

House Testimony

March 9, 2016

Chairman Gallison and members of the Finance Committee:

My name is Robert Billington, President of the Blackstone Valley Tourism Council, speaking in favor of The *Green Economy Bond* referenda. I specifically want to address the impacts of the \$10M allocated for a State Bikeway Development Program. I am also speaking today on behalf of our state's regional tourism officials, whose leaders have asked me to indicate their support for the *Green Economy Bond* which is taking a full-state, comprehensive approach to cycling Rhode Island.

From what I can determine, it has been 18 years since Rhode Island voters were asked to support, with a bond referendum, the construction of a bikeway. This *Green Economy Bond* will be the beginning of a long-term commitment to construct a bicycling network in our state. A state as small as ours is attractive to cycle in a day, for residents and certainly for visitors. I am pleased to be a part of the *Paths to Progress* statewide bikeway committee, which organized last spring, to bring cycling and running interest groups from Westerly to Woonsocket, from Bristol to Burrillville, together to define and refine what a bicycle network would look like for our state.

We chose the name *Paths to Progress* because we know that the main user groups of our bikeways consist of cyclists, walkers, runners, joggers, roller bladers, and parents with strollers. The \$10M investment provides the funds necessary to begin to bring the network to completion. Construction is our top priority along the pathways that are "construction-ready." We know that planning and engineering needs to begin on the larger missing bike path sections on Aquidneck Island, Western Rhode Island and Westerly. These missing links keep our state disconnected.

Along the Blackstone River, we deal with riverfront post-industrial landscapes. These landscapes become wonderful river-view pathways for our Blackstone Bikeway, but they come at a significant cost. The \$5M in funds available in the Brownfield Remediation and Economic Development in the *Green Economy Bond*, will help remediate our post-industrial landscapes, making them available for public use, as the Blackstone River Bikeway.

This 18-mile Blackstone River Bikeway, when completed, will link with the Massachusetts Blackstone River Bikeway, opening up revenue from cyclists from the city of Worcester to Rhode Island. Incredibly, the Blackstone's bikeway is into its 5th decade of development! We need to complete the remaining 8 miles.

In December of 2014, President Obama signed into law the Blackstone River Valley National Historical Park, the 402nd park in the United States. Rhode Island has much to gain in new visitor revenues with the power of this new park, as it tells the story of our Nation's industrial heritage. The \$10M will ensure, that construction on the Blackstone Bikeway will continue, ensuring success of the National Park for family visitors who want to enjoy and visit Blackstone Valley, and pedal down to Bristol, along the scenic East Bay bike path. The *Green Economy Bond* funds will complete a bike way in South County, and we hope jump-start the bikeway planning, from Newport and Westerly north. Of course all bike paths will connect to Providence.

Connecting our state's cities and their parks, via off-road bikeways, encourages more intermodal transportation, via cycling to work and school, and ensures a healthier population. These types of resources satisfy active and passive recreational interests and will draw more visitors to our state.

These funds will also continue our state's work on the 3,000 mile *East Coast Greenway*, stretching from Calais, Maine to Key West, Florida.

This investment ensures the quality of life that our residents and visitors enjoy, our heritage, culture and natural resources and ensures that visitors are drawn here because of our investments, making Rhode Island an enjoyable place to visit, work and live.

In closing, the economic impacts of a bikeway through a community are significant. It is difficult to find economic impact reports for Rhode Island's existing bikeways, however in Maine their Department of Transportation reports \$36M per year from bicycle tourism; Vermont reports \$83M from bicycle tourism, New York, \$253M and New Jersey \$497M in visitor spending related to bicycle tourism. (Adventure Cycling Association 3/1/2016)

We encourage support, and we believe Rhode Islanders will overwhelmingly support the Green Economy Bond.

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