

Testimony in Support of Appropriations to the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority (RIPTA)

House Finance Committee

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The Economic Progress Institute is writing in support of the Governor’s proposal to fully fund RIPTA, which would repeal the two-cent gas enacted in the previous fiscal year, increase funding in the Highway Maintenance Account by \$9.3 million, add \$3.5 million in capital-plan funding for bus purchases, and add another \$1 million in additional cruise operator fees. We also strongly urge the committee to support Representative Alzate’s H8256, which would reverse service cuts by increasing funding by \$5 million to bring RIPTA services back to pre-September 2025 levels.

Rhode Islanders deserve affordable, reliable public transportation. Time and time again, it has been proven that a dependable transportation system boosts economic competitiveness, attracts investment, and ensures that the general population can meet their basic needs, all while contributing to more sustainable communities.¹ Maintaining and expanding public transportation reduces congestion, improves air quality, and enhances the reliability of cars and trucks as congestion-related traffic decreases.² To foster a thriving economy and sustainable environment, it is essential to invest in RIPTA. Those investments should include providing competitive wages, shielding communities from fare increases, while also preserving and expanding services and operational hours. Funding RIPTA is especially important considering the cost of cars has significantly increased in recent years. According to the American Public Transportation Association, people who use public transit save more than \$13,000 a year, or \$1,100 a month, compared to those who drive. Additionally, from 2019 to 2023, the cost of purchasing a new car increased by 30%, and the cost of purchasing a used car has increased by 40%.³

I also urge the members of the board to **consider public transit funding in the broader context of all transportation funding**. As many are already aware, the car-tax phase-out was not a one-time event, and in the enacted FY2026 budget includes \$239.5 million to make local governments whole from the loss of revenue from the phase-out. This is an *annual* and *indefinite* appropriation, and the entirety of the appropriation subsidizes car owners, so they need not pay the tax. The phase-out and the annual appropriation do not provide the benefit of tax relief to *all* Rhode Islanders. It provides no relief for the approximately 9% of Rhode Island

¹ <https://data.bts.gov/stories/s/Transportation-as-an-Economic-Indicator/9czv-tjte/#:~:text=Transportation%20plays%20a%20vital%20role,activity%20in%20its%20own%20right.>

² <https://t4america.org/portfolio/la-transit-strike/>

³ <https://www.apta.com/research-technical-resources/research-reports/transit-savings-report/>



households without any available vehicles.⁴ For rental-occupied households, this rate is 21.5%, according to United States Census Bureau data.⁵

If we are subsidizing car owners with \$ \$239.5 million from General Revenue funds each year, we should think about doing more to subsidize non-car owners, as well as car owners who would prefer to use public transportation more often than they do. The amount provided for the trial period for free R-Line service was welcome but a small subsidy in comparison.

We strongly urge the General Assembly to fully fund RIPTA and restore funding to undo the previously enacted service cuts.

⁴ [https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/11/14/1-in-10-americans-rarely-or-never-drive-a-car/#:~:text=Most%20U.S.%20households%20\(92%25\),have%20three%20or%20more%20vehicles](https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/11/14/1-in-10-americans-rarely-or-never-drive-a-car/#:~:text=Most%20U.S.%20households%20(92%25),have%20three%20or%20more%20vehicles).

⁵ <https://www.census.gov/acs/www/about/why-we-ask-each-question/vehicles/#:~:text=Occupied%20Housing%20Units%20with%20No,Data%20Profiles/Housing%20Characteristics>