

Mobility, Access, and Modernization

Our network of roads, public transit, trains, airports, ports, and walking and biking paths is vital to Rhode Island's well-being and prosperity. Transportation connects people to jobs, schools, health care, and recreation, and it moves goods around our state and region. Yet the transportation system has many challenges: congested traffic, unsafe roads, major pollution and health impacts, budget shortfalls, and public transit that does not serve all customers well, especially older or disabled Rhode Islanders and rural and low-income communities. These issues all harm quality of life in Rhode Island.

A clean, modern transportation system can address these problems and improve our economy. Across the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic, diverse groups are coming together to improve transportation access, efficiency, and equity by pushing for regional policy to:

- Cut transportation emissions—our region's largest source of climate pollution;
- Provide revenue for transportation investments, expand access to electric vehicles (EVs), improve options for carpooling and public transportation, and support walkable, bikeable town centers;
- Promote healthier, more connected cities and rural areas;
- Establish a transportation system that meets the needs of all people; and
- Expand economic opportunity and create new jobs.

Rhode Island's Opportunity

Rhode Island must optimize and enhance its public transportation services, electrify its passenger and commercial vehicle fleet, and rebuild or refurbish its decaying infrastructure. The state's political leadership has an opportunity to incorporate new potential revenue streams to prioritize a clean transportation network—particularly at a time when the public is already engaged in a discussion over how to fund improvements.

- ***Better, Cleaner Public Transportation.*** The nation's second most densely populated state is an ideal fit for expanded public transit. The Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA) and its partners currently provide basic service to 34 of Rhode Island's 39 municipalities, but ridership has dropped dramatically—down 20% since 2014.¹ **Public outreach, express route expansion, and improved frequency of service in some parts of the state are vital to shift Rhode Islanders away from commuting in personal vehicles and towards public transportation.** Further, RIPTA needs additional funds to expand its plan to transition its diesel bus fleet to zero-emission all-electric buses and install a rapid charging network.² Planned commuter rail service expansion and transit-oriented development will also improve commuting options.
- ***Personal and Commercial Vehicle Electrification.*** Vehicle electrification is essential to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from transportation. In the past, Rhode Island successfully incentivized the purchase of EVs with rebates of up to \$2,500 through the Driving Rhode Island to Vehicle Electrification (DRIVE) program. However, as of July 10, 2017, program funding was exhausted.

¹ [RIPTA 2017 Financial Report](#)

² [RI Beneficiary Mitigation Plan - Volkswagen Environmental Mitigation Trust Agreement](#)

Replenishing the DRIVE program, expanding it to include income-eligible options, and leveraging available federal incentives are essential steps toward meeting the state’s laudable EV sales commitment and emissions reduction goals.

- ***Healthy, Connected Communities.*** Transportation-related air pollution is linked to asthma and heart attacks, other health complications, and even premature deaths. These associated health problems are often concentrated in communities already overburdened by other sources of pollution and underserved by public health and transportation systems. Improvements to the transportation network should ensure environmental benefits reach these communities and aim to connect all Rhode Islanders to vital services through upgrades in public transportation, pedestrian, and bicycle networks.

Rhode Island also needs to improve its transportation infrastructure. The American Society of Civil Engineers has graded Rhode Island’s transportation infrastructure a “D,” with the worst bridges in the nation.³ Deteriorating roadways cost the average Rhode Island driver an extra \$810 per year for repairs, while the cost of vehicle operation, congestion delays, and crashes cost Rhode Islanders another \$1 billion annually. Infrastructure improvements are historically funded through federal and state gasoline taxes, as well as tolls, but as vehicles continue to increase fuel efficiency and electrify, states will need to adjust current mechanisms or supplement with new sources to adequately maintain roads and bridges. One promising option for ensuring equitable contribution to transportation funding is to restructure the gas tax to an energy-equivalent surcharge that could be applied on all fuels, including electricity, hydrogen, and natural gas, on a per-energy unit basis.

Transportation & Climate Initiative

In 2017, the District of Columbia and seven Northeast and Mid-Atlantic states, including Rhode Island, issued a [joint statement](#) acknowledging the threat climate change poses to public health and welfare and committing to developing policies that reduce carbon emissions and pollutants from the transportation sector. These efforts, as part of the Transportation & Climate Initiative (TCI), should lead to a package of transportation policy solutions, one of which could resemble the existing Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI) program for power plants. RGGI puts a price on carbon emissions from power plants and participating states receive revenue from the sale of carbon allowances. The states have reinvested the proceeds in renewable energy and energy efficiency programs, cutting carbon emissions in the region by 50%, generating \$4 billion in economic activity, and creating tens of thousands of jobs in the process.⁴

As nearly all states seeking market-based transportation climate policy are in RGGI, this program is particularly relevant. [Acadia Center analysis](#) shows a similar cap-and-invest program for transportation would generate significant funding for investments to modernize and decarbonize the transportation system. If designed properly, such a program would deliver benefits to disadvantaged communities, transform daily commutes, and stimulate the economy.

For more information:

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³ [ASCE 2017 Infrastructure Report Card](#)

⁴ Analysis Group report: [The Economic Impacts of the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative on Nine Northeast and Mid-Atlantic States](#)