

Measuring up Rhode Island

PBN (365)
21-27 Aug. 2000

Among its several distinctive characteristics is Rhode Island's small size. This smallest state gives its residents a distorted perception of distance (a trip to Woonsocket requires an overnight); is often used as a measure of scale (the fire burned an area the size of Rhode Island); and in the eyes of non-Rhode Islanders does not exist as a state (island off the coast of New York or spot on the highway to Cape Cod.)

Well, Rhode Islanders, take heart for rather than comparing ourselves with the other 49 states, where we can take a beating because of our small size, we should compare ourselves with the 191 countries of the world. Hard to believe, one of seven of these countries is smaller than this state!

That's right, there are 29 countries smaller in area than this smallest of all states. These countries normally have a president, a legislature, a flag, an army, a national anthem, embassies scattered throughout the world and most belong to the United Nations. And Rhode Island is larger in area than all of them, and even has a greater population than all of them, except for two.

LETTERS POLICY

Providence Business News welcomes letters from its readers on local business or financial issues or personalities. Letters must be signed, include a daytime telephone number and should be no longer than 250 words. Longer letters may be edited for space restrictions. Send to:

Letters to the Editor
Providence Business news
300 Richmond Street
Providence, RI 02903
they may be sent via facsimile to
(401) 274-0670

Let's consider Rhode Island's actual size and which three numbers may be used. State agencies list a land area of 1,049 square miles, a figure sometimes used; if one adds the 165 square miles of inland water, then the total area is 1,214 square miles, the number commonly given; and now comes a new figure, used by the US Census Bureau for the last census of 1,545 square miles because the new computer maps use straight lines to define territorial waters rather than paralleling the shore, so the result is to increase the amount of water along the coastline. Even with this additional water, Rhode Island still remains the smallest state.

Another measure of our small size is to consider the area of the 3,141 counties in the country. Counties are the principal form of government below the state level in this country, except in New England where cities and towns serve that important role. Counties collect taxes and provide all governmental services, such as schools, roads, police and services that we expect from our cities and towns. The average size of these counties is 1,126 square miles, or about the size of Rhode Island.

Considered by almost any measure taken in this country, Rhode Island is small but considering its size relative to nations in the world, the picture looks quite different, a picture detailed in the recently published National Geographic Desk Reference.

These 29 smaller than Rhode Island countries range in size from less than one square mile, Monaco and Vatican City (the Holy See in Rome is considered as a separate country), to those approaching the size of Rhode Island, Samoa in the Pacific. And the populations range from under 15,000, for Nauru and Tuvalu in the Pacific and Vatican City to those of more than one million, including Singapore and Mauritius in the Indian Ocean where the Dutch landed in 1658 and 50 years later had extinguished the Dodo bird.

Most of these minicountries are islands that have become independent since the end of World War II: eight of these islands are found in the Pacific Ocean; seven are in the Caribbean; and four are located around Africa. Most readers would be surprised to

find that seven of these smallest of countries are found among the 43 countries of Europe, only one of which is an island, Malta. San Marino and Vatican City are in Italy, Monaco is on the south coast of France; Andorra is in the Pyrenees Mountains separating France from Spain; and Luxembourg and Liechtenstein are in Central Europe.

Yet, small as they are, they are similar to Rhode Island in having distinctive characteristics.

For example, Monaco has no army; San Marino is the oldest republic in the world, dating back to 301; Grenada, in the Caribbean and called the nutmeg capital of the world, is the smallest country in the Western Hemisphere; both Luxembourg and Liechtenstein are 100 percent literate; and there are no newspapers on San Tome and Principe located off the west coast of Africa.

Located in the Eastern Hemisphere is Singapore, one-quarter the size of Rhode Island with a population of four million, four times that of Rhode Island, and 100 percent urban with four official languages - Tamil, Malay, Chinese and English; Nauru, its 11,000 residents situated on eight square miles of land in the Pacific, was until recently among the richest countries in the world because of its phosphate deposits which are now declining rapidly as is the wealth of this country;

Tonga consists of 170 islands but the 109,000 residents live on just 36 of them; and Kiribati, located on the International Date Line in the Pacific and formerly called the Gilbert, Phoenix and Line Islands, whose capital of Tarawa is still remembered from World War II where more than 1,000 Marines died in 76 hours of vicious fighting.

In this rush for independence by these small ethnically and racially diverse populations, it is a mark of our own heritage that so many such groups unite themselves under the banner of America and become one culturally and economically strong country. And small Rhode Island, compared with the 49 other divisions of this country, is a proud member of this group. ■

commentary

Chester E. Smolski