
The SMITH HILL REPORT



PUBLISHED BY THE RHODE ISLAND FEDERATION OF TEACHERS & HEALTH PROFESSIONALS/AFT, AFL-CIO

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Smith Hill Report Distribution

Welcome to the 2024 edition of the RIFTHP Smith Hill Report. Twenty-five years ago, the RIFTHP began producing a legislative report to RIFTHP members and leaders. That report, photocopied on green paper, has changed over the years and is now fully digital and available to a wider audience. The Smith Hill Report will be published weekly and will include links to bill testimony, bill text, and other documents that are part of the legislative process.

The RIFTHP wants information on our legislative work to be distributed as widely as possible. We encourage local union presidents to forward this newsletter to members. Please share this newsletter with other AFT members or anyone who has an interest in our issues. This is an excellent vehicle to illustrate the activities we are engaged in on behalf of our membership.

In order to get placed on our weekly distribution list, use this link ([click here](#)). Our goal is to triple our weekly subscriber list this session to generate greater awareness and attention paid to RIFTHP legislative work.

Session Opens

The 2024 session of the Rhode Island General Assembly starts today. The House and Senate begin their weekly meetings this week and are expected to conclude the session in June. The next two months will consist of new legislation being filed and the commencement of committee hearings. Information about the General Assembly, including lists of Senators and Representatives, bill text, bill hearing schedules and an archive of video recordings of committee meetings can all be found on the RI General Assembly website www.rilegislature.gov.

2023 Highlights

The RIFTHP mailed a summary of the 2023 legislative session to all members in the Fall. The special edition of the Smith Hill Report can be viewed here ([click here](#)). The newsletter highlighted some

important legislative accomplishments last session such as the creation of the Hope Scholarship Program at Rhode Island College, the protection afforded paraprofessional school employees assaulted on the job, and funding for the Rhode Island Vision Education and Services (RIVESP) program.

The newsletter also highlighted a few major disappointments, such as the Assembly's failure to improve pension benefits for public employees and its inability to provide medical insurance benefits for adjunct faculty at public higher education institutions.

Senator Bissaillon Sworn-in

After the death of Senator Maryellen Goodwin, a special election was held to fill the remaining term for Senate District 1. Jacob (Jake) Bissaillon, who had worked as Chief of Staff for Senate President Ruggerio, won the Democratic Primary and then went on to win the General Election with 83% of the vote. He was sworn into office on December 8, 2023. He resigned from his Senate staff position and is now serving in the General Assembly. Senator Bissaillon had the support of the RIFTHP, the Providence Teachers Union, and the AFL-CIO.

Said President Flynn, " We congratulate Jake for his impressive win for Senate in District One, Providence. We look forward to working with him on the many issues important to our members and their constituents. I am confident that he will be a strong partner based on our experiences working with him in his role as chief of staff."

Pension Advisory Working Group Formed

Last session, the General Assembly failed to enact any meaningful pension improvement legislation for public employees. Instead, the Assembly directed the General Treasurer to convene a working group to analyze the impact of the 2021 pension cuts. The exact wording of this provision, included in the state budget, is as follows:

36-10.2-11. Advisory working group - Report

- a. The general treasurer shall establish and convene an advisory working group to assist in the review and analysis of the impacts of the Rhode Island Retirement Security Act of 2011 on the state's public retirement systems and their current and retired members. The working group shall develop options for consideration by the general assembly that may be needed to improve the pension programs or address any unintended consequences of the Act. Options, to the extent possible, shall include a clear cost-benefit analysis.
- b. The advisory working group may include, but not be limited to, designees from the

following: the office of the general treasurer, actuarial professionals, public sector unions, state and/or national organizations interested in pension reform and sustainability, pension advocacy groups, and financial and investment professionals.

c. On or before March 1, 2024, the general treasurer shall forward a report containing the findings, recommendations and proposed options for consideration to the governor, speaker of the house, and president of the senate.

The pension work group met three times in 2023, with additional meetings scheduled for January 17, 2024, January 31, 2024 and February 21, 2024.

The Working Group consists of the following members:

- **Ernie Almonte**, CPA – President of the Rhode Island League of Cities and Towns
- **Eric Atwater**, FSA – Partner, Aon PLC
- **Patrick Crowley** – Secretary Treasurer of the AFL-CIO
- **Michael DiBiase** – President and CEO of the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council
- **Thomas Huestis** – Senior Managing Director at Public Resources Advisory Group
- **John P. Maguire** – Active Teacher Representative, Employees’ Retirement System of Rhode Island Board. John was formerly President of the North Providence Teachers Union and Treasurer of the RIFTHP.
- **Alicia Munnell** – Director at Boston College’s Center for Retirement Research. Laura Quinby, Ph.D., Senior Research Economist at Boston College’s Center for Retirement Research, will serve as Ms. Munnell’s designee
- **George Nee** – President of the AFL-CIO
- **Edinaldo Tebaldi**, Ph.D., Professor of Mathematics and Economics and Director of Strategic Planning & Institutional Effectiveness at Bryant University
- **Jonathan Womer** – Director of the Rhode Island Department of Administration

RIFTHP Testifies on Pension Improvements

The second meeting of the Pension Advisory Working Group consisted of presentations made by union leaders representing public employees. RIFTHP President Frank Flynn and Coventry Teacher Alliance President Kelly Erinakes provided testimony at the hearing.

RIFTHP President Flynn urges the Commission to consider several specific pension improvements, such as:

- Increase the accrual rate for each year of service worked by teachers and state workers from the current 1% per year to a higher accrual rate based on years of service with the employer
- Reduction of the penalty imposed on those retiring before their normal retirement age
- Calculate retirement benefits based on the three highest years of salary instead of the five highest years of salary
- Require all newly-hired teachers to participate in social security
- Improve the pension cost of living adjustment (COLA) benefit for current and future retirees

To read his testimony, [click here](#)..

Kelly Erinakes testified after Frank Flynn. She described her personal situation as one of many stories that demonstrate the impact the 2011 law had on teachers. She had 19 years of service at the time the law passed. She had planned a 30-year teaching career, after which she would have received a pension based on 66% of her salary. Because of the law change, she cannot retire after 30 years, she must work 38 years, and her pension will be a dramatically reduced 43% of salary. She further testified that she is not allowed to participate in social security, further diminishing her retirement security.



Frank Flynn and Kelly Erinakes testifying November 30, 2023

Add Your Voice

The Pension Advisory Work Group is collecting testimony as part of its work. General Treasurer James DiOssa has established a site on his website for the Advisory Group, including a link for members to use wishing to submit testimony. You are encouraged to submit testimony to the Pension Advisory Working Group on illustrating how the 2011 law impacted you and what improvements you are asking them to consider. To visit the site, [click here](#). The testimony offered to the Pension Advisory Working Group is being posted on the Treasurer's website.