

**Rhode Island Public Transit Authority
Budget Hearing – February 24, 2009
House Committee on Finance
Testimony of Sierra Club Rhode Island Chapter**

Dear Chairman Costantino and Honored Members of the Committee:

I am Chris Wilhite, Rhode Island Chapter Representative for Sierra Club. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the RIPTA budget. Below is the testimony of the Sierra Club Rhode Island Chapter.

The Sierra Club has spent the last 117 years protecting America’s Wild Legacy, including Yosemite National Park, Great Smokey Mountains National Park, the White and Green National Forests, and certainly Narragansett Bay here in Rhode Island. The worst tragedy that could happen is if we allow the effects of global climate change to ruin all the victories we’ve had over the past century protecting these places. That’s why the Sierra Club Rhode Island Chapter’s top priority is growing our system of clean, green transportation choices and cutting the global warming pollution from cars.

Rhode Island *could* have the best transportation choices in the nation. The Ocean State is not only the smallest geographically, but it is the second densest state in the Union. Unfortunately, current transportation choices in Rhode Island are pitiful when compared to other places. We have no rapid transit or light rail. And while the commuter rail is being extended, our bus system is under-funded.

In fact, compared to our peers, the Rhode Island’s transit system receives far less per capita of state spending than our peers. Here are the numbers according to a 2006 report¹:

Per capita spending on transit by state

Massachusetts	\$201.26
Maryland	\$142.05
New Jersey	\$96.27
Delaware	\$86.71
Rhode Island	\$36.09

While the federal stimulus money will help RIPTA buy cleaner, more fuel efficient buses, it not supplement RIPTA’s struggling operating budget. Indeed, the State Guide Plan, Element 611 states, “RIPTA's most critical need going forward is a dedicated and

¹Transportation Resource Board. 2006

sustainable funding source.” I would add that RIPTA needs funding that grows with inflation and that grows with demand.

So with a transit system that is so under-funded, it is no wonder that RIPTA is less attractive as a transportation choice for Rhode Islanders. It is simply easier to drive a car, even if it is more expensive. But Rhode Islanders buy roughly 450 million gallons of gasoline every year to drive their cars. **At \$3.00, we are sending over \$1 billion out of our state’s economy** to benefit oil and gasoline producing regions of the world.

Rhode Islanders who did use RIPTA to commute in 2006 saved 1 million gallons of oil, a fuel savings worth \$2.6 million and which avoided 4,874 metric tons of global warming pollution². If we invest in growing our transit system with improved and expanded bus service, streetcars or light-rail, and greater commuter rail service, we could become far more energy independent as a state, while generated thousands of new jobs in the transit industry right here in Rhode Island.

If we simply invested half of what the state of Delaware spends on transit, we could significantly grow our transportation choices for Rhode Islanders.

Investing our tax dollars in public transit is one of the wisest investments the state can make. Every tax dollar invested in public transit, generates \$6 or more in economic benefits³. Just as important, keeping our fuel dollars at home will ensure that Rhode Island is doing its part to protect our coastal environment and way of life.

On behalf of the Sierra Club Rhode Island Chapter and its members across the state, I urge you to invest our tax dollars in growing Rhode Island’s public transportation system. **RIPTA’ need for operating assistance is urgent** if we are to keep service for the current demand. In order to be free of foreign oil, Rhode Islanders need clean, affordable transportation choices like mass transit.

Sincerely,

Chris Wilhite
Chapter Director

² A Better Way to Go: Meeting America’s 21st Century Transportation Challenges with Modern Public Transit. Rhode Island Public Interest Research Group Education Fund. 2008

³ The Benefits of Public Transportation: Building Investment Value in Our Economy and Marketplace. American Public Transportation Association. 2004