

Shoreline Public Access in Rhode Island: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

1. What is public shoreline access in Rhode Island?

Public shoreline access refers to the public's legal right to reach and enjoy the shoreline for activities like walking, fishing, swimming, and boating. This right is protected under the Rhode Island State Constitution. There are different forms of access; these are referred to "lateral" beach access, meaning access along the water, as well as "perpendicular" rights of way to get to lateral access.

2. Who manages public shoreline access in Rhode Island?

The **Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council (CRMC)** is responsible for designating and managing public rights-of-way (ROWs) to the shore. They work with municipalities and community groups to ensure these access points are protected and maintained so that people can reach the shore. The public can also gain access to the shore through federal, municipal and state parks and beaches, which are managed by the municipal, state and federal governments.

3. What is a Right-of-Way (ROW) to the shoreline?

A ROW is a legally recognized path that allows the public to reach the shoreline. It does not imply ownership of the land but secures public access across it. ROWs can include roads, paths, or walkways that lead to tidal waters. The Coastal Resources Management Council manages and designates state-designated Rights of Ways. There are also town and municipal rights-of-ways to the shore, that are managed by the locality.

4. How many shoreline access points are there in Rhode Island?

As of 2024, the CRMC has designated **over 216 ROWs** throughout the state's 400+ miles of coastline. Additionally, there are hundreds of state and municipal rights-of-ways designated throughout the state.

5. How does the CRMC designate a ROW?

Designation involves:

- Researching legal documents and land records
- Hosting public hearings
- Confirming public use or legal right
- Recording the ROW in official CRMC maps and documents

Municipalities often initiate this process, and community support plays a key role.

6. How can I find public access points to the shore?

The CRMC maintains a **GIS-based online mapping tool** where users can:

- Locate designated CRMC ROWs
- Access site photos and details
- View directions and access features

🔗 Visit: <https://www.crmc.ri.gov/publicaccess.html>

Rhode Island Sea Grant maintains an online tool that allows users to **filter public access points** by activity.

🔗 Visit: <https://www.shoreline-ri.com/>

7. Are there equity efforts to improve access for all communities?

Yes. In 2022, CRMC launched a project funded by NOAA to assess and improve shoreline access equity, especially in underserved urban areas like Providence and Cranston. The goal is to create a **5-year Public Shoreline Access Management Plan (PSAMP)** based on community input. While the funding for this work was terminated by the federal government in 2025, efforts toward this ultimate goal continue.

8. What challenges does public access face?

Key issues include:

- Blocked or obstructed access points
 - Limited signage and awareness
 - Inadequate parking near access points
 - Environmental degradation or lack of maintenance
 - Lack of knowledge or understanding of the public's right to access points
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9. What can I do if I encounter a blocked access point?

You can report blocked or poorly maintained access point directly to the CRMC or your local municipality. Community vigilance is vital to keeping access open.

10. What is lateral shoreline access?

Lateral shoreline access refers to the public's right to move along the shoreline, typically between the high tide line and the water's edge. This right allows individuals to walk along the beach, fish, or leave the shore to swim.

11. What did the 2023 legislation change regarding lateral access?

In June 2023, Rhode Island enacted a law that expanded the public's lateral access area. The law established that the public may exercise their rights up to 10 feet landward of the "recognizable high tide line"—the line marked by seaweed, scum, or other debris left by the tide. This change aimed to provide a clearer, more visible boundary for public access, replacing the previous reliance on the mean high water line, which was difficult to determine without scientific equipment.

12. Are there any restrictions on this expanded access?

Yes. The law specifies that public access does not extend to areas where no passable shore exists, nor does it permit use of land above the vegetation line, lawns, rocky cliffs, sea walls, or other legally constructed shoreline infrastructure. Additionally, there is no entitlement for the public to use amenities privately owned by others, such as cabanas, decks, or beach chairs.

13. Has the new law faced any legal challenges?

Yes. Anytime a new law is enacted that affects the delicate balance between private and public rights along the shoreline, challenges are to be expected. These intersections can often raise complex and contentious issues. Nevertheless, the State of Rhode Island has a long history of protecting the public's constitutionally protected rights to access the shore, and stands ready to uphold and defend the law, ensuring that its intent and integrity are maintained.

14. How can I get involved?




You can:

- Attend public meetings
- Participate in shoreline cleanups
- Collaborate with local harbor commissions
- Advocate for more ROW designations in your town or city

Organizations like **Save The Bay** and the **Narragansett Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve** also offer volunteer opportunities. Visit <https://savebay.org/> and <http://nbnerr.org/> to learn more.

15. Where can I learn more?

For details on public access, ROW maps, and current initiatives:

-  CRMC Homepage: www.crmc.ri.gov
-  Email: cstaff1@crm.ri.gov
-  Phone: (401) 783-3370