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A walk through state's past and future

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SOUTH KINGSTOWN — I hiked along the bike trail in South County during the holiday break to learn about the area's past and what it had to teach.

The 8.5-mile path starts at the Amtrak station here, crosses the Great Swamp, and then passes through Peace Dale and Wakefield before running to the Narragansett town beach.

The first clue to its history shows up almost immediately. Partially hidden by tall grass along the trail is a 60-foot diameter, double ring of granite blocks.

The stone structure, built in 1876, once supported a huge turntable where shuttle trains could be turned 180 degrees to make trips back and forth between Kingston and Narragansett.

The path I walked formed the bed for the tracks of the Narragansett Pier Railroad, which carried passengers and freight for more than 100 years.

Visitors from throughout the country used the rail link that connected to East Coast trunk lines to vacation in Narragansett or hop a ferry to Newport. Railroad cars carried raw materials to the mills in Peace Dale and Wakefield where factory workers made textiles. The trains carried the finished products to other railroads, which shipped them to transportation hubs and ports on the Atlantic Ocean.

The Narragansett Pier Railroad connected Rhode Island to the world. The short line created jobs, wealth and a reputation for the people who made a living here.

The old railroad went out of business in 1978, a victim of changing economies and transportation systems.

But the lesson it left behind is clear — our state can't be an island. It must be part of a global economy if Rhode Islanders are to prosper.

The state's current transportation system includes an excellent interstate highway system and the remaining railroads, both passenger and freight, still play a role in our economy. But much more needs to be done.

T.F. Green Airport is a regional transportation hub that attracts visitors, students, business people, researchers and other travelers. The number of passengers who use Green is shrinking, however, and last year's totals will fall well below the 2004 numbers. There needs to be a new focus on attracting more airlines and expanding the runways to offer more domestic and international flights.

Besides highways, airports and railroads, shipping remains an important connection to the global economy, but is one

of Rhode Island's weakest links. Quonset Point is an excellent site to connect our coast to trade routes. But deep-seated opposition in South County and by Governor Carcieri to any significant port expansion seems strong enough to kill plans. That's too bad.

Besides improving physical transportation links, regions also can connect to the world through communications and ideas.

The plans pushed by state leaders to create a border-to-border, broadband wireless network, making Rhode Island the nation's first wi-fi state, has merit. But the cost of \$20 million or more should be paid by private companies, not the taxpayers.

And the growing telecommunications competition between giants Verizon and Cox will benefit consumers and companies that need fast, reliable connections to do business.

The communication and collaboration among our public and private research universities must also be encouraged. The ideas that come out of classrooms will create and support new businesses that sell products worldwide and create jobs and wealth.

Brown University is a leader in biomedical research and is expanding its campus in Providence. The University of Rhode Island in South County is also doing more. URI recently hired Peter Alfonso as its new vice provost for research. His job is to boost the university's share of research grants, collaborate more with private industry and help faculty members turn their inventions into saleable products.

Rhode Islanders should embrace the concept that the state can be a breeding ground for innovation. That type of economy encourages companies here to find new ways to expand and identifies Rhode Island as a small, manageable place to test new ideas for national issues such as education, health care and public safety

All those thoughts come to mind while walking on a quiet bike path in the woods where railroads once rumbled. Back then, the rails helped make Rhode Island an industrial power and a tourist mecca.

Here's another thought. In a hundred years, what will a hiker find that explains what we built and left for our successors?