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R.I. should seize stimulus opportunity

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WITH ALL DUE RESPECT to our hardworking elected officials, in this time of great need, Rhode Islanders are looking for true leadership. A great opportunity is before the state. Thanks to our small size, which can afford us the ability to be nimble as well as the capacity to move quickly, we can serve as a national example of how to most effectively, creatively and productively distribute the dollars that will flow into Rhode Island as a result of the federal stimulus package, even as we position the state for long-term prosperity.

The recently passed stimulus package presents us with enormous opportunities. Up to \$1.1 billion is a potentially transformative amount of money for Rhode Island. Along with this tremendous opportunity will come challenges that require a spirit of cooperation, a willingness to be both flexible and transparent, the ability to move at a rapid pace and the strength to make decisions that set aside political agendas in favor of the public good.

The governor, legislative leaders, mayors, town managers and other elected officials have legitimate ideas for how to most effectively spend the stimulus dollars. And let's be clear, while these are not state dollars, each and every federal taxpayer in Rhode Island will be paying for the recovery of our national economy for many years to come. Thus, all of us really care about every stage of the decision-making and implementation process. If there is anything the events of the last few months of 2008 taught us, it is that we cannot afford to be complacent. And in Rhode Island, a state that paced the regional and then the national recession, arguably one of the states that most needs the stimulus, we cannot afford to be the least prepared to put the dollars to good use.

Long-awaited "shovel-ready" projects, job creation and retention, and plugging gaping budget deficits are all on the table. But it is clear there is no one right answer and no one direct path to our state's financial sustainability. We will require a coordinated plan. In a state our size, we must remember that a project in Warwick or Woonsocket will probably employ residents of Providence and Central Falls. Despite the pride we take in our 39 proudly individualistic cities and towns, we are more interconnected and interdependent than any other state. In fact, the stimulus package brings into focus the even more critical issue of the state's serious structural deficiencies. Rather than use this influx of dollars solely for one-time projects, we should take a much longer view and create a model for our long-term economic vitality. We owe it to future generations of Rhode Islanders.

Let's challenge our decision-makers to use the power of our size, bring together key state and local stakeholders and the best thinkers from a diversity of constituencies – from business, the nonprofit sector, social services, education, the arts and government – and from every community as soon as possible, and hammer out not only the priority project lists but also a real vision for our state's economic development. Strategic competition will bring out the best in us, quashing the business-as-usual infighting and provincial bickering that could force delays and cause Rhode Island to emerge at the short end of "use-it-or-lose it" funds. There is room for creativity, but as the popular slogan goes, "Just do it" should be the order of the day.

This may be a once in a generation opportunity – perhaps even once in a century – to repair roads, restore bridges, refurbish schools and create as many sustainable jobs as possible. It may be just the opportunity Rhode Island needs to foster job training and other workforce-development programs that will advance our long-term financial health. Wise decisions our leaders make in today's time of great need will position us to take advantage of tomorrow's prosperity and to be the great state we know we can be. Citizens of Rhode Island are ready for inspired, motivated leadership that acts quickly, seizes opportunity, overcomes old barriers, and above all, keeps the public's interest at heart.

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