

Never Again:

Accountability and Expertise to Stop the Next Bridge Disaster

A Plan to Create the Office of Safety and Accountability, Putting Taxpayers and Safety Ahead of Contractor Profits

Just over two years ago, the westbound side of the Washington Bridge was shut down because it was in imminent danger of collapsing. Now Rhode Islanders wake up to longer commute times, meaning more hassle and less time to spend with their families at home during the workday. It has been devastating for small businesses, including restaurants, local stores, and service providers who rely on the bridge traffic. It's incredibly frustrating for anyone trying to drive to see friends, shop, get to our beaches or head to Providence for dinner. It is a glaring failure of our state government.

Putting up roadside signs thanking people for their "patience" is all the more aggravating. Rhode Islanders should not have to wait this long because state leaders failed to adequately inspect our bridges, take action to fix problems, and—after the bridge had to be shut down—secure a contract to rebuild in a timely manner. The other recent high-profile national bridge failures we've seen were the result of an enormous cargo ship plowing into one of the main supporting piers of a bridge in Baltimore and a tanker truck fire on I-95 in Pennsylvania. Here in Rhode Island, the shutdown of the Washington Bridge was self-inflicted. The only cause is that we failed to adequately monitor and repair a major commuter bridge before it got to this point.

Hindsight is 20/20, and simply assigning blame doesn't get anyone out of a traffic jam on the Washington Bridge any quicker. What concerns me is that we saw this debacle unfold, but nothing has changed. We've continued with business as usual at RIDOT. No one has been held accountable. [We are still employing some of the same contractors who we are actively suing.](#) We've made no meaningful changes to how our bridges are inspected or repaired. We haven't increased transparency. I applaud the General Assembly for finally putting Director Alvitì under oath and holding an illuminating hearing, but what action came out of this?

For Rhode Islanders asking how we are going to avoid this happening again—what are we telling them?

I'm proposing some pragmatic steps, including conducting a full accounting of RIDOT practices and the failures surrounding the Washington Bridge, increasing oversight through audits of our infrastructure contracts, bringing additional engineering expertise in-house at RIDOT, and establishing a new safety and accountability office to rebuild trust with Rhode Islanders.

We're a small state; we should be able to keep our bridges functional and open.

-Helena



Hold the Department of Transportation Accountable

Fire the RIDOT Director

RIDOT is one of our most important agencies, with a billion-dollar annual budget. It should be led with competence, efficiency, and accountability.

As governor, it would be my job to manage the head of RIDOT, and it is the Director of RIDOT's job to effectively manage the department. This clearly did not happen. [Under oath, Peter Alviti couldn't](#) recall the name of his program manager in charge of inspections two years after the bridge saga began. His stated reason for not knowing their name is that this safety inspector was five levels of bureaucracy below the director. And he [doesn't even know if his agency has the original plans](#) for the bridge. Even worse, Alviti admitted that RIDOT doesn't have a system to ensure contractors conducting bridge inspections have done so properly, while continuing to completely dodge accountability and blame those same contractors he hired. He must go and will be gone before the end of my first day as governor.

A Complete Investigation

But this problem goes deeper than a single state employee and decades of poor management. It requires a full investigation of RIDOT practices—not just around the Washington Bridge. We won't fix these problems until we understand exactly what went wrong. While the legislature has finally held hearings and—two years after the bridge was closed—required Director Alviti to testify under oath, this oversight has not resulted in any meaningful action or proposed changes to how the department is run. Meanwhile, instead of taking responsibility and providing a full accounting of what went wrong, the Governor's Office is trying to blame others. That ends when I am governor. We will have a complete investigation that will hold those responsible to account for their actions and stop them from hiding behind litigation to avoid responsibility.

Audit Existing Contracts

The process by which contracts are awarded and reviewed at RIDOT is not accountable to Rhode Islanders. Director Alviti continues to employ contractors who the state is simultaneously suing for negligence and breach of contract on the Washington Bridge. We must audit all existing major DOT contracts to ensure these vendors to the state are meeting their contractual obligations and to ensure that campaign contributions haven't forced taxpayers into raw deals. This audit will be complete and made public within my first year in office.

Conduct a Review of Best Practices Around the Country and World

Clearly Rhode Island's approach isn't working, but we don't need to reinvent the wheel. We should look around the country for best practices to reform RIDOT and equip the office with the people and tools needed to ensure safety, rather than simply relying on contractors' word.



Stop Outsourcing Safety to Contractors

When testifying, Director Alviti [noted the agency has no system in place to ensure that contractors conducting bridge inspections do so properly](#). He argued that “private sector companies have more expertise than RIDOT in building bridges, and the state hires multiple companies to check each other’s work as a form of accountability.” Of the very contractors that led us to this place, he said, [“we don’t second-guess them.”](#) This practice is putting the people of Rhode Island at risk.

RIDOT must have the expertise in-house to hold contractors accountable and ensure every single bridge in the state is safe for Rhode Islanders to drive on. Instead of spending [\\$200 million on safety inspection contractors](#) and simply taking their word, we need to bring engineering expertise inside of RIDOT to check the contractors’ work and ensure taxpayers are getting their money’s worth.

[The federal Government Accountability Office found](#) that outsourcing to contractors was “more expensive than performing work in-house, particularly for engineering services.” [Multiple studies have shown that bringing this capacity in-house will save money](#) because the state is more likely to get a bid right the first time and avoid costly mistakes. In fact, RIDOT’s own [Ten-Year Transportation Improvement Program Proposal for FY 2016-2025](#) states: “In order to save money, it has become imperative to in-source services such as striping, **bridge inspection**, and winter maintenance...An asset management approach to maintenance means that every dollar invested today can save \$3 in costs in future years.” And a [RIDOT press release](#) about the same plan noted that RIDOT “will limit its dependence on consultants, lower administrative costs, and bring certain operations in house including bridge inspection.” A RIDOT with in-house engineering capacity can keep contractors honest, rather than simply taking them at their word.

Create the Office of Safety and Accountability

The status quo has not worked. In order to ensure safety for Rhode Islanders, we need engineering expertise housed within RIDOT. As governor, I will form the Office of Safety and Accountability within RIDOT, which will be empowered to hold contractors accountable and put safety first, ensuring Rhode Island never ends up with a self-inflicted debacle like the Washington Bridge closure ever again. The Office of Safety and Accountability will report directly to the Director of RIDOT.

Show Our Work

In order to reestablish trust and confidence with Rhode Islanders, my administration will re-audit the safety of every bridge in the state and make the findings of this safety audit available to legislators and the public alike.

