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OPINION

No more excuses, the time for statewide action to solve collective problems is now

The legislative session that just ended stood out as one where real progress was made toward effecting change in Rhode Island. Legislative leaders championed – and successfully passed – a comprehensive state funding formula for education that is already being touted as a national model. Bills addressing regulatory reform, work force development and access to capital will help small businesses clear hurdles to doing business in our state.



The groundwork is in place for welcoming wind power expansion. In accomplishing these milestones, our leaders showed a willingness to set aside political agendas in order to serve Rhode Islanders' best interests.

Now, we must capitalize on the momentum created by these positive developments and spirit of collaboration. In these times of complex and serious challenges, let's continue to learn from what is working well. Let's simplify and focus, embracing the tremendous advantages our state has to offer, and have us all "sell" Rhode Island wherever and whenever we can.

Those who come to Rhode Island from out of state, along with the native Rhode Islanders who stay by choice, easily articulate the state's benefits. But we should all be able to list our finest attributes. For starters, there is our size, which allows us to be nimble, flexible and opportunistic, to address changing demographics and shifting trends. But there is much more to build on:

- We are a small-business state. This is our heritage. Consider this: Hasbro, CVS, American Power Conversion, Amica, Textron, GTECH – all have grown here from small companies. And the list goes on – Ocean State Job Lot, Collette Vacations, Dimeo Construction and Gilbane, among other great examples. We must continue to build on the business-friendly tax and regulatory policies that were passed in this legislative session to pave the way for the next wave of growth in small business.
- Rhode Islanders applaud an innovative and entrepreneurial spirit. Organizations like AS220, which now has an enviable partnership with MIT; the Providence Geeks; and Betaspring are perfect examples of what can happen in Rhode Island when we incubate new, forward-looking businesses.
- "Meds and eds." Rhode Island's concentration of hospital and university networks, as well as its pockets of excellence, enable us to be a center for important research

as well as job growth. This is already happening through National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health grants regularly awarded to our hospitals and universities.

- Affordable housing initiatives are starting to work here. The \$50 million Building Homes Rhode Island bond issue approved by voters in 2006 has already leveraged about \$231 million in private and federal funding that paid for nearly 1,000 homes and rental units statewide. And the program created or saved more than 3,000 jobs in its first two years.
- We can be a model for health care reform. Initiatives stressing the importance of primary care and encouraging lifelong, healthy habits have the potential to lower costs significantly.
- School reform is happening. With the passage of the school-funding formula and our promising Race to the Top application, we have created momentum to continue reforms in public education that will be critical to preparing a new generation of Rhode Islanders for the jobs of the future.
- Nonprofits contribute immeasurably to our quality of life. From delivering a safety net and social services to Rhode Islanders in need to protecting our treasured coastline to managing job-training programs and creating arts and cultural experiences that touch all of our lives, Rhode Island's vibrant community of nonprofits make real contributions to the state.

In order to capitalize on all of these strengths – and to address the challenges, including the imperative to fix our structural deficit beyond 2011, and to determine how our ports and our airport can live up to their potential as economic engines – it is time now to create a sense of urgency.

A sense of urgency will inspire Rhode Island to move beyond stating the problems to developing solutions, beyond developing the solutions to taking action, and beyond taking action to getting results. Urgency spurs us to initiate, partner, collaborate, lead, innovate and motivate, creating results we will celebrate.

And urgency will help us see that what we need is one plan for Rhode Island – not just a “creative” or “knowledge” or “green” economy plan, not a tourism plan or a health care or an education plan, but one plan for our small, networked and connected state.

So, no more studies, no more summits. The brilliant entrepreneur and business champion Walt Disney pointed out, “The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing.” Years later, Nike boiled it down to this: JUST DO IT.

The foundation stands ready to work with Rhode Island's business, political, education, health and community leaders to execute the one plan for Rhode Island. The time for excuses is past. We must begin doing.

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