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DOUBLE DUTY

Is it time for R.I.'s citizen legislature to become full time?

BY CASSIUS SHUMAN | Shuman@PBN.com

EVERY year, Rhode Island's 113-member citizen legislature has plenty to pack into a six-month session. This year has been no different.

Major issues debated include raising the minimum wage, legalizing marijuana, hashing out a 20-year lottery contract and affordable housing, not to mention helping navigate Rhode Island out of an economy-crushing pandemic.

And, oh yeah, there's the passage of a state budget that

could exceed \$12 billion next fiscal year.

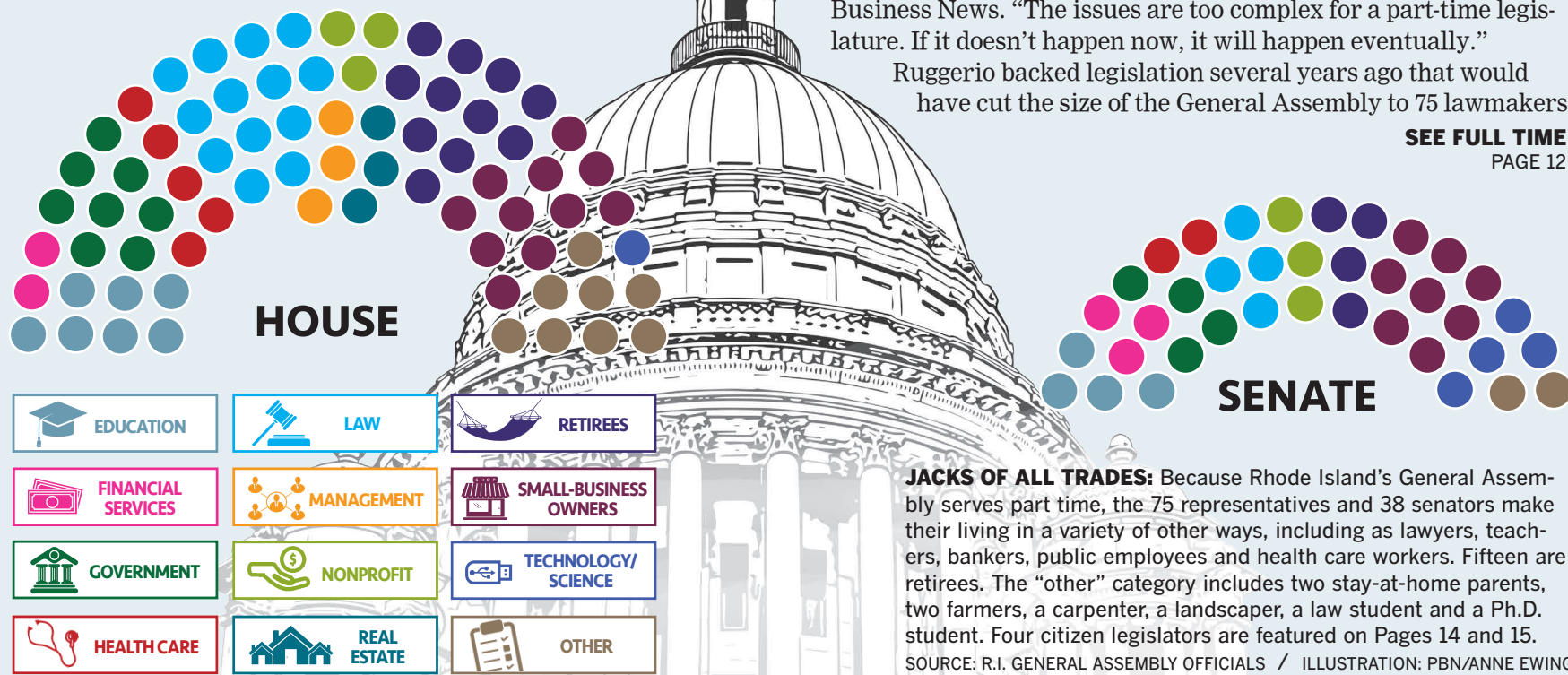
It's no wonder that Senate President Dominick J. Ruggerio doesn't shy away when the topic of the General Assembly's part-time status is raised.

Ruggerio, a Providence Democrat, says the job of legislating – even in the smallest state in the union – has grown too sophisticated to be handled by politicians often distracted with day jobs outside of the Statehouse. He'd like to see the General Assembly become a full-time, professional body.

"The time has come," the retired labor official told Providence Business News. "The issues are too complex for a part-time legislature. If it doesn't happen now, it will happen eventually."

Ruggerio backed legislation several years ago that would have cut the size of the General Assembly to 75 lawmakers

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Lawyers only constant in ever-evolving assembly

BY CASSIUS SHUMAN | Shuman@PBN.com

FARMERS WERE A POWERFUL VOTING BLOC in Rhode Island in the early days of statehood and ruled the General Assembly.

That's because the structure of state government through the 19th century gave rural communities outsized representation in Rhode Island's citizen legislature, meaning that the seats of the General Assembly were largely filled with those who owned large tracts of land – farmers.

Oh, how the times have changed.

In 1886, the earliest year for which the state has complete data available, the 106-member legislature still had 27 farmers. This year there are two among 113 state lawmakers.

But among today's legislators, there are 17 attorneys, 11 educators, 15 retirees, and two stay-at-home parents. And still other state lawmakers have occupations that would have left early Rhode Islanders scratching their

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