportation infrastructure and responsible stewardship of our natural resources, including our farmland, forests, coastline and the Bay.

The proposal before you is one that Grow Smart RI and the RI Builders Association have been studying and developing for over two years. It is modeled after the very successful MassWorks Program in Massachusetts. It provides, on a competitive basis, grants to municipalities to support infrastructure improvements necessary to unlock economic development projects consistent with a municipality’s Comprehensive Community Plan and with Rhode Island’s State Guide Plan.

Many cities and towns in Rhode Island have municipally approved economic development plans and projects that are either held back or delayed due to inadequate infrastructure. Attached to my written testimony are letters of support from several mayors and other community based groups in support of this legislation.

The program we propose would not be in competition with or a substitute for low-interest financing programs available through Rhode Island’s well-run Infrastructure Bank. Grants awarded through this program would be a vital part of the capital stack necessary to move many infrastructure projects forward in a timely way.

There’s a compelling track record of success with this innovative program in Massachusetts, where it has enjoyed strong bipartisan support.

The program is simple, straight-forward and effective (1.5 page bill and 3-page set of guidelines).

It’s the only state-funded municipal infrastructure grant program at this scale that we know of in the U.S.

We’ve included with the written testimony a one-page results summary from Massachusetts that documents an estimated $1 billion in private investment and 2,200 housing units associated with Massachusetts’ $85 million statewide investment in public infrastructure during 2016.
This program in Massachusetts is proven to accelerate both state and local economic development goals which are outlined in the program guidelines.

The competitive nature of the program allows the state, through its program guidelines, to select local projects that optimize return on investment.

Massachusetts initial investment level in the program was $85 million per year. In August 2016, Governor Baker secured legislative support for a $500 million bond to fund the program at a $100 million level over five years.

While this program cannot be meaningful without dedicated funding, we have prioritized the framework for implementing the program and resulting benefits and defer to the General Assembly about the best method for funding it, whether through a bonding mechanism or line item appropriation. Our recommendation is that the General Assembly include funding in the range of $15-20 million annually which represents an investment proportional in size to that of Massachusetts.

We believe this program is in our State’s best interest as a means to facilitate a state/local partnership for investing in a stronger, more vibrant, sustainable and resilient Rhode Island.

Respectfully,

Scott Wolf
Executive Director