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Dear Candidates and Voters:

We are pleased to provide you with the 2020 edition of Grow Smart RI’s biennial Briefing Book for Candidates and Voters.

In the last 9 months we have all grappled with the COVID-19 pandemic, the most socially disruptive and economically damaging national crisis of the last 70 years. It has at least temporarily set back the exciting, if incomplete community and economic revitalization momentum that was building in many parts of Rhode Island. But these recent events which have tested all of us have also hopefully stretched us to re-examine the fundamental strengths, weaknesses, and best paths forward for our state and nation.

We at Grow Smart RI are convinced that Rhode Island can emerge from this crisis with new momentum, enhanced economic opportunity for all and increased climate and public health resiliency. Doing so though requires that we be open to new directions and alliances, while playing with even more laser like focus to RI’s many strengths, and heightening collaboration between the federal government and state and local governments, plus the private and nonprofit sectors.

At a 30,000-foot level, the Pandemic and the current intense and overdue level of racial reckoning should make it easier to promote positive changes that make our communities more user-friendly, healthier and opportunity rich. That’s because the economic and social status quo is simply not a viable long term option. This is a particularly encouraging mindset for the Smart Growth movement which is at once both commonsensical and revolutionary.

We are commonsensical because we are all about promoting growth and development where it does the most good economically, environmentally and socially. And our movement is revolutionary because it seeks to unwind and move us away from the predominant, auto centric, unhealthy and unsustainable sprawling development patterns of the last 70 years.

One of our core beliefs is that Growth is not smart if it only benefits the few rather than the many. That’s why we will push hard for our State’s economic and community recovery efforts to improve access to jobs, transit, and housing for all Rhode Islanders, while preserving our State’s outstanding natural assets and local character.

In publishing this document, we focus on three broad policy areas where we believe government, alongside its private and non-profit partners, should work to expand economic, environmental, and social opportunities. We highlight projects and partnerships that are already working to move Rhode Island forward, as well as policies that have the potential to do the same. We hope that winning candidates at the federal, state, and local level will use this Briefing Book to hit the ground running in pursuing policy decisions to help Rhode Island recover and thrive in a post COVID world, and that voters will use it in advocating for constructive change with their elected representatives.

Any questions or requests for additional information are welcome. We look forward to working with you and all Rhode Islanders to pivot from the current crisis to a new, inclusive and sustainable framework for improved public health, Main Street and Downtown focused community and economic development, and more equitable access to the resources we all need for a good, productive life.

Sincerely,

Scott Wolf
Executive Director, Grow Smart RI
Since 1998, Grow Smart RI has provided statewide leadership for diverse public and private interests seeking sustainable and equitable economic growth.

- We promote such growth by advocating for compact development in revitalized urban, town, and village centers balanced with responsible stewardship of our region’s natural assets – farmland, forests, the coastline, and the Bay.
- We inform leaders, decision makers, and concerned citizens about the many benefits of compact development and asset stewardship and provide research and training on proven smart growth strategies.
- We convene broad coalitions that advocate policy reforms and specific projects designed to build communities where all people and businesses can thrive.

Our Vision’s key elements include:

- Valuing, maintaining, and investing in our diverse built and natural assets in order to strengthen our economy and provide all Rhode Islanders with the opportunity to live healthy and productive lives in a state with an outstanding urban-rural balance.
- Revitalizing our city, town, and village centers, incorporating historic rehabilitation and complementary new construction, walkable streets, parks, and recreational areas, to make these compact centers thriving places to live and visit, work and establish businesses.
- Generating a broad range of attractive, healthy, and affordable housing choices that give all Rhode Islanders the chance to live close to where they work.
- Conserving our natural resources, including farmlands, forests, and our incomparable Narragansett Bay, and strengthening farming, forestry and our marine industries.
- Establishing an efficient and integrated transportation system that enables Rhode Islanders to get to jobs, schools, services, and recreational areas easily and affordably while reducing automobile dependence.
As Rhode Island seeks to rebound from COVID-19, smart growth policy initiatives provide a clear path to a ‘Better Normal’ for more Rhode Islanders.

The multi dimensionality of this crisis is part of what sometimes makes it overwhelming. It is simultaneously a public health crisis, a racial reckoning crisis, a crisis of confidence in governmental institutions, and a crisis requiring patience, resolve, clear thinking, creativity, collaboration and fundamental compassion for our fellow human beings.

While the pandemic has brought an onslaught of challenges and losses, it has also reminded us of many of the things we find most valuable in our communities: walkability, parks, beautiful natural surroundings, historic buildings and neighborhoods and familiar local businesses. The upheaval provoked by the pandemic provides an opportunity to seek an equitable and prosperous path forward, one that can build on Rhode Island’s many strengths.

In 2020, we have already seen the resilience of Rhode Islanders, adapting creatively to economic challenges by encouraging more opportunities for walking, biking and outdoor commerce in business districts and on neighborhood streets.

Our movement’s cross sector nature and long term perspective are key assets that we can leverage to capitalize on Rhode Islanders’ resilience as we help develop an action plan for long term community and economic recovery. And both our organization’s and movement’s emphasis on expanding affordable, healthy transportation and housing choices are noteworthy initiatives for reducing the unacceptable racial disparities in health and economic well-being laid bare by the pandemic.

Moreover, the kind of long range community based planning advocated by the smart growth movement has taken on new significance as we observe how ill prepared many of our institutions, especially at the national level, were to cope effectively with COVID-19.
Contrary to some assertions that density is the culprit for the virus’s spread, researchers from Johns Hopkins University and the University of Utah have shown that density is not correlated with infection rates, and that density can actually improve health outcomes during pandemics, largely due to health care efficiencies. Grow Smart RI has always advocated for efficient, compact development in our urban and town centers, as this contributes to vibrant active Main Streets, walkable neighborhoods, preserved historic resources, conserved open space and an overall higher quality of life – including better health outcomes, which is now more important than ever.

While vigilance and strong precautions against infectious diseases are critical, Rhode Island’s growth policy should not overcorrect based on misinterpretations of recent events. Using the pandemic as an excuse to encourage an urban exodus and suburban sprawl would increase already unacceptably high greenhouse gas emissions, threaten our precious natural resources and Rhode Island’s outstanding but fragile urban/rural balance.

Advocating a return to this kind of unsustainable development pattern would also be economically and fiscally counterproductive and likely widen already unacceptable racial disparities in public health, economic well-being and overall quality of life. Fighting climate change and other long term challenges such as reducing obesity rates, assisting Downtown and Main Street small businesses, and providing easier access to job opportunities have led us to embrace walkable neighborhoods and compact developments with an array of convenient services. It is important to retain the core values of this successful movement while integrating scientifically proven ways to protect public health.

COVID-19 has also served as yet another reminder of racial inequities in our state and country. As minority populations are disproportionately affected by the virus, we must remain committed to promoting health equity. Equity is a core component of smart growth; our communities cannot truly grow smartly and improve for the long haul unless their growth benefits the many and not just the few.
Economic Development & Community Revitalization

Rhode Island and the rest of the country are far from being out of the economic woods even though recent economic indicators are showing some rebound from this past spring’s near depression conditions. Our state’s tourism, hospitality and food sectors remain the most severely impacted parts of our economy, and many of these sectors’ businesses and jobs are located within the Main Streets and Downtowns whose revitalization Grow Smart RI has long championed.

Congress and the Administration need to supplement considerably the $2 trillion emergency stabilization package approved in March 2020 both to stabilize the still weak economy and catalyze a long-lasting recovery from this prolonged crisis. But we must invest wisely rather than squandering money in a way that fails to provide a foundation for long-term economic growth. Substantial funds must go to investments that build lasting economic prosperity and ultimately help all Rhode Islanders and other Americans have the opportunity to live in a place that is healthy, prosperous, and resilient.

With current unemployment and underemployment rates still far higher than during the immediate Pre-COVID 19 period, Rhode Island will need to continue to pursue a bold and thoughtful strategy for economic and community recovery. And much of the funding for that recovery will need to come from the federal government because of its ability to make major countercyclical investments while our state and local governments remain constrained by balanced budget requirements and a reduced revenue stream.

Ensuring such an outcome requires prioritizing the infrastructure and community revitalization programs that will protect the segments of the economy and our communities at most immediate risk while also building a foundation for long-term recovery.
Ambitious and new Federal relief for state and municipal budgets and federal investments in infrastructure offer two of the best paths forward. Absent federal stimulus beyond the CARES Act enacted March 27, 2020, states and municipalities will be unable to meet basic obligations or to expand economic opportunity. Moreover, Grow Smart RI and the Rhode Island Builders Association have determined that many creative local housing and other economic redevelopment proposals for our Main Streets and Downtowns cannot be implemented without costly infrastructure improvements beyond the financial capacity of most individual municipal governments.

The Ramos family of Central Falls cuts the ribbon after re-opening of Taqueria Lupita following storefront improvements made possible through a competitive Rhode Island Main Street Streetscape Improvement Fund grant award.
Recommended Federal Policies

- **Prioritize Fiscal Relief**
  Prioritize and accelerate passage of fiscal relief for state and municipal budgets.

- **Support Infrastructure Investment**
  Include 100% federally funded infrastructure investments through a competitive grant program as part of the next economic stimulus.

- **Expand Federal HTC**
  Support the Historic Tax Credit Growth and Opportunity Act (S2615/HR 2825) to permanently hike the Federal Historic Tax Credit (HTC) from 20% of Qualified Rehab Expenditures (QRE’s) to 30% for small historic rehab projects, and to provide this same increase temporarily (2020 through 2024) for larger projects. Passage of this bill would partially make up for the current lack of incentives for historic rehab currently available through either Rhode Island’s State Historic Tax Credit program or Rebuild RI.

- **Incentivize Community Revitalization**
  Support the REHAB Act (H.R. 6175) designed to encourage redevelopment of non-historic buildings near transit hubs.

- **Invest in Main Street**
  Include $100M in COVID relief to sustain and expand the essential work of Main Street revitalization programs in every corner of the nation.

- **Reduce Barriers to Housing Production**
  Support the federal Yes in My Backyard Act (S-1919/H.R. 4351) to discourage discriminatory land use policies and remove barriers that prevent needed housing from being built.
Recommended State Policies

☑ Recapitalize HTC Program
The State Historic Tax Credit (HTC) has been RI’s most impactful economic and community revitalization tool to date in the 21st Century. Currently, Historic Tax Credits are also gaining attention on a federal level as a tool for both pandemic recovery and long term growth. In the eighteen years since the State HTC program was established in RI, it has stimulated $1.8 billion of private investment, associated with the rehabilitation of more than 300 historic buildings. However, this program has received no new appropriated funding since 2013 and a sunset provision mandates its expiration on June 30, 2021. Rhode Island should once again embrace this vital revitalization incentive by eliminating the sunset provision and recapitalizing the program.

☑ Think Big About Rail
Rhode Island’s elected leaders should collaborate with those of other Northeastern states in pursuit of North Atlantic Rail, a proposed high-performance rail network better connecting - physically and economically - all of the small and mid-sized cities across the 7-state New England - Downstate New York megaregion with each other and the powerhouse economies of Boston and New York City. Phase I of North Atlantic Rail would fund the MBTA’s vision to electrify and improve commuter rail between Rhode Island and Metro Boston along the Providence- Boston MBTA route.

☑ Activate Municipal Infrastructure Grant Program
Incorporate funding for the RI Municipal Infrastructure Grant Program (RIGL 42-11.4) enacted in 2018, as part of the Governor’s Housing & Infrastructure Bond proposal as recommended by a coalition of community stakeholders. Funds from the Municipal Infrastructure Grant Program would be awarded on a competitive basis for infrastructure projects that unlock housing and other economic development opportunities.
Recommended State Policies

☑ Recapitalize the Rebuild RI Tax Credit Program

A relatively new additional tool for incenting historic rehab is the Rebuild RI Tax Credit. In consultation with Grow Smart RI and its allies, Commerce RI has made it easier over the last year and a half for small historic rehab projects to use and benefit from this tool. That’s why we recommend support for the Governor’s proposal to recapitalize the program with a net infusion of $22 million dollars.

☑ Support Housing Production Incentives

Support Governor Raimondo’s Housing Incentives for Municipalities in Budget Article 12 (see p. 293) encouraging special overlay zones in locations with existing infrastructure, underutilized facilities, proximity to public transit centers and existing mixed use development. Incentives also include payments to offset any clearly demonstrated additional costs of educating students living in new family friendly housing districts. This proposal is modeled on the successful 40S legislation in Massachusetts.

☑ Implement RI’s New Economic Development Strategy

Implement key parts of the State’s revised Economic Development Strategy, including prioritizing investments in the “Blue Economy” and establishing a State Community Development entity and a Local Development Fellows Program to assist municipalities in pursuing promising economic and community development projects.

☑ Advance Bond Referenda

Advance in a special election in 2021 the following portions of Governor Raimondo’s revised proposed Bond Referenda that most directly advance smart growth priorities (see the Governor’s original Bond proposals in Budget Article 5 beginning on p. 84).

(1) Higher Education Facilities Bond
d. Center for Ocean Innovation ($10M)

(2) Beaches, Clean Water & Green Bond
a. State Beaches and Parks ($40M)
b. Local Recreation Projects ($4M)
c. Natural & Working Lands ($3M)
d. Clean Water, Drinking Water ($15M)
e. Municipal Resiliency ($7M)

(3) Housing & Infrastructure Bond
a. Housing Production ($40M)
b. Port of Davisville Infrastructure Improvements ($20M)
Recommended State Policies

Renew Main Street RI Streetscape Improvement Fund

Before 2019, Commerce RI offered competitive grants and loans to improve infrastructure in commercial corridors and Main Streets. Qualifying projects with a 30% match could receive up to $300,000 for improvements. As commercial areas seek to reinvent and reinvigorate themselves, expanding opportunities to upgrade infrastructure will be crucial.

Recommended Municipal Policies

☑ Proactively Confront Main Street Vacancies

Municipalities should consider innovative zoning strategies to encourage private investment along Main Streets, such as those enacted in Downtown Woonsocket and elsewhere. Relaxing zoning regulations and quickening the permitting process are often necessary as businesses, restaurants, and residential developments attempt to pivot or occupy new spaces. Being flexible and assisting entrepreneurs will enable more of our Downtowns and Main Streets to grow stronger.

☑ Encourage Multi-Family Housing

Encourage multi-family housing through zoning reforms such as allowing both single family and multi-family housing to be built in more neighborhoods. Multi-family housing is the type of housing most in demand in RI per a 2016 study by Housing Works RI and RI Housing, entitled “Projecting Future Housing Needs”. While single family housing is a good option for many families, widespread restrictions against multi-family housing contribute to our housing shortage and to higher housing costs. Roughly 80% of the housing added to our nation’s largest metro areas since 1990 has been single family housing. This trend causes affordability issues in urban centers, as well as in suburban and rural communities which also often have large lot zoning, requiring high infrastructure per living unit with low financial returns.
122 North Main Street is the first major mixed use development located in the Woonsocket Downtown Overlay District, a policy that earned a smart growth policy award in 2016. The projects includes 17 market rate apartments on the upper floors with Lops Brewing and Office co-op business on the first floor. All the apartments were quickly rented upon completion in January 2020 and were tastefully developed with all the modern everyday conveniences that renters are looking for. Located just steps away from the Stadium Theatre, local favorite eateries, and access to public transportation, these new units give the City more housing options but still affordable for everyday workers. The community really rallied behind the project when it was first denied by the Zoning Board. After slightly altering the project plans, it was approved unanimously due to broad community support.
Transportation

As we reignite Rhode Island’s economy in the shadow of COVID-19, transportation will not be the same. Our goal is to emerge from the crisis with a strengthened transportation system, which balances short-term necessities with a long-term vision.

Global transportation trends are providing insight into how people want to travel. According to the Pew Research Center, Millennials comprise a plurality of the American workforce, and it has been well-documented that this generation prefers to live in places where they can travel by foot, bicycle, and mass transit. Employers locate in places where they can attract a talented workforce - transportation plays a large role in these location decisions. However, COVID-19 has had an impact on transportation preferences. Now is a crucial moment for the future of transportation - Rhode Island has the opportunity to create a desirable transportation system that can fuel decades of economic growth.

While there has been an overall decrease in transportation due to COVID-19 stay-at-home recommendations for many Rhode Islanders, some forms of transportation have been hit harder than others. In particular, public transportation has struggled due to perceived health issues, despite research that claims no direct correlation has been found between use of urban public transit and transmission of COVID-19. On the other hand, bike sales have boomed during the pandemic. Moreover, cities across the globe (including Providence) have closed some streets to allow for increased pedestrian and bicycle traffic, and the changes have been well received. However, traffic collisions are still the number one cause of death for children and young adults in America.

As more Rhode Islanders begin to walk and bike, we must invest in infrastructure that is safe for all travelers by focusing on Complete Streets projects and policies that safely accommodate all users, modes, and abilities.
Matching our infrastructure priorities with these transportation trends would also put Rhode Island in line with federal objectives. The House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee is championing the INVEST in America Act, a 5-year, $500 billion proposal. This proposal incorporates Complete Streets standards into federal road funding with an emphasis on safety for all road users regardless of mode. If Rhode Island plans for streets that accommodate all users and encourage economic growth, our efforts could be rewarded with federal funding.

While we try to adapt our transportation systems to the current public health and economic crises, it is important that we not overlook or underestimate the long term value of a robust public transportation system.

Globally, transit ridership plummeted during the pandemic, and is recovering slower than other modes. Despite RIPTA’s effective and resourceful response, which prioritized safety while servicing essential workers, these global trends hold true in Rhode Island as well. New safety measures mean that mass transit has a reduced capacity (and thus is more expensive to operate). Keeping in mind that essential workers and minorities disproportionately rely on public transportation and that equity is an important goal in our transportation systems, Rhode Island should not overreact to the temporary issues that public transportation faces. Transit-oriented development is a crucial strategy for Rhode Island’s future, and enhancing RIPTA’s abilities will in turn empower communities with a blueprint for smart growth. Rhode Island cannot recover fully from the pandemic without a continued significant investment in public transportation.
RIDOT proposed an amendment to the state’s 10-year transportation spending plan that reduced investment for bike and pedestrian projects by $37M. Grow Smart RI and many others, including a majority of the State Senate opposed this move. Still, it was approved by the State Planning Council on August 29, 2019. As bridge maintenance continues in the upcoming years, it is crucial that Rhode Island does not shortchange other important transportation infrastructure.

**Recommended State Policies**

- **Adopt Transit Master Plan (TMP) and Bicycle Mobility Plan (BMP)**
  After 2-year public processes, RIPTA, RIDOT, and RI Statewide Planning have drafted the Rhode Island TMP and BMP. These proposed plans are bold and commendable visions for the future. With a large federal infrastructure bill on the horizon (such as the INVEST in America Act), an approved TMP and BMP, with vetted projects, would put Rhode Island in a good position to compete for this federal funding.

- **Withdraw RIDOT’s Multi-Hub Plan**
  Withdraw RIDOT’s flawed Multi-Hub Transit Plan for Downtown Providence and commit to an open, public process for improving Kennedy Plaza while strengthening the public transit system. Hundreds of transit riders have objected to the plan and several stakeholder groups, including Grow Smart RI, have formally asked the Governor to intervene and withdraw it.

- **Enhance RI’s Bike/Ped Spending**
  RIDOT’s RhodeWorks program which became law in 2016 was an important step in bringing Rhode Island’s deteriorating bridges into a state of good repair. However, these investments should not come at the expense of pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure investments. In July 2019,

**Federal Policies**

- **Provide Emergency Transit Relief**
  Provide $32 billion in emergency transit relief immediately to avoid stranding millions of Americans from essential jobs and services.

- **Reform Surface Transportation Act**
  Commit to reform the Federal Surface Transportation Act to move America toward a more modern transportation system essential for an equitable economic recovery and a cleaner transportation future. On September 30, 2020 Congress approved a 1-year extension of the outdated Surface Transportation Act, pushing any reform off for at least another year.
Recommended Municipal Policies

☑ Implement Complete Streets

Complete Streets allow users of all ages, abilities, and transportation modes to travel safely, comfortably, and efficiently. With a focus on equity and transportation choice in the wake of COVID-19, Complete Streets are more important than ever (see Grow Smart RI’s July, 2020 Op/Ed). Through local ordinances (as implemented in Central Falls) and master plans (as adopted in Providence), as well as individual projects implementing this philosophy, Complete Streets can become both commonplace and transformational in your community.

☑ Incorporate Transit Oriented Development (TOD)

Transportation infrastructure and housing development need to coordinate for communities to grow sustainably. At a time when housing availability is at a crisis, TOD is a proven tool that enables housing growth, from high end to affordable, and is already being implemented in several Rhode Island communities. A recent study by Grow Smart RI, HousingWorks RI and Roger Williams University demonstrated that TOD could successfully accommodate up to 73,000 new housing units and 25,000 new jobs in several municipalities, including Woonsocket, North Kingstown, South Kingstown, Westerly, and Newport. The study provided a framework for municipalities to undertake the planning to incorporate TOD into their comprehensive community plans and zoning.

☑ Partner with RIPTA

The State’s proposed Transit Master Plan (TMP) emphasizes RIPTA’s commitments to improve and expand service in order to get more Rhode Islanders where they’re going when they need to get there. As the TMP moves toward formal adoption, now is the time to coordinate with RIPTA to improve or introduce public transportation in your community.
In January, 2020, Providence released the Great Streets Initiative. This plan unveils a $20 million investment in public space improvement projects, which aim to reduce household transportation costs, upgrade traffic safety, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and enhance public health. Projects will include traffic calming measures, streetscape and placemaking projects, and pedestrian and bicycle safety improvements. Given that an average of 150 pedestrians and 60 bicyclists were hit by cars in Providence every year between 2009 and 2015, these safety improvements are crucial.

The Urban Trail Network, which will connect all of Providence's neighborhoods, is the centerpiece of this plan; after the designed improvements are completed, 93% of residents and 95% of jobs will be within walking distance of the Network. Currently, 10% of Providence commuters walk to work and 1% bike, but almost two-thirds drive by themselves.

The Urban Trail Network and the other planned improvements should increase opportunities for Providence residents to get around without heavy use of cars. Such a change would not only have a positive impact on greenhouse gas emissions and public health, but also on equity. Nearly 20% of Providence households do not have access to a personal vehicle. The Great Streets Initiative will make it significantly safer and cheaper for families to navigate Providence without a car.

“Great Streets equips Providence with a roadmap that better connects our community and creates an inclusive city that meets the needs of all residents and visitors to the Capital City, no matter how they choose to get around.”

Mayor Jorge Elorza
Forest Conservation

Forests are one of Rhode Island’s most valuable and underappreciated resources. Forests occupy more than 368,000 acres, or 56% of Rhode Island’s land area. But only about one-third of our forested land is permanently protected and the rest is being converted to non-forest uses at an alarming rate.

DEM and the RI Tree Council published “The Value of Rhode Island Forests” in February 2020, a report that does an excellent job of explaining the multitude of values forests provide all Rhode Islanders.

The following is a synopsis of the key values:

Forests clean the AIR and WATER. 80% of Rhode Islanders rely on surface reservoirs surrounded by largely forested watersheds for drinking water. Forests remove more than 13,800 tons of hazardous air pollutants in Rhode Island every year, providing more than $30 million annually in pollution removal benefits.

Forests are an ECONOMIC ENGINE. More than 500 firms in the forestry and wood products sector generated a total economic impact of $715 million and 4,800 jobs in Rhode Island in 2016. An estimated 503,000 people participate in wildlife-related recreation each year bringing $348 million to the state’s economy through fishing, hunting and wildlife watching.

Forests are needed to fight CLIMATE CHANGE. Forests are the most effective and economical means to remove large volumes of carbon from the atmosphere. Elevated carbon levels are already causing harmful impacts from climate change. Rhode Island forests absorb about 500,000 metric tons of carbon dioxide each year. They store an estimated 26.7 million metric tons of carbon. The Rhode Island Greenhouse Gas Reduction Plan has determined that Rhode Island needs to conserve forests to achieve our climate change goals. Forests help Rhode Island communities adapt to a changing climate by protecting us from extreme weather.
Forests support HEALTHY PEOPLE.
Trees support healthy communities by countering the urban heat island effect, mitigating flooding dangers, and reducing energy bills. Access to green space has been shown to improve mental health. Forests provide a “sense of place” to Rhode Island communities.

Forests allow WILDLIFE to thrive.
Core forests larger than 250 acres are considered critical to support more than 450 species with the greatest conservation need in Rhode Island. But all forests provide habitat.

Despite the many values of preserving forests, Rhode Island’s forests are in danger. Between 2011 and 2018, nearly 2,000 acres of core forest were lost to other uses. DEM has determined that over 50% of Rhode Island’s recent forest loss is attributed to clearing for solar development. Rhode Island needs both the forest and renewable energy to successfully fight climate change. We therefore must achieve Governor Raimondo’s goal to have 100% of our electricity derived from renewable energy by 2030 in a way that avoids further forest loss.
Establish Funding to Conserve Forests

There is currently no dedicated State source of funds to purchase forest land. Future State open space preservation bonds should set aside $5 million to acquire the development rights to the most important forest land. The Rhode Island farmland preservation program has been very successful in permanently protecting over 100 farms for future generations. Rhode Island needs a similar program dedicated to conserving forests.

Reform Renewable Energy Laws

The State renewable energy statutes must be amended to remove the existing economic incentives that are encouraging the widespread loss of forests. The Governor should establish a study commission to accelerate renewable energy siting while promoting protection of valuable forested land, with recommendations for the 2021 legislative session.

Pass Community Conservation Act

This legislation will allow Rhode Island municipalities to levy a tax for open space protection, historic preservation, and climate resiliency. Such a tax would give municipalities the ability to match existing State and Federal funds. A similar program has been very successful in Massachusetts.

Develop Markets for Wood Products

Forest products currently contribute over $700 million annually to Rhode Island’s economy. Developing new markets will create more jobs, provide incentives for forest landowners to implement better forest management, and store carbon long-term in the wood products. The increased use of wood products to avoid the carbon intensive production of concrete and steel is also needed to meet our climate change goals.

Improve State Forest Management

The enhanced management of the forest can improve the absorption and storage of carbon while maintaining the other important forest values. According to the New England Forestry Foundation, improved forest management of New England’s forest has the potential to remove the annual carbon emissions from all vehicles in New England. In RI carbon emissions from vehicles are approximately 36% of our annual greenhouse gas emissions. DEM should lead by example and use State owned forests to demonstrate how forests can be more effectively managed.

Create RI Forest Conservation Commission

This group, which should be coordinated by DEM, should be charged with the following:

- Assess and recommend new funding sources to conserve forests
- Identify incentives to encourage forest landowners to maintain and manage their land
- Encourage forest conservation as a means to fight climate change and maintain the other forest values identified in The Value of Rhode Island Forests report
- Help to increase and create new markets for Rhode Island forest products to store carbon long-term and create new jobs
Address Forest Conservation in Local Planning

Municipal comprehensive plans should include a map of high priority forestlands. The RI Wildlife Action Plan contains a map of the most important forested areas that are 250 acres and larger. Municipalities can also include other local priority forested areas that can be less than 250 acres. The comprehensive plan should also contain clear policies to encourage forest conservation.

Encourage Tree Planting

Trees also play a fundamental role in Rhode Island’s urban communities. These communities should encourage tree planting to reduce urban heat island impacts, improve air quality, public health, reduce runoff, and improve the overall quality of life.

Adopt Zoning to Encourage Forest Conservation

Many zoning ordinances inadvertently encourage more forest loss than necessary to accommodate desired growth. Techniques such as conservation development and the transfer of development rights can conserve meaningful unfragmented forests and other important natural areas for future generations while allowing development.

Moreover, zoning should allow owners of farm and forested areas to establish eco-friendly small accessory business uses on their land. This would reduce development pressure and maintain forest values.

DEM has developed guidance and model ordinances for all these techniques that is available on their website.
Rhode Island needs to reform our renewable energy programs to provide incentives to accelerate solar in developed and disturbed areas and prevent the future loss of forests and farms. RI is faced with the most important land use challenge of our lifetimes. We need to make the transition to renewable energy as quickly as possible, while avoiding the loss of our forests and other natural areas. Both of these policy initiatives are critical to meet our climate change goals. Most understand we need to reduce new carbon emissions and that’s why renewable energy is needed. But many aren’t aware that we also need to absorb and store carbon that is already in the atmosphere. Forests and other natural lands are the most economical and only practical means to achieve that vital objective.

Unfortunately, RI’s current renewable energy programs are inadvertently encouraging the loss of forest for solar development. More than 50% of RI’s recent forest loss has been attributed to solar development, according to DEM. A recent RI Office of Energy Resources study has determined RI has the potential to support between 3,000-7,000 MW of solar in areas already developed or disturbed such as rooftops, parking lots and landfills. Another Office of Energy Resources study has determined offshore wind has the greatest potential to supply our energy needs and that it is cheaper than utility scale solar.

In addition, we have an electrical grid that wasn’t designed for renewable energy transmission and will need to be upgraded. We have to accelerate renewable energy but we need to be careful and think through the best way to proceed to avoid actions that will be counterproductive or negatively impact RI’s other land use and environmental priorities.

Moreover, we need to provide land to meet our housing and other economic development needs and we don’t want to undermine the fundamental character of our communities as we expand renewable energy production.
Other States, such as Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey and Vermont have taken an active leadership role to resolve this very complicated land use challenge. But RI has chosen to delegate renewable energy siting to 39 cities and towns and the process isn't working as well as it needs to.

Since the actions RI takes to achieve our climate change goals can have major implications for future generations, it’s critical to make sure the path we take is the right one. RI can become a national leader in the fight against climate change, if we can accelerate renewable energy while simultaneously conserving our forests and farms and prevent the loss of our community character.
Recommended State Policies

- **Revise Renewable Energy Statutes**
  Revise renewable energy statutes to recognize the value of forests to fight climate change while achieving our renewable energy goals. Encourage renewable energy development on landfills, brownfields, rooftops, parking lots, and gravel pits. Remove existing incentives for proposed development on valueable forest and other natural areas.

- **Develop Comprehensive Plan to Fight Climate Change**
  Developing renewable energy alone will not be sufficient to meet Rhode island’s climate change goals. Rhode Island needs a comprehensive plan to determine how we can better use forests and other natural areas to absorb and store carbon. The plan must also address using less energy overall.

- **Look to Other States for Guidance for Solar Siting Reforms**
  Draw upon the resources and experiences of other states that have successfully revised their solar siting programs, including New Jersey, Massachusetts, Vermont and Connecticut.

Recommended Municipal Policies

- **Enact Solar Siting Zoning Reforms**
  Through creative local zoning ordinances, encourage renewable energy on developed and disturbed locations and discourage the development of forests, important habitat and prime agricultural soils.

  Use guidance from New York entitled [Guide to Boost Clean Energy and Protect Nature and Communities](#) as a key resource in identifying important considerations and potential concerns while drafting solar ordinances.

- **Identify Community Priorities Early**
  Facilitate open discussions with residents about priorities and shared concerns related to solar development to establish unified community-specific goals in the ordinance-drafting process.
Smart Growth on the Ground

Rhode Island Forest Conservators Organization

The Rhode Island Forest Conservators Organization, RIFCO, a nonprofit association of forest land owners, established a forest demonstration site to help educate land owners on how to more effectively manage their forest land. RIFCO also coordinates educational workshops, site visits around the State and virtual tours to promote good forest management.

Providence Neighborhood Planting Program (PNPP)

The Providence Neighborhood Planting Program (PNPP) founded in 1989 has co-funded the planting of over 13,000 street trees through more than 620 neighborhood groups. This program provides free trees as well as the training to plant and maintain them. The PNPP focuses on neighborhoods with the lowest tree canopy.

“As in most cities across the country, the low tree canopy neighborhoods match up with low income levels, with lower owner occupancy, with higher asthma rates and other public health indicators…where trees are and where they aren’t, it’s pretty striking in terms of benefits and barriers.”

Cassie Tharinger, Director, PNPP