**Legislature Completes 2019 Session – Almost**

At 10:00 pm last Friday, the House and Senate finished most of their work for the 2019 legislative session. The two sides did commit to come back sometime during the fall to address an 11th hour proposal to provide a contract to IGT to encourage them to physically stay in Rhode Island, but to also require Twin River casino to obtain most of the casino machines from IGT in return.

What happens next? The hundreds of bills that were passed in the last two weeks will be transmitted to the Governor for her consideration. In order to provide the Governor sufficient time to determine whether to: (1) sign a bill, (2) veto a bill, or (3) allow a bill to become law without her signature, the General Assembly will transmit bills periodically over the next couple weeks. Under The Dome will publish a full list of new laws once that process is complete.

However, some of the highlights for the business community are as follows:

**Budget** – the FY2020 budget passed both the House and Senate without any broad-based taxes including the Medicaid assessment, the expansion of sales tax on business services, the increase in cell phone fees, scooping of various funds, the lobbyist tax, the tobacco taxes, and the hotel tax. The budget maintains the phase-out of the car tax. The budget did decrease the current fiscal year budget for the Real Jobs Development Program. This budget was what some people referred to as a status quo budget, but it was a good budget for the business community in comparison to where it started in the process.

**Marijuana** – The General Assembly chose not to legalize adult use of marijuana. It did expand the number of marijuana dispensaries from three to nine. This issue will likely be before the legislature again next year.

**Minimum Wage** – For the first time in many years, the business community will not face an increase in the minimum wage as the Senate bill died in the House Labor Committee.

**Plastic Bags and Straws** – The business community, at the request of the Governor, negotiated a plastic bag ban bill with members of the environmental community for a period of three months. An agreement was reached; but when the bill came to the Senate for a vote, the environmentalists convinced the Senate to change the bill to reflect items they wanted during the negotiations but did not achieve. The plastic bag ban bill would have included expensive stitching requirements for re-useable bags and eliminated the flat rate charged for paper bags meant to assist businesses in recouping the cost of the alternative bag. The bill died in the House. The straw bill would have required customers to ask for a straw in order to get one in a food establishment or to proactively obtain one at a straw dispenser. The bill also included a state preemption clause to ensure the state does not suffer from 39 different rules on straws. The environmental community fought to remove preemption and to remove the dispenser option, and criticized the Senate for making the changes. The bill died in the House.

**Deceptive Trade Practices** – The Attorney General fought hard to pass a bill that would allow him to file actions against any business for committing a deceptive trade practice – a term not well defined in the legislation. The bill covered heavily regulated businesses such as health insurers, banks and mortgage companies, as well as entities with limited government regulations like retail stores or hair dressers as examples. The business community was meeting with the Attorney General to try to work out a compromise when time ran out. All parties agreed to continue talks over the fall.

**Human Resource Issues** – Bills addressing sexual harassment training in the workplace, pay equity, naloxone availability, employee bullying liability, employee transportation coverage, wage reporting by gender, race, age, etc., and elimination of the employment-at-will doctrine all died for this legislative year.

**Beer** – A Senate bill allowing beer manufacturers to increase sales to 24 – 12 oz. bottles or cans and 24 – 16 oz. bottles or cans passed both the Senate and the House and should be on its way to the Governor’s desk within the next couple weeks. Prepare yourselves to go to your favorite brewery and load up!!!