

Resurrection and Preservation: EcoRI News Roundup

Resurrection of Environmental Bills Held for Further Study in 2021

RI legislators returned to the General Assembly chambers in January, and environmental advocates are hoping to pass an ambitious agenda. The legislature is expected to consider several environmental and climate-related bills that fell by the wayside last session.

At the top of the list of legislative priorities is the reintroduction of the Renewable Energy Standards Act requiring energy providers to source 100 percent of electricity sold in RI from renewable energy by 2030. It passed the Senate last year with 30 votes, before stalling in a House committee.

State lawmakers are prepared to introduce at least three bills targeted at regulating per- and polyfluoroalkyl (PFAS) substances, commonly known as “forever chemicals.” The carcinogens are found in plastics, packaging, waste and water supplies. Researchers have linked these fluorinated chemicals to thyroid disease, low birth weight, cancer and cardiovascular disease.

In 2019 the RI Department of Health officials found 48 percent of RI’s drinking-water sites tested positive for PFAS, with 24 percent containing elevated levels above the recommended standard.

One of the big victories for environmental advocates in 2021 was the Ocean State Climate Adaptation and Resilience (OSCAR) Fund, which provides grant funding to municipalities and state agencies for adapting public infrastructure for climate-change impacts, preserving public access to the shoreline, and providing a match to help local municipalities acquire federal money. The law, however, was passed without any funding mechanism. Advocates say they will attempt to get OSCAR funded this year.

While specifics are still being worked out, bottle deposit bills are expected to make a return to the legislature after a brief absence. In 2020, Rep. **Carol Hagan McEntee** (D-South Kingstown), introduced a bill to place a 10-cent redemption rate on returned bottles. The measure was projected to divert some 15,000 tons of plastic containers annually from the Central Landfill in Johnson. Trade and business groups claimed the rate, higher than RI’s neighboring states, would cut into beverage sales and increase costs for rent, labor, energy and food.

Warwick Has Dwindling Green Space and Wants to Save it

The Warwick Land Trust Committee is proposing a bold initiative to protect what little remains of the city’s green space: a \$15 million bond referendum on this year’s ballot to conserve nearly a dozen properties totaling some 500 acres.

During the past seven decades, the city’s open space has shrunk significantly. In the 1950s, most of southern and western Warwick was farmland and forestland. Today, apart from Morris Farm and the few farms left in the Potowomut area, the farmland has disappeared and the forestland has been fragmented, with much of it clear-cut.

The majority of the city’s remaining open space can be found in the hillside neighborhood of Cowesett

and in the Natick area.

“The large areas of open space left are at risk of becoming solar fields or being developed into housing,” Land Trust Committee member **Nathan Cornell** said. “This is what is left, and we need to protect it for future generations and for the health of the community.”

If successful, he believes it would be the biggest conservation initiative in the city’s history. The bond figure of \$15 million was derived from property assessments.

Battery Storage Facility Loses Charge

The company behind RI’s first utility-scale battery storage facility, a key component for renewable energy sources, has officially pulled the plug on the project.

Developer Plus Power, a San Francisco-based company that specializes in energy storage, proposed building a battery facility to store electricity generated from renewable energy sources. A spokesperson for the company confirmed that it has officially scrapped the proposed site in the village of West Kingston but declined to say why.

Town Council President **Abel Collins** expressed disappointment over the project’s cancellation. “I am supportive of large-scale battery storage installations, in addition to smaller-scale commercial and residential storage,” he said. “I would have liked to see it come to fruition.”

Project developers were planning on placing a series of 40-foot shipping containers on 7.4 acres of property near the train station. The containers would hold the inverters, transformers and batteries expected to store between 3.5 and 4.5 megawatts each, to total 140 megawatts of power.

The death of the battery project is a setback for renewable energy in the state. Utility-scale battery storage is a necessary component for transitioning to renewable energy. Green energy sources are limited by intermittency: the times when the sun doesn’t shine, and the wind doesn’t blow.

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