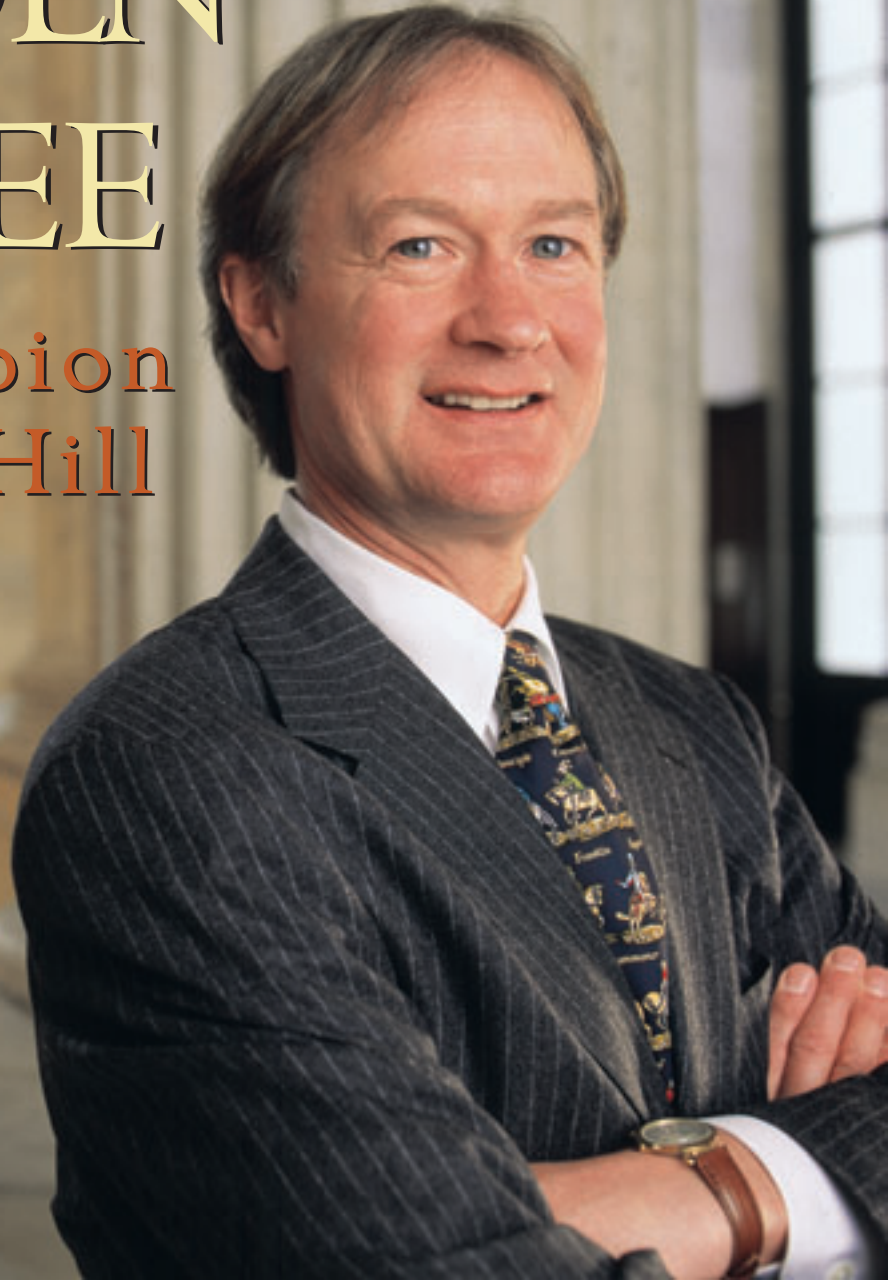


# LINCOLN CHAFEE

## Trail Champion on Capitol Hill

*By Beth Baker*

Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island hardly fits the image of a U.S. senator. For one thing, he's soft-spoken and unassuming. It's hard to imagine the boyish 50-year-old glad-handing a crowd or bellowing out a stump speech. And, like his late father, Sen. John Chafee, he's a rare bird in Washington because he's not overly partisan. Indeed, the lifelong Republican is known as a maverick on Capitol Hill because he frequently crosses party lines, particularly to support environmental issues.



That makes him a key legislator this year as Congress reauthorizes the Transportation Equity Act, dubbed TEA-21. The act, which is reauthorized every six years, is critically important to trails. It represents the nation's largest source of support for trail development, authorizing funding for Transportation Enhancements (TE) around the country. TE projects range from development of pedestrian and cycling facilities and safety programs to acquisition of historic sites and preservation of abandoned rail corridors.

Chafee's love of Rhode Island's natural places is evident to me as I enter the reception area of his Capitol Hill office. Framed watercolors depict great blue herons in wetlands,

and fishermen raking quohogs in Narragansett Bay. Also apparent is his love of horses. He may be the only U.S. senator—at least in the last century—to have “horseshoer” on his resume: After graduating from Brown University in 1975, he spent seven years shoeing horses at racetracks in Canada.

Eschewing the stuffed-shirt formality of Washington's power elite, Senator Chafee comes out to greet me and escort me to his office. We pull up chairs at a round table to discuss his support of TE activities.

In the Senate, TEA-21 must first be considered by the Environment and Public Works Committee. There are 10 Republicans—including Senator Chafee—on the commit-

tee. The nine other members are rounded out by eight Democrats and one Independent who organizes with the Democrats. Chafee is the first to admit that his vote often makes the difference on important environmental issues on the committee.

TEA-21 is the most significant legislation facing the committee this year, he explains. Although he believes full reauthorization of TE funding will receive wide support, it faces many challenges. The act, which includes funding for highway safety, mass transit and air quality improvements as well as Transportation Enhancements, is supported primarily through an apportionment of gasoline taxes amounting to \$30-plus billion a year. "As the economy ebbs and flows, it's going to be a struggle to keep that level of funding," Chafee says.

Marianne Fowler, senior vice president of Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC), agrees. "The nation is in a budget crunch and there will be cuts," she says. "During the last reauthorization, many lawmakers tried to cut Transportation Enhancement Activities. Many people view TE as a frill, not a necessity."

That Chafee should now be in a position to influence passage of a strong TEA-21 bill is especially fitting given his father's role in creating the original legislation. In 1991, the notion of investing transportation dollars in bike paths and water taxis was downright radical. Nevertheless the elder Senator Chafee and former Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.) championed the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, known as ISTEA, which was the precursor to TEA-21. When Senator John Chafee died in office in 1998, his son was appointed to finish his term. In 2000, Lincoln Chafee was elected in his own right.

"Senator [John] Chafee had a vision that transportation systems were important, but that they should also be marked by grace and beauty," says Fowler. "He fashioned Transportation Enhancements Activities to support that ideal and embedded them in the language of ISTEA. TE was codified by less than 150 words in the bill."

But those 150 words had a huge impact. "Transportation Enhancements really struck a chord with the American public," says Fowler. "When we see a highway median blooming with wildflowers or when people have a trail close to their home, they are undoubtedly there because of Transportation Enhancements. Senator Chafee held that vision and his son holds that vision."

The numbers tell the story. Before ISTEA, federal investment in bicycling and walking facilities was a total of \$47.6 million from 1975 to 1991. But from 1992 to 2001, that figure mushroomed to more than \$2.5 billion. Some 8,000 projects were supported with TE funding, among them:

- The Pinellas Trail in west central Florida, a well-used commuter bike trail that helps ease traffic, increase tourism to small towns, spawn new businesses and renew a sense of community pride.

- Keystone Ancient Forest Preserve in Sand Springs, Okla., an expanse of 400-year-old red cedars and steep ravines that forms a panoramic view enjoyed by 7 million motorists annually on Route 412.

- The George S. Mickelson Trail in South Dakota, a destination rail-trail and one of the longest in the country at 114 miles.

Senator Chafee has his own favorite trails that have been supported with TE money. "One is the East Bay bike path that was an old rail line" in Rhode Island, he says. "It is just enormously popular. It's beautiful. It winds along parts of Narragansett Bay." Another is Blackstone River Bikeway, a rail-trail near Providence that runs along the historic Blackstone River. Chafee hopes future TE funds will be used to complete this popular 17-mile trail. "My father worked very hard on getting the money for this bike path," he says. "Finishing it is still important."

As a Warwick, R.I., city council member, then town mayor in the 1990s, Lincoln Chafee became convinced of the importance of preserving abandoned rail corridors. "Neighbors would come in to petition the old rail line to buy the property abutting their backyards," he says. "Once that's done, you can never reclaim it. It would be too expensive to get back. That's why it's so important that [TE] be funded, so that we don't lose little bits and pieces of these valuable corridors."

Senator Chafee's values are a testament not only to his father's legacy but also to his mother, Virginia Chafee, a passionate environmentalist who was part of the original organic farming movement.

As he was growing up he witnessed firsthand the effects of pollution on Narragansett Bay and its rich diversity of wildlife. The eel grass disappeared and, with it, the blue crabs and other organisms. Prime culprits in their decline were bacteria from old cesspools that leached into the marshlands. To solve the problem, Providence invested in a treatment plant. The state is now building a \$500 million tunnel that leads to a holding tank to catch and treat sewage.

Chafee's goal in Congress is to defend the progress that's been made in cleaning up the nation's water and air and in preserving green space. "It may sound a little unambitious or depressing," he says, "but at this stage, [my priority] is to [prevent] rolling back environmental laws."

Despite soaring deficits and environmentally unfriendly leaders both on his committee and in the White House, Senator Chafee is optimistic that the Transportation Enhancements program will receive the support it deserves. "It's been a terrific success," he says. "All indications are we're going to continue to build on the success—which is good for the rails-to-trails program."

*Beth Baker, a freelance writer and certified naturalist in Takoma Park, Md., enjoys walking her dog and bird watching on trails in the Washington, D.C., area.*

