

The

SMITH HILL REPORT



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Assembly Responds to COVID-19 Crisis

The Rhode Island General Assembly has not met for two months due to the COVID-19 State of Emergency declared by Rhode Island Governor Gina Raimondo on March 9, 2020. While there have been no scheduled sessions of either the House or Senate since they last met on March 12th, there have been several specific action taken by the Assembly to contend with the financial fallout of the pandemic.

On March 16, 2020, the Disaster Emergency Funding Board met at the State House. The Board exists pursuant to RIGL 30-15-10 and consists of the House Speaker, Senate President and the Chairs of the House and Senate Finance Committee. The Board met and approved up to \$300 million in borrowing to ensure that the state had enough money to pay its obligations. This was necessary to ensure state aid to cities and towns and state payroll costs, among others, while state revenue dropped due to the economic closures. Thus, even while state income tax, sales tax and lottery revenues faltered, state and local programs could continue.

On April 30, 2020, a joint House – Senate Task Force met to review some of the spending of federal funds related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the participants met in person in the House Lounge where social distancing could be done, with others participating remotely. The Committee documents are available to the public. One document summarizes the planned \$147 million in COVID-19 related expenses through the end of April ([click here](#)).

Joint Legislative COVID-19 Emergency Spending Task Force Membership

Representative Marvin L. Abney Co-Chairman	Senator William J. Conley Jr. Co-Chairman
Representative Jason Knight	Senator Sandra Cano
Representative John W. Lyle Jr.	Senator Erin Lynch Prata
Representative Alex D. Marszalkowski	Senator Joshua Miller
Representative Patricia A. Serpa	Senator Thomas J. Paolino
Representative Anastasia P. Williams	Senator V. Susan Sosnowski

On May 8, 2020, the Caseload and Revenue Estimating Conference met and finalized budget projections to be used in balancing this year's budget and adoption of next year's budget. The Caseload and Revenue

Estimating Conference is held twice a year and consists of House, Senate, and Governor budget staff who use economic projections and caseload data to formulate estimates on revenue and expenses. The group met both in person and remotely with no in-person viewing allowed. Due to the economic fallout of the pandemic, the group has lowered anticipated state tax revenue by 10% compared to estimates made last November.

The current fiscal year (FY 20) revenue is now projected to be \$281 million less than anticipated. For the upcoming (FY 21) fiscal year, revenues are down \$516 million less than planned last November. The House Finance Committee is planning to resume budget hearings later next week to begin plans on balancing the state budget.

Mail Ballot Opportunity

Two weeks ago, all registered voters should have received a mail ballot application through the US Postal System. Using federal funding available due to the pandemic, Secretary of State Nellie Gorbea mailed the application to all registered voters to obtain a mail ballot for the June 2, 2020 Presidential Preference Primary. The primary, which had been initially scheduled for April 28, was moved to permit time to plan balloting to be done primarily through mail ballots.

There will only be a limited number of voting places open to the public for the June 2nd primary. It is important for all Rhode Islanders to participate in the electoral process and doing so by mail is the best opportunity for all to participate. The deadline for getting your mail ballot application back is May 19. After that date, emergency ballot applications are also available. Go to vote.sos.ri.gov for more information.

The AFT Executive Council has voted to endorse Joe Biden in the Democratic primary. RIFTHP President and AFT Vice-President Frank Flynn said of the Biden endorsement “The AFT has spent the past year engaging members nationwide in the endorsement process. This was the most open and member driven process in our history. Ultimately, it came down to which candidate shares our values, had a clear vision of support for working families, and had the most viable path to win the election. For those reasons, the Executive Council of the AFT has voted to endorse Joe Biden for President and we encourage our members to support him.” For more information about the AFT endorsement, [click here](#).

Rhode Island Census Participation Lags

Census forms have been mailed to all US households. Participation may be done via the internet this year. The Census, held every ten years, is used to reapportion Congress and other political offices. Census data is

also widely used to distribute federal funds through its aid programs. Having every person counted is important for communities to maintain political representation and federal funding.

Rhode Islanders currently lag the country in participating in the census. According to the US Census, the national participation rate is 58.5% while the Rhode Island participation rate is 56.3%. Our neighboring states of Connecticut and Massachusetts both exceed a 60% participation rate. The RIFTHP encourages all RIFTHP members to participate in the census and to encourage their family, friends, neighbors, and students to also participate in the process. Without a full count we are extremely vulnerable to losing a seat in Congress. This would reduce our federal aid at a time when we need it more than ever. Please do all you can to encourage everyone to complete the census form. Completing the Census takes a very small amount of time but will return significant benefits if we are all counted.

Revenue for Rhode Island Campaign Continues

The RIFTHP is on the steering committee of a statewide coalition dedicated to encouraging the Assembly to create more state revenue and enhance tax fairness by increasing income tax on the wealthiest 1% of Rhode Islanders. The campaign, **Revenue for Rhode Island**, is seeking a 3% income tax increase on income over \$475,000.

The RIFTHP, along with other coalition members, sent a letter last week to all Assembly members asking that they consider our revenue proposal as they grapple with major budget deficits. The letter ([click here](#)) was issued before the Caseload and Revenue Estimating Conference concluded that the FY 2020 and FY 2021 budgets have a projected deficit over \$800,000,000.

To learn more about the campaign, [click here](#).

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