

RIPTA Master Plan a road map to a Rhode Island that works for all | Opinion

Arnold Chace Guest columnist

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The 2024 General Assembly has the unique opportunity to finally fund RIPTA and its Transit Master Plan which would, among other benefits, expand services statewide. The good news is the voters can help.

Legislation being considered in the House Finance Committee ([H7774](#)) would provide much needed operational funds in the short term and, more importantly, provide the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority with a stable funding solution that no longer relies on the federal government or declining gas tax revenue. As a downtown resident and an avid supporter of public transit, I am convinced that enhancing our public transportation system is crucial for sustainable urban living, as well as the economic growth and environmental health of our state.

In his January State of the State address and a subsequent social media campaign, Gov. Dan McKee focused on several worthy goals: improving school attendance, raising household incomes, implementing the Act on Climate and solving the housing crisis. However, it is extremely difficult to see a path to achieving these goals without an unwavering commitment to our public transportation system.

This system is essential to providing equitable access to employment, education and health care for all residents, regardless of socioeconomic status. It is also pivotal to attracting new jobs to our state. Despite the plans to make headway in important areas, the governor's budget still leaves an \$8-million deficit for fiscal year 2025, leaving RIPTA in the red.

Regrettably, the state has been challenged to fully fund public transit for decades. According to the Federal Transit Administration's database, Rhode Island invested just \$66 in transit per capita in 2019, compared to peer urbanized states such as Connecticut (\$80), Delaware (\$110), or Massachusetts (\$253). Still, RIPTA is one of the most cost efficient, well-run mid-sized transit agencies in the nation, outperforming Hartford and Worcester's transit systems by significant margins per service hour. RIPTA's efficient operating budget has no margin for austerity; it is unreasonable to expect further savings to be possible without significant service cuts.

Highlights of the RIPTA Transit Master Plan, adopted in 2020 with the contributions of key stakeholders and the public, would set the state up for success. It would:

- Improve bus frequency;
- Create new routes;
- Reduce trip times;
- Improve commuter experience;
- Increase express bus service.

Following this plan and fully funding RIPTA will significantly improve the quality, efficiency and accessibility of public transportation in Rhode Island. This, in turn, will increase ridership, reduce traffic congestion and contribute to healthier communities.

Imagine the savings generated when families could own one car instead of two. Imagine the economic opportunities built when Rhode Island, Massachusetts or Connecticut residents can arrive at any train station between Providence and Westerly, then take the bus to work. Imagine the cleaner air created with more public transportation options for our children and grandchildren.

I urge you, our state leaders, to finally give RIPTA the resources it needs to add more riders and move the state in the right direction. I also urge readers to support this funding request and commit to the long-term sustainability and prosperity of our state. A simple email to your state representative or senator, or to committee chair Rep. Marvin Abney, could help move this legislation.

If we allow public transportation to languish at this critical moment, inaction will be felt for generations. Providing adequate funding now for RIPTA is investing in a better future for all of Rhode Island.