**Last Week at the State House**

The bill hearings are reaching a pinnacle as the legislature heads in to the three-week stretch leading to the Spring recess that takes place April 18 – 22. A few bills have passed one chamber – meaning the Senate or the House.

S.2080, An Act Relating to Insurance – Individual Health Coverage, passed the Senate by a 26 to 8 vote. Voting “no” were Senators Algiere, de la Cruz, Lombardi, Lombardo, Morgan, Picard, Raptakis and Rogers. The bill requires individual, large group and small employer health insurance to cover what is deemed to be ten essential services: (1) Ambulatory patient services; (2) Emergency Services; (3) Hospitalization; (4) Maternity and Newborn Care; (5) Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Services, including Behavioral Health Treatment; (6) Prescription Drugs; (7) Rehabilitative and Habilitative Services and Devices; (8) Laboratory Services; (9) Preventive Services, Wellness Services and Chronic Disease Management; and (1) Pediatric Services including Oral and Vision Care. These coverages are contained in the federal affordable care act (ACA). The ACA contains insurance premium subsidies resulting in more people participating in the health insurance program and spreading expenses among more individuals. Should the federal government rescind the ACA, and Rhode Island require the ten areas to be covered by insurance, the cost impact to premiums is unknown. The Chamber had requested that this analysis be completed prior to passage of any health care mandate. <http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2080A.pdf>

S.2087, An Act Relating to State Affairs and Government – Environmental Justice Act, passed the Senate 32-4. Voting “no” was Senators de la Cruz, Morgan, Paolino and Rogers (Archambault and Raptakis did not vote). S.2087 establishes criteria and a process for creating Environmental Justice (EJ) areas in the state. The Division of Statewide Planning would establish EJ areas, although, ten residents from an area can request to be declared an EJ area.  At that point the Division would be required to prepare a report (within 6 months) stating why the area should be designated EJ or why an area should be removed from the EJ list.  The bill does not state what happens if the Division does not think the area should be designated an EJ. Following the report, the bill calls for a public hearing within thirty days.  Following the hearing, the Division has thirty additional days to render a final decision which must take into consideration public comment and "community support." To qualify for EJ area status, the area has to have one or more: (1) annual median household income 65% or less of statewide median household income (which would be about $45k); (2) 25% or more residents that are not proficient in English or (3) 25% or more of the population is minority and with annual household median income of less than 150% of state median (about $105k). Once designated an EJ area, the Department of Environmental Management (DEM) could not issue "any permitted activity" within the area or within a half mile of the area UNLESS: (1) applicant prepares an environmental impact report including cumulative impacts; (2) includes adverse impacts that can't be avoided if the permit is granted; and (3) includes public health impacts.  That report has to be given to DEM and DEM must hold a public hearing on the permit.  Then DEM has to wait forty-five days before rendering a decision to grant the permit - DEM can deny in less time.  DEM must consider community support when rendering its decision. It is unclear if the permits only apply to new facilities and expansion of existing facilities or to the renewal of an existing permit. <http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2087.pdf>

H.7392, An Act Relating to Health and Safety – Restroom Access Act, passed the House floor on a vote of 67 to 0. H.7392 applies to retail businesses with three or more employees working on site at the same time. Any such establish that does not have a public restroom must allow patrons, with certain health conditions, to use the employee restroom when needed. The covered medical conditions include: Crohn's disease, ulcerative colitis, any other inflammatory bowel disease, irritable bowel syndrome, pregnancy, cancer or any other medical condition that requires immediate access to a restroom facility. The bill states that the patron shall present proof of the condition at the time of request to use the restroom – a document issued by a doctor, or the Crohn’s & Colitis Foundation. <http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/HouseText22/H7392.pdf>

**This Week at the State House**

Wednesday, March 30th

The Senate Labor Committee has a busy schedule at 4:00 p.m. in Room 211 at the State House. S.2243, An Act Relating to Labor and Labor Relations – Rhode Island Parental Leave Act, increases employees parental leave from thirteen weeks to twenty-four weeks over a two-year period. Under current law, employers with fifty or more employees fall under parental leave; and employees become eligible for the leave after working for one year with the employer. S.2243 does not change the thresholds for number of employees or time of work required for eligibility. <http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2243.pdf>

S.2245, An Act Relating to Labor and Labor Relations – Temporary Disability Insurance, calls for an increase in the weekly dependent allowance for individuals claiming temporary disability insurance benefits (TDI). The allowance would increase from $10 to $20. The bill also extends benefits to those who file in order to care for a grandchild or a sibling; and the maximum number of weeks available to caregivers would increase from six week to eight weeks in 2023 and to ten weeks in 2024. <http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2245.pdf>

S.2130, An Act Relating to Labor and Labor Relations – The “Commuter Transportation Benefits Act, requires employers with 500 or more employees to provide a pre-tax transportation fringe benefit program consistent with the Internal Revenue Code at the maximum level allowable under federal law. The new requirement would take affect January 1, 2023. <http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2130.pdf>

Thursday, March 31st

The Senate Committee on Health and Human Services is meeting in Room 211 at 4:00 p.m. One bill of concern is S.2075, An Act Relating to Health and Safety – Catastrophic Illness in Children Relief Fund. The bill creates a Fund to provide financial assistance to families for medical expenses not covered by state or federal programs, or by an insurance policy. The Fund receives its dollars from a $1.50 per employee annual charge on all employers.

<http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2075.pdf>

Renewable electricity is a topic for discussion in the Senate Commerce Committee at 4:00 in Room 310. S.2274, An Act Relating to Public Utility Carriers – Renewable Energy, requires Rhode Island to increase the amount of electricity derived from renewable sources over the next nine years until the state reaches the current legal requirement of 100% by 2030. The Chamber has urged both House and Senate to hear from ISO New England and the Public Utilities Commission prior to the adoption of any acceleration of renewable mandates within the electrical system. ISO New England is an independent body that administers the region’s wholesale markets, and operates the power system to ensure reliable and competitively priced wholesale electricity. At a recent hearing of the Senate Committee on Environment and Agriculture, ISO-NE announced that they have adopted a new vision, “To harness the power of competition and advanced technologies to reliably plan and operate the grid as the region transitions to clean energy.” The key to this vision, is to ensure we have a RELIABLE system. The New England grid currently plans for summer peak electricity use, due to air-conditioning demand within the region. As we transition to electric heat and electric vehicles, ISO-NE must plan for ***winter*** peak demand which is higher and will be even higher if the state requires buildings’ heating systems and vehicles to switch to electricity. Battery storage must be figured out, and emergency plans must be flawless as a power outage in the middle of winter could be disastrous otherwise. According to the Energy Information Administration’s November 2021 report, Rhode Island’s average retail price of electricity was fourth highest in the country at 18.54 c/kWh (<https://www.eia.gov/electricity/state/rhodeisland/>) The Chamber is on record saying, “As we go through the process of increasing electricity demand and restrict the sources of electricity generation, economic analysis of proposals will be critical.” The Public Utilities Commission, with its experts and resources should be asked to provide economic analysis on proposals as well. Rhode Island currently has renewable electricity requirements ahead of our neighbors: MA is 80% clean energy by 2050; VT is 90% renewable energy by 2050; ME is 100% renewable by 2050; CT is 100% zero-carbon by 2040; and RI is 100% renewable by 2030.

<http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2274.pdf>

The following new bills have been filed:

House Bill No. [8025](http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/HouseText22/H8025.pdf) Williams, Giraldo, Alzate, Biah, Vella-Wilkinson, Hull, Amore, Slater, Potter, Cassar**,**AN ACT RELATING TO CORPORATIONS, ASSOCIATIONS, AND PARTNERSHIPS -- WORKERS' COOPERATIVES (Clarifies the role of a workers' cooperative to allow it to operate as a hiring hall under certain circumstances.)

<http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/HouseText22/H8025.pdf>

House Bill No. [8031](http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/HouseText22/H8031.pdf) Messier, Felix, Alzate, Tobon**,**AN ACT RELATING TO STATE AFFAIRS AND GOVERNMENT -- RHODE ISLAND HARD-HIT LIQUIDITY PROGRAM ACT (Establishes the “Rhode Island Hard-Hit Emergency Liquidity Program Act” to provide up to twenty million dollars ($20,000,000) to businesses adversely affected by the Coronavirus pandemic by providing aid for drop in sales.)

<http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/HouseText22/H8031.pdf>

House Bill No. [8036](http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/HouseText22/H8036.pdf) Alzate, Batista, Giraldo, Cassar, Henries, Amore, Felix, Carson, Speakman, Ranglin-Vassell**,**AN ACT RELATING TO STATE AFFAIRS AND GOVERNMENT -- ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE ACT (Requires the department of environmental management to create environmental justice areas.)

<http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/HouseText22/H8036.pdf>

House Bill No. [8038](http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/HouseText22/H8038.pdf) McEntee, Craven, Morales, Caldwell**,**AN ACT RELATING TO LABOR AND LABOR RELATIONS -- FAIR EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES (Prohibits an employer, employment agency, labor organization, or employee, to commit any act declared to be an unlawful employment practice; individuals would be held personally liable for such conduct.)

<http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/HouseText22/H8038.pdf>

Senate Bill No. [2738](http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2738.pdf) Goodwin**,**AN ACT RELATING TO COMMERCIAL LAW -- GENERAL REGULATORY PROVISIONS--SURCHARGES ON CREDIT CARD TRANSACTIONS (Provides that surcharges on credit card transactions may only be permitted when certain notice requirements are adhered to and provides for a misdemeanor penalty of five hundred dollars ($500) and/or one year in jail in any violations.) <http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2738.pdf>

Senate Bill No. [2740](http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2740.pdf) Ruggerio, McCaffrey, Goodwin, Euer**,**AN ACT RELATING TO PUBLIC UTILITIES AND CARRIERS -- LABOR STANDARDS IN RENEWABLE ENERGY PROJECTS (Adds a new chapter known as the Labor Standards in Renewable Energy Projects.) <http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2740.pdf>

Senate Bill No. [2741](http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2741.pdf) (Secretary of State) Picard**,**AN ACT RELATING TO STATE AFFAIRS AND GOVERNMENT -- BUSINESS FAST-START OFFICE (Requires the fast-start office to regularly convene business owners in the state to gather recommendations to improve business licensing procedures.) <http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2741.pdf>

Senate Bill No. [2759](http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2759.pdf) Mendes, Calkin**,**AN ACT RELATING TO TAXATION -- REAL ESTATE CONVEYANCE TAX (Taxes property not considered a primary residence at a flat rate of five percent (5%) of the assess value.) <http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2759.pdf>

Senate Bill No. [2775](http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2775.pdf) (Attorney General) McCaffrey**,**AN ACT RELATING TO LABOR AND LABOR RELATIONS -- PAYMENTS OF WAGES (Increases the criminal penalties for wage theft and employee misclassification.) <http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2775.pdf>

Senate Bill No. [2794](http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2794.pdf) (Dept. of Business Regulation) Sosnowski**,**AN ACT RELATING TO FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS -- CREATION AND EXPANSION (Amends a number of provisions in the general laws relative to financial institutions by eliminating unnecessary requirements and/or clarifying language in order to reduce certain burdens on businesses operating in Rhode Island.) <http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2794.pdf>

Senate Bill No. [2815](http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2815.pdf) Ruggerio, McCaffrey, Goodwin, Ciccone, Lombardo, Pearson, Lawson, DiPalma**,**AN ACT RELATING TO LABOR AND LABOR RELATIONS -- REAL JOBS RHODE ISLAND ACT (Establishes a real job Rhode Island program, which is an industry-led system to advance the skills of the state's workforce to grow the state's economy and increase sustainable employment for middle-class families.)

<http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2815.pdf>

Senate Bill No. [2816](http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2816.pdf) (Dept. of Labor and Training) Goodwin**,**AN ACT RELATING TO LABOR AND LABOR RELATIONS -- EMPLOYMENT SECURITY--GENERAL PROVISIONS (Extends until June 30, 2023, an increase in the total amount of earnings a partial-unemployment insurance claimant can receive before being entirely disqualified for unemployment insurance benefits.)

<http://webserver.rilin.state.ri.us/BillText/BillText22/SenateText22/S2816.pdf>