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# SMITH HILL REPORT



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## The General Assembly Adjourns

The Rhode Island General Assembly adjourned this week, bringing the 2026 legislative session to a close and marking the end of this year's Smith Hill Report. We will return when the General Assembly reconvenes in January for the 2027 session.

This session demonstrated the growing strength of RIFTHP's legislative program. From the successful passage of the Charter Moratorium and Cap Reduction Act to the growth of our newly formed Legislative Action Committee, members played an increasingly visible role in shaping debates at the State House. Throughout the session, educators, public employees, healthcare professionals, retirees, and local union leaders testified at hearings, contacted legislators, attended rallies, and advocated for issues important to our members and the communities we serve.

One of the highlights of the year was RIFTHP's first-ever Lobby Day, which brought more than 200 members to the State House to meet directly with lawmakers and advocate for public education, retirement security, healthcare, and workers' rights. The event demonstrated the power of member engagement and reinforced the message that decisions made at the State House have a direct impact on our workplaces and professions.

Legislative victories are never the result of lobbying alone. They are built through relationships, organizing, and member involvement. This year's successes reflect a simple reality: when members are engaged, united, and present, RIFTHP is stronger and more effective.

Thank you to every member, local leader, retiree, and Legislative Action Committee activist who contributed to this year's efforts. Your participation helped make RIFTHP a stronger voice at the State House, and that work will continue when the General Assembly returns in 2027.

## Charter Moratorium and Cap Reduction Clears General Assembly

One of RIFTHP's top legislative priorities is now headed to the Governor's desk.

The General Assembly has approved legislation establishing a three-year moratorium on new charter school approvals and reducing Rhode Island's charter school cap from 35 to 28. The Senate approved the bill on a 31-6 vote, followed by House passage on a 61-11 vote after extensive floor debate.

Sponsored by Senator Melissa Murray of Woonsocket and Representative Mary Messier of Pawtucket, the legislation represents the furthest any proposal limiting charter expansion has advanced in Rhode Island. Previous efforts to establish a moratorium or place new limits on charter growth failed to clear the House. This year, growing concerns from municipal leaders, school committees, educators, and taxpayers helped build support for a temporary pause while the state evaluates the fiscal impact of charter expansion and considers broader education funding reforms.

Importantly, the legislation does not close any existing charter schools or eliminate any current charter seats. Existing charter schools will continue operating, and charter schools that have already received final state approval will be allowed to move forward. The bill instead pauses future expansion while policymakers review Rhode Island's education funding system and the recommendations of the Rhode Island Foundation's Blue Ribbon Commission on Education Funding.

The legislation advanced despite an extensive opposition campaign. Charter advocacy organizations invested heavily in broadcast advertising, digital media, direct mail, billboards, and lobbying efforts designed to defeat the proposal. Supporters countered that Rhode Island already operates one of the largest charter sectors in the region relative to its student population and argued that the state should not continue expanding a parallel school system while districts face funding challenges, declining enrollment, mounting municipal pressures, and growing responsibility for serving students with the most significant special education needs.

When the House bill returned to the Senate for concurrence, opponents offered a floor amendment that would have allowed a charter school that had not received final state approval to proceed despite the moratorium. The amendment was defeated, and the Senate then voted to concur with the House version of the bill, clearing the legislation for transmission to Governor McKee.

The bill also benefited from sustained advocacy by educators, school employees, municipal leaders, school officials, and RIFTHP members who testified, contacted legislators, attended hearings, participated in grassroots organizing efforts, and helped keep the issue at the forefront throughout the session.

The legislation now awaits action from Governor McKee. Whether signed into law or vetoed, passage through both chambers marks a significant milestone in Rhode Island's ongoing debate over charter expansion, public school funding, and the future of public education.

### **Rule of 90 and Pension Improvements Remain a Top Priority**

While the General Assembly adjourned without advancing Rule of 90 or broader pension improvement legislation, retirement security remained one of the most active and widely discussed issues of the 2026 session.

Throughout the session, legislators from both parties expressed support for Rule of 90, COLA restoration, and other retirement security improvements. RIFTHP worked aggressively to advance these proposals, pursuing opportunities through both standalone legislation and the state budget process.

Members and retirees generated more than 7,000 emails to legislators, made thousands of phone calls, participated in direct lobbying efforts, attended hearings, and raised the issue in meetings across Rhode Island. RIFTHP also made retirement security a central focus of its first-ever Lobby Day and continued a five-year effort to build support for meaningful pension reform.

Although no pension legislation reached final passage this year, retirement security is now firmly established as a major issue at the State House. The level of member engagement, legislative interest, and public discussion surrounding Rule of 90 demonstrates how much the conversation has shifted in recent years. What began as a long-term advocacy effort has become one of the most visible and widely supported issues for public employees in Rhode Island.

## What's Next

The legislative session may be over, but the campaign for retirement security is not.

As candidates seek support and endorsements during the 2026 election cycle, RIFTHP will continue pressing for clear commitments on Rule of 90, pension improvements, and retirement security. Members deserve to know where candidates stand on issues that directly affect their ability to retire with dignity after a career of public service.

RIFTHP is already preparing for the 2027 session. We have developed legislation establishing a true Rule of 90 with no minimum age requirement and legislation increasing the pension accrual rate to strengthen retirement benefits for current and future public employees. Together, these proposals will form the foundation of RIFTHP's retirement security campaign as we continue leading the fight for pension reform in Rhode Island.

The growth of our Legislative Action Committee, record member participation, and unprecedented engagement on retirement issues have strengthened our ability to advocate effectively at the State House. The same member-driven activism that helped advance major priorities this year will continue to drive the fight for retirement security.

Retirement security remains unfinished business. RIFTHP will continue organizing, educating, advocating, and building support until public employees receive the pension improvements they have earned through a lifetime of service.

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### Questions

RIFTHP members with questions about the Smith Hill Report or our legislative agenda may reach out to RIFTHP Lobbyist Jeremy Sencer at (401) 273-9800 or at [jsencer@rifthp.org](mailto:jsencer@rifthp.org).

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