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January 26, 2022

Law School News

The Dean Meets the Governor

RWU Law Dean Gregory W. Bowman recently sat down with Rhode Island Governor Daniel J. McKee to discuss issues of common concern to both the Statehouse and the Ocean State's only law school. Here are some excerpts.

January 26, 2022

| Michael M. Bowden



RWU Law Dean Gregory W. Bowman and Rhode Island Governor Daniel J. McKee on a portico overlooking downtown Providence. Image Credit: James Jones/RWU Law

ON THE PANDEMIC RECOVERY

Governor McKee: Dean Bowman, you and I both took office in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is what I would call a baptism under fire. We were tested! But overall, the state of Rhode Island has done extremely well. For example, back in March we were hovering around

the lowest vaccination rates and highest infection rates in the country. Today, we're the second-most vaccinated population with virtually the lowest infection rate in the country. On the economic side, we were able to open up our economy sooner. Right now, according to the Moody's Back-to-Normal Index, Rhode Island is the fastest-improving economy in the Northeast—and we just became the third-fastest recovering economy in the country.

Dean Bowman: That's fantastic to hear, Governor. The role of businesses, both small and large, is going to be very, very important in the economic recovery. Your administration has been very supportive of that, and the School of Law is also working hard—for example, through its Small Business Start-up Clinic and other experiential programs—to lend its support to this effort. Small businesses in particular are an important part of this state's future. So I think that focusing on them—focusing on helping people create their own jobs and chart their own futures—is deeply important.

I'd love to hear your thoughts on economic revitalization in Rhode Island—how your administration is working to support a vibrant future for businesses in the state.

McKee: Well, for starters we ensured that federal funds became available to our small business community. One of the first things I did as governor, in fact, was to activate about \$30 million in funds that went out to well over 4,500 businesses at \$5,000 per small business—that really helped.

And now we've developed the RI 2030 plan, which factors in local businesses, support for families and health care, support for the Blue Economy and the Green Economy, and talks about how small businesses fit into that picture. *[Released on Oct. 15, the RI 2030 plan outlines the McKee administration's vision for the state's economic recovery and "what we want Rhode Island to look like in the years ahead," setting out priorities for spending the state's share of American Rescue Plan funds and, eventually, Build Back Better funds. For more information, visit <https://www.ri2030.com>.]*

Bowman: That's really exciting. On a related note, Roger Williams University is working to establish a new Real Estate Center of Excellence, which will focus on various issues relating to real estate—including real estate development, real estate management, community development, the effects of climate change on community resiliency, and more.

Also, the University's Blue Economy Center of Excellence will focus on community and economic issues, while also bringing in other areas of opportunity for economic growth, such as maritime commerce, renewable energy, aquaculture, and so on. In other words, I think there is a lot of overlap between RWU Law's goals and your administration's goals: not just to maintain the economy, but really help it grow and thrive.

McKee: What you're doing is really great leadership because we have an incredible opportunity, coming out of the pandemic, to reset our state. We've historically been the first in and the last out of economic downturns. But today, we're holding on to first in the Northeast, and third in the country—and we can maintain that with good leadership.

Bowman: People often talk about a small state being disadvantaged because of its size, but in some ways it's a big advantage because we can be nimble. We can put programs in place and see the immediate impact. And in terms of returning to normalcy, when you put money and effort into supporting small businesses—providing them with support, places to start, jobs to create, legal representation—the return on investment is just enormous.

McKee: We're definitely making an effort to embrace our small businesses, but we can do more. One of my goals as governor is to increase per capita income across the board in all communities. When you develop an economy, you're going to increase per capita income. But to do that, you need not only entrepreneurs, but a trained and skilled workforce. And that's what you're building at Roger Williams University. As you know, a number of your law graduates are working with me here—the advantages of our good relationship with the state's only law school are not lost on us. And we're interested in any way you can work with us to create a more small-business friendly state. We're really making an intentional effort to do that.

ON COASTAL RESILIENCY

Bowman: Can you talk a little bit about your administration's efforts to help build coastal resiliency?

McKee: A number of the foundations had been set before I became governor, but I was pleased to sign the Act on Climate [on April 14, 2021], which is an effort to reduce our carbon emissions by 45 percent by 2030, then 80 percent by 2040, and then to become carbon neutral by 2050. And as part of the RI2030 plan, we've activated a committee to really dig into this issue. In addition, we have a goal of reaching 100 percent renewable on our energy grid by 2030.

Off of Block Island, we have the first wind turbine farm in America. And we're looking at another 50 wind turbines to be built about 15 miles off our coast, which will provide us with about 400 megawatts of energy and the equivalent of 25 percent of our energy needs, and which will electrify as many as 270,000 homes. Based on what we have in place right now and what is coming, I believe we'll meet those goals. And every time you commit to a renewable, like wind or solar, you're creating jobs—well-paying jobs, which move us further toward our goal of raising per capita income.

Bowman: That's really exciting. One of the things that appealed to me about coming to Rhode Island was the fact that RWU Law is home to the Marine Affairs Institute, through which the law school works closely with the Rhode Island Sea Grant Legal Program and the University of Rhode Island. The opportunity to engage in work related to coastal resiliency and renewables, and to see the impact of this work on the local economy, was very interesting to me.

And of course, there is an exciting overlap between the first two Centers of Excellence that RWU is establishing in the areas of Real Estate and the Blue Economy. Those centers both address community resiliency and sustainable coastal futures, including the effects of climate change and how we can ensure that Rhode Island's communities adapt and thrive. We are the Ocean State, after all, and these centers can be especially impactful here: there are impacts of

climate change that Rhode Island needs to be prepared for, but there are also opportunities that the state can take advantage of.

McKee: Yes, we *are* the Ocean State and our need for resiliency is real. The climate issues are real, and Rhode Island is front and center: I recently read that we've had an 11-inch rise in our water levels in Newport since 1990 or so. We're right in the middle of the eye of the storm, so to speak. So all that resiliency is really important.

ON IMMIGRATION

Bowman: As you know, Rhode Island is home to a very diverse immigrant community. Could you talk a bit about the challenges these communities are facing today and how your administration is reaching out?

McKee: It's a combination of things, both long- and short-term strategies. Rhode Island has always been a place that welcomes a diverse population from around the world, and first-generation immigrants have always found their place in our communities.

Education is a big part of that, and I've been involved in education strategies now for 20 years or so. In particular, we've developed schools that really reach out to communities and families that are struggling financially and close the learning gaps that exist, particularly in the Hispanic community. So that's a step in the long term. At the level of higher education, I just signed a bill last week which makes sure that if you're living in Rhode Island, regardless of your residency status, you can have in-state tuition, which opens opportunities as well.

In the shorter term, we're really taking care of minority business enterprises—making sure we follow the rules on the percentage of state contracts they receive and making an effort to understand that, for minority-owned businesses and women-owned businesses, access to capital is a challenge. So we're making an effort, when we distribute federal funds, to make sure that a certain percentage goes to these businesses.

Bowman: It sounds like you're involved in both strategic planning and action based on values. At the law school, our Immigration Law Clinic—run by a graduate of our law school, Professor Deborah Gonzalez '07—is also doing great work for the immigrant community. And within a robust clinical law program, when you have multiple clinics, there can also be provision of services to a client in more than one area. For example, a client might have an immigration issue, but also own a small business or want to start a small business. By helping that client in both areas, we've just created a job. That sort of overlap is one of the great strengths of legal education and experiential learning through our clinical programs.

McKee: Our Hispanic community is one of the highest-growing populations for small businesses right now. That's why Rhode Island is wise to invest in the work that you were just talking about, both for the short-term goals of aligning people with jobs and encouraging them to open up their own businesses, and the long-term goal of investing in these people through education.

Bowman: About 10% of our law students are first-generation students. I'm really proud of the work those students are doing and the policies that got them there. On a personal note, my father was a first-generation student himself. His mother had maybe a 6th grade education. My mom's dad was first-generation too. I am where I am because of the opportunities that my parents had. And seeing that process repeating through the eyes of RWU Law's students really moves me.

McKee: I recall that the value of RWU Law was somewhat debated in the beginning—did we really need a law school, and so on—but today, 30 years later, it's very much established itself as Rhode Island's law school. It's part of the state's culture, and we're all really proud of that. Our School of Law really matters, providing access to a legal education, and room for high-level legal discussions and scholarship right here at home. That matters a lot.

Bowman: It's interesting, Governor. Thirty years ago, back when I went to law school, the main goal of many students was just to get out and get a good-paying job with a law firm. Fifteen or 20 years ago, we began to see a shift—students said they wanted to go out and do well, and then, later in their careers, to start making a difference. But according to surveys of today's law students, they want to come in and make a difference *right now*. They're coming to law school to make the world a better place right now. Which may sound sentimental, but it's a fact. That's what law students are telling us. And so at RWU Law we have a law school that gives our students that opportunity: to work in state government, federal government, the public interest sector, as public defenders, or anything else they want to do—business, real estate, you name it.

McKee: And there is a lot of need for their services, in Rhode Island and beyond.

Bowman: Absolutely. Thank you for your time, Governor McKee.

McKee: It's been a pleasure, Dean Bowman.