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Newsroom: Rhodes '12 On Environmental Enforcement

Roger Williams University School of Law

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Newsroom

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Rhodes '12 On Environmental Enforcement

Clean Water Action Rhode Island Director Jamie Rhodes '12 highlights electronic waste-recycling programs as a sign of environmental progress in the state.

From PROVIDENCE BUSINESS NEWS: "[NEWSMAKERS: Time to step up enforcement of environmental regulations](#)" by Marc Mainville, PBN Staff Writer



KEEPING IT CLEAN: Clean Water Action Rhode Island Director **Jamie Rhodes [RWU Law '12]** highlights electronic waste-recycling programs as a sign of environmental progress in the state.

INTERVIEW: Jamie Rhodes

POSITION: Rhode Island state director, Clean Water Action

BACKGROUND: Rhodes has spent his entire professional career in environmental advocacy. He began his career as a Clean Water Action canvasser in Pennsylvania in 2006 and climbed the ranks within that branch of the organization. He moved to Rhode Island Clean Water Action in 2007 to work as a canvass director before leaving the organization in 2009 to attend law school. He is scheduled to graduate from the law school at Roger Williams University this spring.

EDUCATION: Bachelor's degrees in both history and politics, University of California at Santa Cruz, 2006

FIRST JOB: Babysitter beginning at age 15

RESIDENCE: Providence

AGE: 28



Jamie Rhodes was named director of Clean Water Action

Rhode Island on Feb. 1. Rhodes believes his biggest initial challenge will be continuing the strong reputation Clean Water Action has built as an environmental voice in Rhode Island under his predecessor, Sheila Dormody. Dormody left the organization late last year when she was named Providence's sustainability director. Clean Water Action is celebrating its 40th anniversary and Rhodes will advocate for programs that require more responsible waste disposal.

PBN: *What is your top priority as you begin to lead the efforts of Clean Water Action?*

RHODES: We need to continue the campaign for extended producer-responsibility programs. It's essential for our waste-management systems in Rhode Island that we're able to put together a program that's coordinated, effective, and efficient and links producers and manufacturers of consumer products to the end-life of those products. A program like this will lead to more products that are recyclable, less toxic and that the burden of the end-life of these products is not on us as consumers, or our cities and towns.

PBN: *So the producers of a product should bear greater responsibility for how it is disposed?*

RHODES: This cycle needs to look at the manufacturers, the distributors, the retailers, the consumers and the communities that run the landfills. We need to look at this as a continuum, as opposed to a linear goal that once you manufacture it, it is not your problem anymore, because it is. As the manufacturer, you're the only one who actually knows what's in it. It's about putting together a comprehensive program that allows us to not rely on the landfill as a dumping ground for what can be seriously toxic items.

***PBN:** Are strides already being made in Rhode Island?*

RHODES: Some of the things our state has already done have been great. We've put these programs in place for individual products. We currently have electronic waste-recycling programs where some manufacturers are taking responsibility for the end-life of electronics. What we need to do is keep learning from these individual programs so we can try to put together a framework that can address any new product on the market.

***PBN:** What do you see as the biggest environmental issue facing the state right now?*

RHODES: One of the things we need to see as a state is the enforcement mechanisms come forward and actually give teeth to the environmental regulations that have been put in place. We put all these great laws into effect but we're not getting the benefit on a personal level, on a health level, on a public-health level, without actual enforcement. It is also unfair to businesses if one business follows all the rules, but the competition down the street isn't because there's no enforcement mechanism.

***PBN:** Do you find it harder to fight for the environment during difficult economic times? Can a focus on environmental health actually help the economy?*

RHODES: We feel that most when we're working with the state government. Cities and towns recognize that if we were to make some systemic changes it could provide some relief on the burden they face to fund municipal services. With the state, anytime an issue gets flagged as having an impact on the state budget, it is not an easy process these days. That's just the nature of our economy right now. ...We are dealing with a situation where our budget is tight and that's why when we talk about these enforcement mechanisms, these can not only be revenue-neutral proposals but actually revenue enhancements for the state.

Beyond revenue from enforcement, environmental health can help the economy in other ways. So much of that has to do with our tourism industry, our fishing, and all of these things that require a healthy environment to succeed. For us to be able to continue to have business development that requires our natural resources, we need to look at it on a sustainable-management level. I think we're going to get that

type of investment, that type of growth; entrepreneurs going out there and saying you know what, I think we have a lot to offer for this state, if we have a healthy environment to support my investment.

PBN: How do you measure success when you advocate for an issue as wide-ranging as the environment?

RHODES: One of our biggest successes as an organization is when we change the dialogue surrounding environmental issues. Getting back to the solid-waste issue; if we are able to change the discussion from the linear thought of manufacturers to landfill, to one where people see the other option of a cycle from manufacturers to distributors to retailers, to consumers, to recyclers, back to manufacturers, than I think we have done a good job.

PBN: What drives you to be an environmental advocate?

RHODES: When I left school I didn't see that as my future. ... Once I got involved, I realized that it is an issue I believe in. ... I don't feel like I'm ever compromising my morals or my view of what I'd like to see as a society. ... There are times in other organizing efforts where you really need to compromise your principals to see effective action, but with the environment it never looks that way because what's on the other side from this doesn't make sense from my perspective; to say that we can destroy the environment to further human progress. You don't get the human progress if you fail at protecting the most valuable resource we have. •

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