



Governor's  
Committee  
Narragansett Bay &  
Watershed Planning  
Commission

# Public Access and Recreation Panel Report

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**Public Access and Recreation Panel Report**

Prepared for the Governor's Narragansett Bay & Watershed Planning Commission

By the Public Access and Recreation Panel

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### **Statement of the Problem**

Pursuant to Executive Order 03-16 and the Governor's December 15, 2003 letter, the Narragansett Bay & Watershed Commission's Steering Committee determined that it was necessary to establish a number of panels to address specific issues affecting Narragansett Bay and its watershed.

The Public Access & Recreation Panel was given the responsible for reporting to the Commission its findings and recommendations for actions addressing public access and recreation needs on Narragansett Bay. "The Panel identified the preservation of the Narragansett Bay water quality as the common denominator of public access and recreation."

The Public Access & Recreation Panel was requested in the Governor's Operating Guidelines to address the following questions:

- (1) What is the nature of the problem?
- (2) What course of action is necessary to correct the problem?
- (3) How best (recommendations) to achieve the necessary actions?

This report will address each of these questions starting with the problem.

The Public Access & Recreation Panel identified the nature of the problem as the Narragansett Bay encompasses 2,300 acres of island land stretching twelve (12) miles from Prudence and Patience Islands in the north to Beavertail and Brenton Point in the south. Each of the Narragansett Bay islands has a distinct personality, the product of its natural features and cultural legacy. The problem with offering the residents of the State of Rhode Island increased shoreline public access thus improving the recreational potential of these truly unique natural resources are:

**Bay Island Ferry Service Re-instatement** - Currently the Narragansett Bay Island areas offer limited recreational destinations due to a lack of infrastructure amenities. There have been previous attempts of limited success to establish a Bay Island Park system that would more fully develop the immense recreational potential of the Narragansett Bay.

**Improved Public Transportation to Existing State Parks** - Many existing "land side" Narragansett Bay State Park facilities (e.g. Colt State Park, Goddard Memorial State Park, Brenton Point State Park, Beavertail State Park, India Point Park, etc.) lack inner city connection to public transportation.

**Shoreline Public Access** – The overriding problem with public access to the shoreline is the identification to the general public of the many existing shoreline public access locations. In addition these areas lack accommodations such as restroom facilities, trash collection and general acceptance by the local communities.

### **Background Information**

**Bay Island Ferry Service Re-instatement** - RIDEM and its predecessor the Department of Natural Resources have conducted previous master planning for a Bay Island Park System that would create family oriented recreational opportunities. Ferry service was previously created that serviced the Narragansett Bay islands, which terminated in the mid-1980's. Service was accessed from Bend Boat Basin in Portsmouth with 1985 fares reported as \$3.00 for adults. RIDEM has available reports and file

information that documents the previously completed studies as well as historical data associated with the schedules, fares, and operating costs of the ferry service. Service operated yearly from approximately mid May through mid October.

*“The Bay Islands Park: A Marine Recreation Plan For The State Of Rhode Island”* prepared by the Coastal Resources Center at the University of Rhode Island for the Advisory Committee on Island Parks, believed to have been completed in either the late 1970's or early 1980's details the aspirations and subsequent planning by both residents and state officials to develop a state-run island park system.

The Public Access & Recreation Panel identified the following that must be considered in any planned Bay Island Park system:

1. The linkage of Narragansett Bay Watershed Rivers and Trails to the Bay is important as a “long range” goal.
2. Security concerns, issues and incompatibility of high hazard passage of LNG Tankers that may interrupt recreational usage of the Narragansett Bay were raised as a concern.
3. Appropriateness of island parks to accommodate increases in public recreational activities.

**Improved Public Transportation to Existing State Parks** – The existing State Parks are generally poor transit generators. Many existing State Park facilities located on Narragansett Bay (e.g. Colt State Park, Goddard Memorial State Park, Brenton Point State Park, etc.) lack good convenient inner city connection to public transportation. The Public Access & Recreation Panel identified the following circumstances that affect RIPTA's ability to provide improved cost effective public transportation service:

1. Current RIPTA service is directed primarily to limited State beach locations and need connectivity to some form of secondary linkage to State Park facilities.
2. Weather dictates ridership level on beach routes.
3. “One Seat” rides is the desired approach for planning a RIPTA route. Once multiple rides with bus transfers are introduced ridership is lost.

**Shoreline Public Access** – A CRMC document entitled *“The Public Trust Doctrine”* serves as the basis for the citizen's rights to public access to and along the coastal shoreline and waters of Rhode Island. The overriding problem with public access to the shoreline is the identification to the general public of the many existing public access locations. Many of these shoreline access locations are extensions of paper streets or easements through properties that are obliterated through creative landscaping by abutting property owners. In addition many municipalities deliberately attempt to discourage their usage through prohibitive parking restrictions yet other communities are taking a more pro-active role in policing these public right-of-ways to ensure public shoreline access.

### Analysis

**Ferry Service Re-Instatement** - The Public Access & Recreation Panel identified challenges to the re-instatement of this ferry service that include:

1. Developing a strategy that funds the operation and purchase of equipment for this service albeit through establishment of creative financing solutions.
2. Service must appeal to a broader group base while also balancing the experience through passive recreational activities realizing the sensitivity of environmental and/or historic elements on the islands. The existing pristine state of the islands must be preserved.
3. Evaluating previously suspended service and determining "How to do it better".

The focus and/or concerns of re-instating the Bay Island Park system should consider:

1. Eco-tourism slant on service should be considered.
2. Hazardous material concerns with several islands (e.g. Dutch Island) that may have supported military purposes needs evaluation.
3. Since 1985 limited new facilities have been constructed on several islands. However there is still a lack of infrastructure available to support an increase in public usage of a Bay Island Park system (i.e. camping, sandy beaches, restrooms, etc.).
4. Consider public/private partnerships with private organizations such as Save The Bay who are currently operating a teaching ferry service during the summer months.
5. Plans are being advanced to construct a Visitor's Center to support the existing docking facility at India Point Park, which should be incorporated into a Bay Island Park System.
6. The existing pristine state of the islands must be preserved and sensitivity of resources considered.
7. Guided tours with limited public access to very limited Island areas should be considered.
8. Virtual access though the Internet may be a partial solution to public access concerns.
9. Tick borne disease and liability issues of Island access promotion must be carefully considered.
10. Operating resources to maintain and/or operate the Panel's proposals are critical.
11. Increased Narragansett Bay safety enforcement visibility with commitments that include resources, and responsibility.

The RIDEM Narragansett Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve has prepared a document entitled "*Overview of the Narragansett Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve: Natural Resources, Infrastructure, and Recreational Opportunities*". This document provides an overview of the numerous existing Bay Island Park facilities and states "*The National Estuarine Research Reserve is a network of protected areas established for a long term research, education and stewardship. This partnership program between NOAA and the coastal states protects more than one million acres of estuarine land and water, which provides essential habitat for wildlife;.....*"

In addition there exists a "*Narragansett Bay National Estuarine Sanctuary – Management Plan*" prepared by the U.S. Department of Commerce – (NOAA) Office of Ocean and Coastal Resource Management and RIDEM, dated May 1983. The plan provides a framework for achieving resource management objectives for the Narragansett Bay National Estuarine Sanctuary and acts as a guide for the sanctuary manager and staff in operating the sanctuary. The plan also provides an overview of the

sanctuary environment as well as Narragansett Bay, paying special attention to the issues and problems that will influence management and that are addressed by the sanctuary's education or research programs.

Significant background information has been previously compiled by the RIDEM and published in a document entitled "*Outdoor Recreation Demand Survey*" conducted for RIDEM as part of the development of the *State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP)*. Information such as percentage of people visiting coastal areas, walkways/bikeway needs assessments, etc.

**Improved Public Transportation to Existing State Parks** – The Public Access & Recreation Panel identified the following:

1. A new RIPTA service that can be integrated to an existing RIPTA service run is the desirable approach as it would be fairly inexpensive to institute. It is estimated that instituting Saturday or Sunday service to Galilee may cost RIPTA approximately \$11,000 to \$15,000 for a service that extends from late June through late August.
2. An enhancement of the RIDE Flex bus program may offer increased flexibility by utilizing a "flex zones" concept within a route to an existing state park facility.
3. Service to a community based organized group can be provided by RIPTA if scheduled in advance.
4. Shuttle bus service within a community or State Park can be costly because of the initial bus acquisition cost. RIDOT Enhancement Program could be used to purchase the vehicle. Existing school bus drivers could be employed to operate the shuttle bus system during summer months.

Linkage of a "regional" shuttle service between a ferry system, State Park and existing bus routes would be attractive.

5. Public advertisement of the bus service is critical.

Consideration of developing a single publication (e.g. map) that would display RIPTA routes and proximity to locations for fishing, boat ramps, ferry service, State Parks, etc. would be prudent. This document could also identify food locations and picnic areas. It could have a website link for viewing RIPTA bus route schedules.

6. Save the Bay is constructing a headquarters, educational center and docking facility at Fields Point. RIPTA does not currently offer bus service connection to the Fields Point area.

**Shoreline Public Access** – The Public Access & Recreation Panel identified possible solutions to identifying and/or promoting shoreline public access locations:

1. Developing a map with the locations of the shoreline public access locations.
2. Develop a "partnership" with local groups where a public voice will be heard promoting locations and use of these public shoreline access locations.
3. Conduct seminars with participation by municipalities promoting access locations.
4. Consider focusing on three (3) or four (4) locations within pro-active municipalities utilizing the RIDOT Enhancement Program with stipulations for parking as a transportation link. Areas would

be properly signed with trash receptacles promoting public use. Once this site is completed it will be used to promote attractiveness to other more skeptical municipalities.

5. CRMC has identified right-of-way candidates in the Proposed Adopt-a-Site & Enhancement Grant that should be investigated. Potential sites to be included in the RIDOT Enhancement Program for public shoreline access:
  - a. Nausauket Road (Warwick) – J-24 (Cedar Tree Point)
  - b. Narragansett Bay Avenue (Warwick) - J-28 (Warwick Neck)
  - c. Ogden Avenue (Warwick) – J-38 (Rocky Point)
  - d. Samuel Groton Avenue (Warwick) – Town ROW w/fair ramp
  - e. Spriketing Street (Jamestown) – G-2 (West Passage)
  - f. Carr Lane (Jamestown) – G-10 (East Passage)
  - g. Daunis ROW (Barrington) - P-2 (Nayatt Point)
  - h. Fort Street Paper Street (Narragansett) – off Major Arnold Road
6. Evaluate and enhance public shoreline access to the following prime fishing locations identified by Rhode Island Saltwater Anglers Association:
  - a. T-Wharf (Prudence Island)  
Accessible by boat only and access must be restricted to wharf area only.
  - b. Rome Point (North Kingston)  
This site is part of the John H. Chafee Natural Preserve and the Town strictly restricts development activities and access to this site. RIDEM is in the process of designing a parking lot and is seeking the Town's approval.
  - c. Hull Cove (Jamestown)  
Public access is available to this site and there is a 4-car parking lot at the site with expansion possible.
  - d. Bristol Narrows (Bristol)  
Accessible via a gravel path.
  - e. Rocky Point (Warwick)  
CRMC indicated public access to the shoreline could be a provision in the imminent sale of this property.

7. CRMC is currently developing a plan for June 2004 that would identify goals and set priorities for public shoreline access locations in which land acquisition is needed to facilitate and accommodate parking for kayaking/canoeing, fishing, and surfing activities.

The RIDEM and CRMC should jointly coordinate efforts to purchase property for public access. Jointly funds can be leveraged for better results. The initial step in this process is to identify existing property owners who are willing to sell property for public access.

## **Recommendations**

The Public Access & Recreation Panel recommends the following actions to correct these problems:

**No. 1 Re-evaluate the Reinstatement of the Bay Island Park System** - Consideration should be given to re-evaluate the development of a Bay Island Park system through the establishment of a Citizen's Advisory Committee under the direction of the Department of Environmental Management to study the feasibility of a state-run island park system.

As significant comprehensive studies were previously completed this Citizen's Advisory Committee would begin its tasks with an evaluation of the adequacy and adaptability of these previously completed plans in today's state needs and climate. The "*The Bay Islands Park: A Marine Recreation Plan For The State Of Rhode Island*" report a comprehensive document that studied the creation of a Bay Island Park system in the late 1970's or early 1980's could serve as the basis for re-evaluating the re-instatement of the Bay Island Park system. RIDOT Enhancement Program funding could be considered as a means of funding to update the report and establish a pilot program of the Bay Island Park system. State subsidies would be required to operate and maintain this system if re-instatement were proven feasible.

RIDEM indicated that it is in the process of re-allocation of a \$400,000 NOAA grant due to expire in 2004 to develop public facilities near the Prudence Island T-wharf.

Prior to recommending the evaluation of a re-instatement of the Bay Island Park system, the liability issue with the disease carried by deer ticks on several of the islands is a concern. It is recommended that the Department of Health and Department of Environmental Management work together to identify the potential health issues with a possible Bay Island Park system proposal and develop strategies to mitigate any adverse effects.

In addition, the Narragansett Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve is mandated by federal regulations to maintain the pristine nature of its protected areas.

**No. 2 Improved Public Transportation to Existing State Parks** – Work with RIPTA and other public and/or private agencies to explore and identify opportunities to improve or increase public transportation opportunities such as:

- ❑ RIPTA working with Save the Bay could investigate bus access to the Save the Bay planned Fields Point facility. RIPTA would be willing to accommodate Save the Bay by instituting a bus service as a co-promotion aimed at community based organizations perhaps on a twice a month frequency.
- ❑ Application to the RIDOT Enhancement Program for funding a shuttle bus service within a State Park and to promote linkage between the park shuttles and existing bus routes.

- Develop a single publication (e.g. map) that would display RIPTA routes and proximity to locations for fishing, boat ramps, ferry service, State Parks, etc. This document could also identify food locations and picnic areas. It could have a website link for viewing RIPTA bus route schedules. Both RIPTA and RIDEM currently publish mapping of their respective facilities that would require sharing of information to accomplish this goal.

**No. 3 Improve Shoreline Public Access** – Implement the CRMC strategy for advancing the shoreline public access at Adopt-a-Sites by scheduling a meeting with dedicated constituency forming a partnership of adjoining neighbors, CRMC, and private agencies (i.e. RI Saltwater Anglers Association) and negotiate an agreement that addresses noise issues, trash collection, maintenance, etc.

CRMC jointly with the Rhode Island Saltwater Anglers Association should submit a RIDOT Enhancement Program application for a combination of Adopt-a-Site that need minor improvements to enhance access. These sites should include a combination of the previously stated prime fishing locations and Adopt-a-Site locations.

Also develop a video of the “before vs. after” condition as a means of promoting the site with media exposure and placement of the video on their website.

**References**

- ❑ *RIGIS Data Catalog*. RI Department of Administration, Sept. 2003.
- ❑ RIPTA Bus Schedules.
- ❑ RI Recreational Fishing & Boating Access Guide, Map by RIDEM, 2003.
- ❑ Boston Harbor Islands Visitor Guide from [www.bostonislands.org](http://www.bostonislands.org).
- ❑ Public Access Guide to the RI Coast by Coastal Resource Center, URI and NOAA.
- ❑ *The Public Trust Doctrine: Your Rights to the Coastal Lands and Waters of Rhode Island*, by the State of Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council.
- ❑ *A Code of Conduct While Using Public Rights-of-Way to the Shore in Rhode Island*, by the Coastal Resources Management Council.
- ❑ *Designation of Public Rights-of-Way to the Tidal Areas of the State, Progress Report for July 2002 through June 2003*, submitted by the Coastal Resources Management Council Subcommittee on Rights-of-Way.

**Appendix**

**RIDEM Historical Records**

- ❑ 1985 Ferry Schedule
- ❑ Various Purchase Orders for Ferry Operating Expenses dated 1984 to 1989
- ❑ 1985 Ferry Operating Agreement Renewal
- ❑ Bay Island Visitor Information Pamphlet

**Planning Studies/Master Plans**

- ❑ *The Bay Islands Park Development and Management Plan*, Circa 1981.
- ❑ *The Bay Islands Park: A Marine Recreation Plan for the State of Rhode Island*. Coastal Resource Center – University of Rhode Island.
- ❑ *Narragansett Bay National Estuarine Sanctuary Management Plan*. US Department of Commerce NOAA and the State of Rhode Island DEM, May 1983.
- ❑ *South Prudence Island, Bay Islands Park Master Planning Study*. Prepared by Sara Bradford, Landscape Architect for the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, Division of Planning and Development.