

Video Press Release: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wd7z8bMgbb4>

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**Waterford Street School to Become New Community Center**

*The Elementary School and former Junior High will be the new home to Senior Center and 3 Gardner Nonprofits*

Gardner- October 4, 2022 - Gardner's Waterford Street School, recently vacated after completion of the new Gardner Elementary School, will begin a new mission in the coming months. The former school is set to become the new home of four important Gardner institutions – **The Gardner Senior Center**, the **Gardner Community Action Committee**, **GAAMHA**, an organization dedicated to providing employment and treatment for individuals with disabilities and substance use disorders, and **Growing Places**, which aims to provide communities with sustainable, local produce.

In addition to providing a suitable home for these four institutions, including considerations of safety and access for the Senior Center, the quick turnaround in occupancy at the Waterford Street property will provide the City with a consistent source of revenue in what would otherwise be a disused building.

There will also be a **Constituent Service Office** at the location where members of the public will be able to meet with different City service departments and elected officials by appointment or scheduled office hours.

Speaking on the long-considered but quick-coalescing development, **Gardner Mayor Mike Nicholson** said, "The first time we talked about this project was in September of 2020, when I mentioned to Representative Zlotnik and Council President Kazinskas that I'd like to see the Senior Center moved to Waterford Street to get all of its services in a one floor building, and the project really took off from there. For the next year and a half, working with his office, we were able to set up meetings with the different organizations to get us to where we are today."

Key to Waterford's repurposing was **State Representative Jonathan Zlotnik**, who noted the opportunities that would arise from having the four organizations share a common space and resources. He stated "This project will meaningfully repurpose this building and provide these organizations with much needed space to improve and expand services. There are many advantages this will provide and present great opportunities for collaboration. As a former student, and the son of a former teacher at

Waterford Street School, I'm very happy that we have been able to work to see this building continue to serve this community."

Speaking at a press conference on Monday to announce the project, **City Council President Elizabeth Kazinskas** said "I think this is going to be an exciting use of the space here at Waterford. As a former student of Gardner Junior High, it's really nice to see something come of this space, because there are a lot of wonderful memories that were made for students over the years, just as there will be for the people that are coming here."

At the press conference, the video of which can be found on the City's YouTube channel, Mayor Nicholson noted that this initiative compliments the work the City has done over the last two years to prevent and reduce the number of vacant buildings and problem properties in the City.

"We've done a lot of work in Gardner to revitalize vacant buildings and hold landlords accountable and we need to hold ourselves to the same standard," said Mayor Nicholson. "Today's announcement shows just that. This new Community Center will utilize the space in a way that truly benefits the City's residents by growing what these organizations do and allowing them to collaborate in a more effective environment."

The press conference also made plain the enthusiasm of Waterford's four new tenants. Speaking on behalf of the Gardner Senior Center, **Director Mike Ellis** outlined some of the specific advantages he saw for his organization in the upcoming move.

"The Gardner Senior Center is really energized and excited about moving here to Waterford. We currently have three major issues facing us on a daily basis. First, if you've ever come to the Senior Center for an event, you know that parking is an issue. Here at Waterford we have ample parking for folks to come and attend many of our programs. The second issue is that our current building doesn't allow us to do many large programs at the same time. This move will help us provide more programs to our seniors simultaneously. Third, it's not going without notice that the Gardner Senior Center stairs are precarious. In fact, over the last fifteen months, we've had several major incidents that have required us to call emergency services. Coming to Waterford affords us a facility on a single floor so that we'll have better access, more opportunities, and a safer environment."

**Julie Meehan, the Director of the Gardner CAC**, which currently shares a building with the Senior Center, echoed similar sentiments to her neighbor. “Many people know the CAC as the largest food pantry in the city, but beyond the pantry we also have free community meal sites, toys for tots, medical transportation for seniors, Thanksgiving and Christmas food baskets, and emergency assistance for housing and heating. This move is very important because it allows our agency to have all of our programs centrally located as opposed to scattered throughout the city.”

**Ayn Yeagle, the Executive Director of Growing Places**, said “One of the things that we work on is filling food system gaps. The pandemic certainly helped to make apparent the food insecurity issues we have in our region. We have 190 farms in North Central Massachusetts and our farmers are growing beautiful crops of all different types, but they don’t really have a way to get it to everybody. What Growing Places does is fill the distribution and aggregation gaps. What Waterford will do is that it has a school kitchen and we’re going to retrofit it and create a processing center so we can create value-added products for our farmers and our community, such as taking apples and making apple sauce, or apple chips, or maybe even some apple pie if you’re lucky.”

**Tracy Hutchinson, the Chief Executive Officer of GAAHMA, and Shawn Hayden, its Chief Operating Officer**, like their future neighbors, saw opportunity for growth in their organization. “As excited as we are about the expansion of our community-based day program here at Waterford Street School, that actually triggers another exciting expansion for GAAHMA” said Hayden “There will be another opportunity for the City in that the space that’s freed up at our Coleman Street headquarters will actually be able to pivot and expand our growing outpatient behavioral health services to provide mental health and addiction counseling for people in the city.”

Asked when the move was expected to come to fruition, officials emphasized that while there were several steps still to come in the process, they were confident it could be undertaken some time in 2023.

Nicholson concluded by thanking Representative Zlotnik for the integral work he played in getting this project to where it is today. “I want to thank Representative Zlotnik for his help in getting this project off the ground, by helping bring these organizations together and providing state funds. I’d also like to thank all of these organizations for their continued investment in our community.”

In order for this initiative to take place, the School Committee must first vote to transfer the building from the School Department to the City for ownership. The City Council must then approve the Senior Center moving to the location and approve the lease agreements for the tenants moving into the location.

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**Michael J. Nicholson, J.D.**

Mayor, City of Gardner

Gardner City Hall, Rm 125

95 Pleasant St

Gardner, MA 01440