



May 27, 2026

COMMENTS ON BILL 2026 - S 2599
An Act Relating to Criminal Procedure – Railroad, Steamboat, and Bridge Police

These comments are submitted on behalf of ACCESS/RI, and its members, the American Civil Liberties Union of Rhode Island, Common Cause Rhode Island, the League of Women Voters, the New England First Amendment Coalition, and the Rhode Island Press Association.

We strongly oppose Bill S 2599, which would have sweeping impact on a small but vitally important section of law enforcement records, both shielding those records from the public, and setting a dangerous precedent for other potential public record restrictions.

By design, the language of the bill leaves no room for equivocation; no option for a balancing test to determine public interest; no standing for the public. It states that: “Any police report” and “all communications between police officers and railroad crew members” shall not be made public. This carveout neuters and undermines the existing Rhode Island Access to Public Records Act, which makes it clear that records maintained by a law enforcement agency are in the public interest and are to be considered public, unless there could be an “unwarranted invasion of personal privacy” or other specific reasons to keep records private. These privacy exemptions and the existing APRA language are sufficient to balance the interests of public vs. private in cases involving a railroad fatality.

This bill is overly restrictive and potentially hostile to the public interest. We hope the day never comes, but if Rhode Island were ever to experience a tragic, large-scale railroad incident, such as a collision or derailment, resulting in fatalities, then all law enforcement records relating to the incident would be shielded from the public — despite the obvious and overwhelming public interest in what happened and why. Imagine the worst had happened and the Washington Bridge had collapsed, resulting in a fatality. If a bill such as this applied to bridge fatalities, the government could release records related to a bridge’s construction, history, and design, but nothing related to the catastrophic failure that resulted.

The potential precedent set by this bill is equally troubling. APRA is commonly under attack from special interest groups hoping to shield records in their narrow area of focus. Passage of this bill would give a green light to future carveouts for dubious reasons.

We strongly urge the Judiciary Committee and the General Assembly to reject this bill.

Thank you for considering our comments.

Scott Pickering, President
ACCESS/RI

Linda Lotridge Levin
Rhode Island Press Association

Steven Brown, Executive Director
American Civil Liberties Union of Rhode Island

John Marion, Executive Director
Common Cause Rhode Island

Justin Silverman, Executive Director
New England First Amendment Coalition

Jane W. Koster
League of Women Voters of Rhode Island