

Thirty years on, much changed, much the same

Dawn broke a cheery red, vanquishing the shadows on Mohegan bluffs. Bull rakers were out in a placid Greenwich Cove. Yellow school buses, noisy with the exuberance of third graders, wound their way through the streets of Cumberland. RISD and Johnson & Wales students explored new food ideas. The commute on Route 95 slowed at the “S” curve in Pawtucket and at the Route 10 Connector. In Providence, civic leaders gathered to discuss whether it was possible to move rivers and create a destination downtown. 1986 was a time of optimism.

There were stresses, however, and many remain familiar. Rhode Island was still feeling the effects of the loss of Navy jobs in Newport and at Quonset. The workers’ compensation system was in critical condition. We were behind the curve in impactful ‘high tech’ and ‘bio tech’ industries and ‘software’ sounded like a textile produced in Woonsocket. Reinvestment was lacking. New shopping areas like malls in Warwick flattened downtown retail, educational progress stalled and failed minority communities. The gimlet eyes of Rhode Island voters and taxpayers toward governmental initiatives revealed skepticism, the economy was graying as were our demographics. Governmental scandals and failures would be discovered in the near future.

Rhode Island, always an idiosyncratic if not quirky place, survived. The economy slowly improved, the Navy came back through and with Electric Boat, universities and colleges flourished, high tech and bio tech entities arrived from out of state, we managed through a workers’ compensation crisis. We endured the closure of RISDIC-insured credit unions and loan and investment companies, lived through political and judicial scandals, isolated cases of corruption, the foreclosure crisis, and the most recent debacle, the failure of 38 Studios. We experienced the booms and busts of the national economy, and while we suffered through the busts, we enjoyed the booms. We were proud when the cranes dotted the Providence skyline, Newport reinvented itself into a tourist designation, Quonset Point became a magnet of jobs, a distinctive airport was built, and a mini-renaissance took place in Providence concurrent with the moving of the rivers. Our optimism was nourished by a sense of what could be, that we could thrive and not just survive.

During our booms and busts, some things that did not change have become, self-evidentially even more essential to our economy and our way of life. For example, our natural resources, i.e., Narragansett Bay, our shoreline and ports, our geographical position on the Atlantic Coast, freshwater availability, our educational institutions. Coupled with a population of working, socially conscious people, the building blocks of success and sustainability are in place.

But challenges remain.

We long not to be at the “end of the economic food chain” nor a place where economic growth, more often than not, lags the country at large. We seek to match our sense of social concern and largess in areas such as welcoming immigrants and Medicaid expansion with our need to promote and pay for appropriate and much needed infrastructure improvements and a first class educational opportunity for our children. State and local governments must be more accountable, thereby diminishing the ‘only in Rhode Island’ skepticism that haunts the public square.

This morning, the cliffs of Block Island were pink once again, bull rakers began their arduous work day, school buses wound their ways through forested routes of western Rhode Island, the traffic commute took five minutes longer, a new restaurant opened in Warren, and business leaders met to discuss how to diversify our economy and take advantage of what we offer to the world.

The Biggest Little State may not yet be the busiest, but it seems to be trying!
Once again.

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