



**State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations
President of the Senate
Room 917, State House
Providence
02903**

WILLIAM V. IRONS
PRESIDENT OF THE SENATE
Office (401) 222-8655
Facsimile: (401) 222-2967
Email: sen-irons@riin.state.ri.us
website: www.riin.state.ri.us/irons

Thank You Rhode Island

**President of the Senate William V. Irons'
Departure Communication
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Thank you, Rhode Island

Tenure in the Senate

For 21 years I have had the privilege and the pleasure of serving my constituents in the wonderful communities of Pawtucket and East Providence and the people of Rhode Island. Their confidence has been an honor which has humbled me and for which I will be eternally grateful.

Shortly after Election Day last year, I decided that that 2002 election would be my last. I had served, contributed and reached the pinnacle of my profession as the first President of the Senate in the history of Rhode Island. At the end of 2004 at age 61 it would be time to move on.

The past 21 years – more than a third of my life – have given me the opportunity to play a role along with my Senate colleagues in solving many of the problems our state has faced over those two decades. Many, like the banking crisis, were daunting at their outset but solutions were always achieved.

Reform Efforts

In 2002 when the people demanded a meaningful Separation of Powers amendment to the State Constitution, I committed the prestige of my leadership team to making it happen, despite many in the political arena who felt it was an abdication of authority, rightfully conferred by the constitution of our state.

A number of years ago when our campaign finance system was broken and abused, I co-sponsored legislation to fix it – a solution that has remained largely unchanged for a dozen years; the “Revolving Door Prohibition” and four year terms for our general officers are examples of other significant issues I was honored to work on with my colleagues.

When our people looked up from the rubble of RISDIC and demanded new leadership in the Senate, to sweep out the old ways and bring reform, I worked along with many colleagues to make the needed changes, at great risk to my political career.

Economic and Institutional Undertakings

I was proud to be the lead advocate in the Senate in the restructuring of our electrical utilities system – a change in which Rhode Island led the nation.

Over many years I have been thrilled to participate in rebuilding of our flagship educational institution, the University of Rhode Island. With so many great Rhode Islanders we have truly set that institution on a national leadership course. Go Rhody!

Along with my wife, Mary, we co-chaired and have just completed a successful fundraising drive to build a Family Crisis Center that would help the victims of Domestic Abuse.

And throughout my career I have consistently worked diligently on economic development to create jobs for our future. The last decade has seen many worthwhile results. Keeping our children in Rhode Island in good paying jobs has been a goal for these two decades. Now many more Rhode Island youth have the opportunity to remain in their native state and raise their families.

I believe the legislature deserves much credit for the strength of our Rhode Island economy during the last national recession. The past four years have shown Rhode Island's economy is no longer the first into a recession and the last to emerge. While neighboring states suffered serious unemployment and massive budget shortfalls, slashing services and raising taxes, we have made relatively minor adjustments to keep economic growth on track.

Spirit of Service

I don't recount these accomplishments in order to indulge in self-praise and congratulation. Rather, I do so to illustrate some important facts. First, your State Senate has consistently, and successfully, grappled with the problems we have faced over the last 20 years. I am proud to have made some small contribution. Our successes show that any problem Rhode Island currently faces can be met and mastered with hard work and commitment. And second, these victories show what a public-spirited private citizen can achieve in the public arena with the support of like-minded public servants.

While serving in the Senate has been my passion, I have tried to make certain that public service always remained something that I did – and never allowed it to define me as a person, or who I am. My relationship with those closest to my life, my family and my communities of Pawtucket and East Providence are what define who I am. This distinction and the effort to maintain a clear sense of myself is why I was able to decide to exit the stage and leave the spotlight behind. This approach has also helped me remember who I came to the Senate to serve – the people who sent me.

Business Career

While I have succeeded in government, I have also succeeded throughout my 35 year career in the insurance industry. I have been a national leader in my professional association and I have achieved success by serving my clients with hard work and constant problem solving. I have been honored to have those clients refer me to others. I have been blessed to be a person who has achieved success in both the private and public realm.

Swirl of Innuendo

But now, after 21 years, questions have been raised about me, my clients and my livelihood. These questions are raised despite the fact that I have sought, and received, assurance from the state Ethics Commission that my activities were appropriate and proper. I have always followed my conscience and sought to do the right thing, always erring on the side of caution.

These questions, and the discussion that has surrounded it, raise some serious issues for Rhode Island and the present structure of its part-time citizen legislature. But while these questions are important, they will be addressed on another day by others.

Political Dynamics of the Moment

I have always known that strong leaders create strong enemies. And despite my painstaking efforts to follow the law and the rules as I understand them, some political opponents have begun an attack. Some will raise their questions in the open daylight of the public realm. Others have begun the time-old process of backroom destabilization to bring down my position as President of the Senate.

Ten years ago and in a different set of legislative challenges, I would have stayed and fought – and, I believe, prevailed.

Institution Must Be Above Self

But after 21 years of service and 61 years of life, those closest to me have asked whether this political fight is appropriate in light of the challenges facing our state. After all, this is not about any noble outcome, like Separation of Powers or ethics reforms that would benefit the state. Rather, this battle would mire the Senate in petty, internal bickering that would take place against a backdrop of truly important issues and challenges – a budget deficit, the question of casino gambling and how to build a successful 21st Century economy for Rhode Island, just to name a few. From the Senate's perspective, addressing these problems must take precedence over politics. And from Bill Irons' perspective, after achieving what I have in my Senate career, I have no interest in spending the last legislative session of that career in a mere political fight when there are so many more important issues to address. I was elected Leader in 2001 to end a split in the Senate. I will not allow at the end of my tenure for my presence to lead to a new one.

As President of the Senate, I have cherished the support of my colleagues. They have looked to me to provide the leadership that would pave the way and ease the process

while they worked to solve problems, big and small, on behalf of the people they serve. But leadership is a two-way street. And when the time comes that my presence hinders the conduct of the people's business more than it helps, it is time to go.

Effective noontime January 1, 2004 I will resign from the office of the President of the Senate. Effective February 6, 2004 I will resign my seat in the Rhode Island State Senate and after 21 years willingly return to my life as a private citizen. While I expect this will raise questions in the minds of some, I am confident time will answer the questions in a manner reinforcing my years of service.

I wish my colleagues in the Senate and the House and the Carcieri administration all the success in the coming year in meeting the challenges they will face.

I leave with no regrets and with an optimistic and hopeful view of the future for my home state where I've lived and which I have loved my entire life.

Thank you, Rhode Island.