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**REPORT ON THE STATE OF THE CITY**

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Given Tuesday, January 10, 2023 - 7:00 PM  
Gardner City Hall, City Council Chambers

Good Evening,

President Kazinskas, Vice Chair Pelavin, Lieutenant Governor Driscoll, Representative Zlotnik, other members of the General Court, Members of the City Council and the School Committee, Honored Guests, family, friends, and fellow Gardnerites:

**INTRODUCTION:**

One hundred years ago, Mayor Chester Pearson stood before the newly elected City Government as Gardner's first mayor, and delivered the first inaugural address outlining the successes of this community as a Town, laying out plans for the new city's future, and issuing a message of hope as they began the next chapter in Gardner's history.

Two years ago, when I stood here to deliver this speech for my first time, there were only 10 other people in the room, spread out and wearing masks. Hospitals were facing capacity concerns, testing kits were at the forefront of people's minds, and the first COVID-19 vaccines had only just been released.

I concluded those remarks by stating that despite the uncertainty of the time, I was optimistic about the next years for our city. That our strength and perseverance would show our resilience, and present us with new opportunities.

I am proud to stand here today and say that we have stayed on that path and have set ourselves on a trajectory for continued success as we enter into the next century in our City's history.

**SUCSESSES OF THE PAST YEAR**

**FINANCIAL STABILITY & TRANSPARENCY**

During the last two years, we made great strides to improve our financial standing. The balance of our stabilization account is the highest it has ever been.

Additionally, our finance team has worked to make sure that everything is done to protect the taxpayers' money, and uphold our fiduciary responsibility to this City's residents. For the second year in a row, we received a perfect report on our annual audit from our City's outside auditor.

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We're also making a concerted effort to return blighted and unutilized properties to the tax roll, increasing our revenue, improving our neighborhoods, and returning the spirit of our city to its forgotten corners.

**SCHOOLS**

We have continued to invest in our schools to ensure that our students have the resources they need in order to discover their potential and prepare them for future success.

After several years of planning and construction, the new Gardner Elementary School is now open to our students. This building provides a 21st century learning experience in an environment that was built to meet student's needs, rather than retrofitted from a previous use. This is the first time that Gardner has constructed a purpose built elementary school since 1923 when Prospect Street School was constructed.

We have begun work to improve and refurbish Landry Auditorium and LaChance Gymnasium at Gardner High School. Both have been fully repainted, the auditorium's seats were replaced, new carpet installed, and an acoustic improvement study is underway. The basketball court in the gym has been refinished and new scoreboards, crash pads, and banners installed.

The Watkins Field Renovation project will be completed this spring with new concession and bathroom facilities.

In addition to the Watkins Field facility improvements, the other fields at our education campus have been improved as well. This work included repairs to the irrigation system, leveling the field, reseeded the lawn, new baseball and softball diamonds, backstops, bullpens, tennis courts, and the construction of a new fitness court.

Two years ago, we reinstated our elementary school beginner band program after it was cut from the budget in 2010. In its first year, 158 students joined the program. Today, over 200 students are enrolled in the Gardner Elementary Band. To help boost all of our music programs across the district, we appropriated \$100,000 in funding to help purchase new equipment and supplies for all of our band, choral, drama, and general music programs in all our schools.

**INFRASTRUCTURE**

In the past two years, we have also made unprecedented investments in our infrastructure.

Since 2020, we've paved more miles of road than we have in that same timeframe in our City's history.

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With that, we've replaced all water pipes that were originally installed between 1860 and 1930.

At the same time, utilizing Community Development Block Grant funds, we have continued improvements to our pedestrian infrastructure around the City. This has included installing new sidewalks, street crossings, lighting fixtures, and bicycle signage throughout the Downtown area.

Working with the Massachusetts Department of Transportation's Traffic Improvement Project program, the Uptown Rotary at the intersection of Woodland Avenue, Pearl, Elm, Green, and Central Streets will be completely remodeled this Spring in order to allow for more efficient traffic flow.

### **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

Our economic development measures have also proved to be successful as our commercial base continues to grow.

Many people in our community remember a time when our downtown was a lively place people frequented on a regular basis. In the 1930s, my great-grandfather, Alcide Goguen, opened his barbershop on the second floor of the Flatiron building at 25 Main Street, where he worked until he sold his business to Turk's Barbershop in 1973. While downtown faced economic challenges since then, we have taken tremendous steps to reinvigorate the area, supporting our long standing establishments and welcoming new endeavors to the City.

In the past two years, amidst the economic challenges of the pandemic, 35 businesses have either newly opened their doors in the City, expanded, or are under new ownership, with the majority of these businesses located in our Downtown.

Recognizing that we, as a City, needed to play a key role in our economic recovery efforts from the pandemic, not only to help these new businesses and property investments survive, but also assist our long standing local businesses, we created several economic assistance programs utilizing funding we received from the state and federal government.

Awarding over 3 quarters of a million dollars to help our new and existing businesses with things like rent and mortgage payments, utilities, and the unexpected costs that came with running a business during a pandemic. Our businesses showed faith in our community during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we are returning the favor.

However, our economic development goals would be incomplete if we did not safeguard our future while moving forward from our past. Blight, vacant properties, and absentee landlords are problems that must be proactively guarded against. With that in mind, my office, working with

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Councilor Tyros, drafted an ordinance, unanimously approved by the Council, to arm our building and health departments with the tools they need to go after these problem properties that too often drag down a whole neighborhood.

**THE STATE OF OUR CITY**

Yes, the last few years were tough. The world has changed. Our city has changed. But with that comes change for the better. Working together, we transformed uncertainty into opportunity.

Where other Cities around the country saw businesses close and storefronts boarded up, Gardner saw economic growth like it hasn't seen in decades.

While other Cities questioned how they would stay afloat financially, Gardner continued to cement our solid financial foundation.

While other Cities delayed projects, Gardner invested in our schools, improved our infrastructure, and increased our recreational opportunities.

Because of all of this, I am proud to stand here today, and report as clearly as I can, that the state of our City is strong.

**FUTURE PLANS**

We have many things to be proud of. But there is a lot more we are planning to do.

As we've worked to prevent problem properties, transform blight into promise and hold the private sector to a high standard, we will continue to hold ourselves to the same.

The opening of our new school gave us new opportunities in our former school buildings. Working with private sector partners, we have begun the process of revitalizing the areas of the former School Street School and Prospect Street School Buildings. Elm Street School, which hosts Gardner Academy, the Gardner Boys and Girls Club and will soon house the school department's central office.

In the coming months work will begin to transform the former Waterford Street School into the new Gardner Community Center to house the Gardner Senior Center, Gardner Community Action Committee, Growing Places' Food Processing Center to assist with food insecurity problems in the region, and GAAMHA community based adult day program. All four of these organizations have previously worked together, but by bringing them together all under one roof, they can grow and expand their services, work more closely and efficiently with each other, and better serve our residents. I would be remiss if I did not give a special thank you to

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Representative Zlotnik for his partnership in this endeavor - both in bringing these stakeholders together and for working to obtain a \$400,000 appropriation from the Legislature for this project.

Utilizing Community Development Block Grant Funding, the Greenwood Indoor Pool Building and the former Rome Furniture Building on the corner of Main Street and Willow Street are coming down.

The construction of a new pavilion at the Greenwood Pool site and the work being done to transform the former National Grid site into a waterfront park will improve one of Gardner's most cherished recreational areas.

The work planned for Rear Main Street will break ground this spring. Utilizing over \$6 million from the Commonwealth's MassWorks Grant Program, this area with so much potential will soon have a new 160-space parking lot, event plaza, food truck parking, picnic area, amphitheater seating, fountain, shade pavilion, increased public art opportunities, and more.

All of which will compliment the new residential building that will be constructed on Rear Main Street- adding around 100 new market rate apartments.

Work will begin this spring to renovate the locations of Maki, Orpheum, and Chair City Parks to include outdoor seating options, fountains, historical information markers, and community gathering spaces.

Our five phase infrastructure improvement project will be entering its third phase this year with new lighting, sidewalks, and pedestrian safety improvements being made along the perimeter of Monument Park and Park Street to Crystal Lake Drive.

We have also begun studying the feasibility and merits of extending our infrastructure improvements to South Gardner Village Center, including a plan to move the overhead utility wires to underground conduits.

**CLOSING**

The work that we've done and the successes that we've achieved are entirely thanks to the teamwork that our officials at all levels have displayed. I would like to thank the members of our City Council, School Committee, our legislative delegation, and all of our partners in government for constantly coming together to build a community we can be proud to call our home.

This is how government should work. Far too often, people view holding political office as theater, with their foremost responsibility (-) clicks on social media, and their foremost motivator (-) personal gain. However, that's not the case here. When a problem in Gardner arises, we come

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together, find a solution, and do what needs to be done. To compete against our region, and others, both near and far in an ever increasing global economy, Gardner needs to be and thrives as a well oiled machine.

As we move into this new year, and the next century in our City's history, I look forward to us continuing to work together and setting an example for others to follow.

I'd like to leave you with the words that Mayor Pearson used to closed the City's first inaugural address 100 years ago:

“Let us resolve to lend our energies to make the City of Gardner a leader in the Commonwealth. Its advancement can be accomplished by holding true to high ideals, by keeping mutual faith and by a spirit of honest and intelligent citizenship.”

God Bless you all, God Bless this great City, God Bless the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and God Bless America.