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## 2014 Rhode Island General Assembly Wrap-Up

The Rhode Island General Assembly recessed their 2014 session on June 21st at 4:06am. Over twenty-five hundred bills were introduced during the session, with five hundred fifty-five bills passing both chambers to become public law after either being signed by Governor Chafee or allowed to become effective without his signature. By comparison, just under twenty-four hundred bills were introduced in the 2013 session, with five hundred thirty-four becoming public law.

The 2014 session was a tumultuous one given that Representative Gordon Fox began the session in January as House Speaker, but resigned his position as Speaker in March following a raid by law enforcement on his home and office. Following his resignation, Representative Fox maintained his seat as the state representative for House District 4, but decided not to run for reelection in November. Succeeding Mr. Fox as Speaker was (former) House Majority Leader Nicholas Mattiello, and replacing Mr. Mattiello as Majority Leader was long time state representative John DeSimone. During the change in leadership, several House committee chairpersons were replaced too.

True to their word, both the Senate leadership and the new House leadership focused their primary efforts on the Rhode Island economy. As such, they passed a number of initiatives aimed at improving the economic climate in Rhode Island, most of which were included in the state budget bill. Typical of previous years, health care was also an important topic in 2014 with a variety of health care bills becoming law. While specific city and town bills constituted the major category of laws passed, other bills passed spanned the gamut from the environment to social media privacy to calamari.

Below are the highlights of those bills passed by the General Assembly in the 2014 session, beginning with those items of importance in the state budget.

## State Budget Legislation (H 7133 Sub A As Amended)

**Corporate tax reduction** -- Article 12 of the state budget bill cut the corporate tax rate from 9 percent to 7 percent.

**Estate tax threshold** -- Article 12 of the state budget bill amended the estate tax threshold from \$921,655 to \$1.5 million. The \$1.5 million threshold will now be adjusted annually for inflation.

**URI-RIC Nursing Education Center** -- Article 5 establishes the lease authorization language for a University of Rhode Island & Rhode Island College Nursing Education Center to be constructed in the former South Street Power Station Building in Providence.

**Ballot proposals** -- Article 5 of the state budget bill contains ballot questions for the issuance of bonds for a variety of projects. Among the projects are \$125 million to construct a new College of Engineering building at the University of Rhode Island; \$35 million to fund enhancements and renovations to mass transit hub infrastructure throughout Rhode Island; and, \$53 million for various clean water, open space and healthy community initiatives. (Included in the \$53 million bond initiative is \$15 million for improvements and renovations to Roger Williams Park Zoo).

**Highway Maintenance Fund** -- Article 21 eliminated tolls on the Sakonnet River Bridge and created a new highway maintenance fund to maintain the state's roads, bridges and infrastructure.

**Statewide minimum wage** -- Article 11 mandated that Rhode Island municipalities cannot require the payment of a minimum wage other/different than the state or federal mandated minimum wage.

**Lady Bird Trust/Medicaid Recovery** -- Article 19 brings Rhode Island into compliance with federal requirements allowing states to recover certain resources for medical assistance recipients from third party settlements. Article 19 also mandates that an individual with a "Lady Bird" deed will not be eligible for Medicaid unless he/she conveys interest back to themselves.

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## Health Care

**Licensing of out-of-state physicians** (H 7137 Sub A/S 2513 Sub A) -- Physicians who are licensed to practice in other states, but not in Rhode Island, and who are in good standing in those (other) states, may now practice medicine in Rhode Island under limited circumstances. (Signed by Governor.)

**CON/Medical Tourism** (H 7368 Sub B As Amended/S 2526 Sub A As Amended) -- The "Rhode Island Access to Medical Technology Innovation Act" provides for a moratorium on the state's certificate-of-need (CON) process for health care facilities located in Rhode Island, but with more than fifty percent (50%) of their patients residing outside of Rhode Island ("medical tourism"). It also provides a similar moratorium for in-state hospitals until July 1, 2015, and mandates the replacement of the current twenty-four (24) member Health Services Council with a new twelve (12) member Health Services Council. It also requires the Department of Health to conduct a statewide healthcare and utilization capacity study and to establish and maintain a statewide health plan. (Signed by Governor.)

**Mental health parity** (H 8042 Sub A/S 2801 Sub A As Amended) – These acts amend the state’s mental health parity laws to provide health insurance coverage for medication assisted therapy, including methadone maintenance services, for the treatment of substance abuse disorders, opioid overdoses and chronic addiction. Under these acts, Rhode Island hospitals are also required to maintain and to submit to the Director of the RI Department of Health a discharge plan and transition process for patients with opioid and other substance abuse disorders, and requires the Director to develop and disseminate to hospitals and other affected treatment facilities a model discharge plan and transition process for patients with opioid and other substance abuse disorders. (Signed by Governor.)

**Enteral nutrition therapy** (H 7903 Sub A/S 2505 Sub A) – Prior to passage of these acts, health plans doing business in Rhode Island were required to pay for non-prescription enteral nutrition products up to \$2,500 per covered member per year. These acts abolish the \$2,500 cap and clarify that coverage is to be provided regardless of the recipient’s age. (Signed by Governor.)

**Coverage for immunizations** (H 7133 Sub A As Amended) – Article 16 of the budget legislation amends the longtime funding mechanism for the state’s childhood and adult immunization programs, as well as the children’s health account program, from an assessment on fully insured employer groups to an assessment on all insurers as defined in the article (except US government health care programs). (Included in budget legislation signed by Governor.)

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## Environment

**Climate Change** (H 7904 Sub A/S 2952 Sub A) – These acts create a Rhode Island Climate Change Coordinating Council to, among other duties, assess, integrate and coordinate climate change efforts throughout state agencies, reduce emissions, strengthen the resilience of communities, and prepare for the effects of climate change in Rhode Island. (Signed by Governor.)

**Food residuals recycling/composting** (H 7033 Sub A As Amended/S 2315 Sub A As Amended) – Effective January 1, 2016, Rhode Island restaurants, businesses, higher educational institutions, hospitals and other entities which, on an annual basis, generate one hundred four (104) or more tons of organic waste, will be required to recycle their organic waste at an authorized composting or anaerobic digestion facility. (Signed by Governor.)

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## Other

**Calamari** (H 7446 Sub A/S 2398 Sub A) – Perhaps one of the most talked about bills during the 2013 and 2014 sessions, calamari is now the official appetizer of Rhode Island. (Signed by Governor.)

**Minimum wage increase** (H 7194 Sub A/S 2249 Sub A) -- Effective January 1, 2015, Rhode Island’s minimum wage increases to \$9/hour. (Signed by Governor.)

**Social media privacy** (H 7124 Sub B/S S2095 Sub A As Amended) – Rhode Island educational institutions and employers are now prohibited from requesting or accessing social media account information from, respectively, students/prospective students and employees/applicants, except as provided for in the very limited circumstances outlined in the acts. (Signed by Governor.)

**Newport Grand** (H 8294 Sub A As Amended) – This act authorizes ballot questions (for November, 2014) to amend the state constitution to specify that no gambling facility could change locations within its city or town without the approval of the voters of that city or town, and, allows Newport Grand to expand to offer table games with the approval of voters both in Newport and statewide. (Signed by Governor.)

**Eviction of tenants** (H 7449 Sub A/S 2659 Sub A) – These acts create a process for the eviction of residential tenants in a mortgage foreclosed property of one to four dwelling units, and, requires “just cause” for eviction. (Signed by Governor.)

**Animal cruelty** (H 7496 Sub A/S 2312 Sub A) – Under these acts, it is now a misdemeanor to confine any animal in a motor vehicle in a manner that places the animal in a life threatening or extreme health threatening situation, by exposing it to a prolonged period of extreme heat or cold, without proper ventilation or other protection from the heat or cold. (Signed by Governor.)

**“Master lever”** (H 8072 Sub A/S 2091 Sub A) – Effective January 1, 2015, Rhode Island voters will no longer have the option of straight party voting by means of a single mark in non-primary elections. Additionally, the Secretary of State is required to conduct community outreach programs to educate the public about the elimination of the straight party voting option. (Signed by Governor.)

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