

LESSONS ABOUT GARDNER HISTORY



Gardner Magazine Publisher Werner Poegel interviews
Gardner Mayor Michael Nicholson to learn more Lessons
about Gardner History, how we can learn from the past to
have more successes in the present and contribute to a
better future.... Copyright Werner Poegel 2023

with Mayor Michael Nicholson

Forward and Index of Pages

This is a book of reflection. Those who are most able to learn from the Lessons of History are less likely to repeat mistakes. They are also more likely to have more future successes because they are open to self-criticism. Such is the case of Gardner Mayor Michael Nicholson, who assumed office during the Covid pandemic in July 2020. While reading the varied subject matter in these pages, you will discover an emerging Statesman, a man who is genuinely interested in serving his community to the fullest extent possible. Mayor Nicholson carries with him an air of positivity, a healthy amount of pride tempered with humility, and an infectious love for the City of Gardner, Massachusetts which he leads with a great team of capable, competent, resourceful, and awesome people. (From Publisher Werner Poegel)

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About the Storms of January 2023

Question: About the recent storm: What is Gardner doing differently that allowed it to restore power more quickly than other nearby communities? Was it coordination, manpower. what was it?

Mayor Nicholson: There's a lot of different things that go into that question, but I think the simple answers to that are communication and pre-planning. And what I mean by that is one of the things that Gardner's made a recent concerted effort to do is during the summer months, in the off seasons, really going and looking through our tree canopy and seeing what trees are diseased, what trees are in danger, if we did have an ice storm or a snowstorm like we had the past week of falling on power lines and taking them out and addressing those that we do, that's why we have our annual tree hearing and our tree cutting program, and quite frankly it's also why the general laws of the Commonwealth exempt trees that pose a threat to power lines from having to have a tree hearing, and we can just go and cut those.

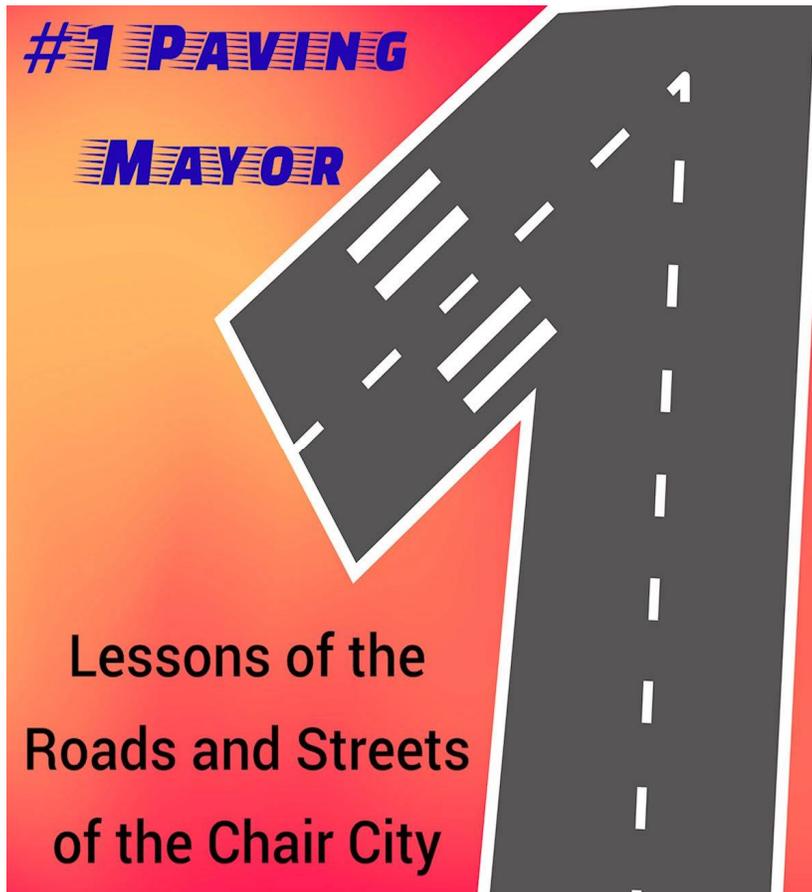
So by pre planning those, what we do is avoid things like we saw in other communities that border us that were out of power for much longer because they had more trees fall or branches fall and take power lines down with them than we did because we already took care of those.

About the Storms of January 2023 (continued)



And while we still had some power outage issues, a lot of it wasn't our fault. There was other communities that we feed power off in certain sections, like South Gardner feeding off of the Westminster substation relying on those other communities. But what we do there is we continue with our coordination to make sure that we're in constant communication with National Grid. Our public safety departments are in radio contact with the DPW, so that when a problem arises we can respond immediately, begin those conversations as they happen, rather than waiting until something, you know, another domino falls before then, we have to catch up and really are behind the ball at that point.





About Paving

Question: Mayor Nicholson, what lesson do you draw from the past which has encouraged you to ask for more money for paving roads than previous Mayors?

Mayor Nicholson: So this is actually a story that happened when I first got elected, and I was giving a talk to some students.

The focus of my talk was a lot of students didn't realize how much municipal government played an active role in their lives. So, you know, I went to them and I said, you know, if you brushed your teeth this morning, did water come out of your faucet. Was it clean? That means the water department is doing a good job. Did you eat this morning? Is that? That's because the health department really inspected either the restaurant you went to or the grocery store you went to, to make sure the food was safe and things like that.

And a student raises his hand to go – 'So then how come there's a lot of roads that aren't up to where they need to be, too, and we always hit bumps on the way to school. And that really sparked a thing with me there that I wasn't realizing my own lesson at that point. And while there's only so much you can do with the funding that you have, it's the things that directly impact people every day, that make them think of their home. I could do all the policy work I want to in City Hall. And is it going to have an impact on someone? Absolutely yes.

But if someone's not enjoying their quality of life that they have here in Gardner, are we doing our job of building a place that people feel happy, proud, safe and comfortable to call their home? And the answer is no.

About Paving continued

So one of the approaches that I've always had is let's find the things that affect people the most and prioritize those so that their everyday lives are impacted so they have fond memories and not complaints about Gardner. Now, are we ever going to reach what we want to reach in our street paving program ? Probably not . If you look at what we get from the state, we've gotten the same amount , six hundred thousand dollars a year from our Chapter 90 funds that we receive from the commonwealth every year since 2012. Now, with inflation and everything else that's happened since 2012., our purchasing power has gone down. We've been able to put more into it on our own, but we can only do so much. But we try to keep up as best as we can.

Question: Mayor Nicholson, with a new administration in, do you think Chapter 90 funding will change in any way?

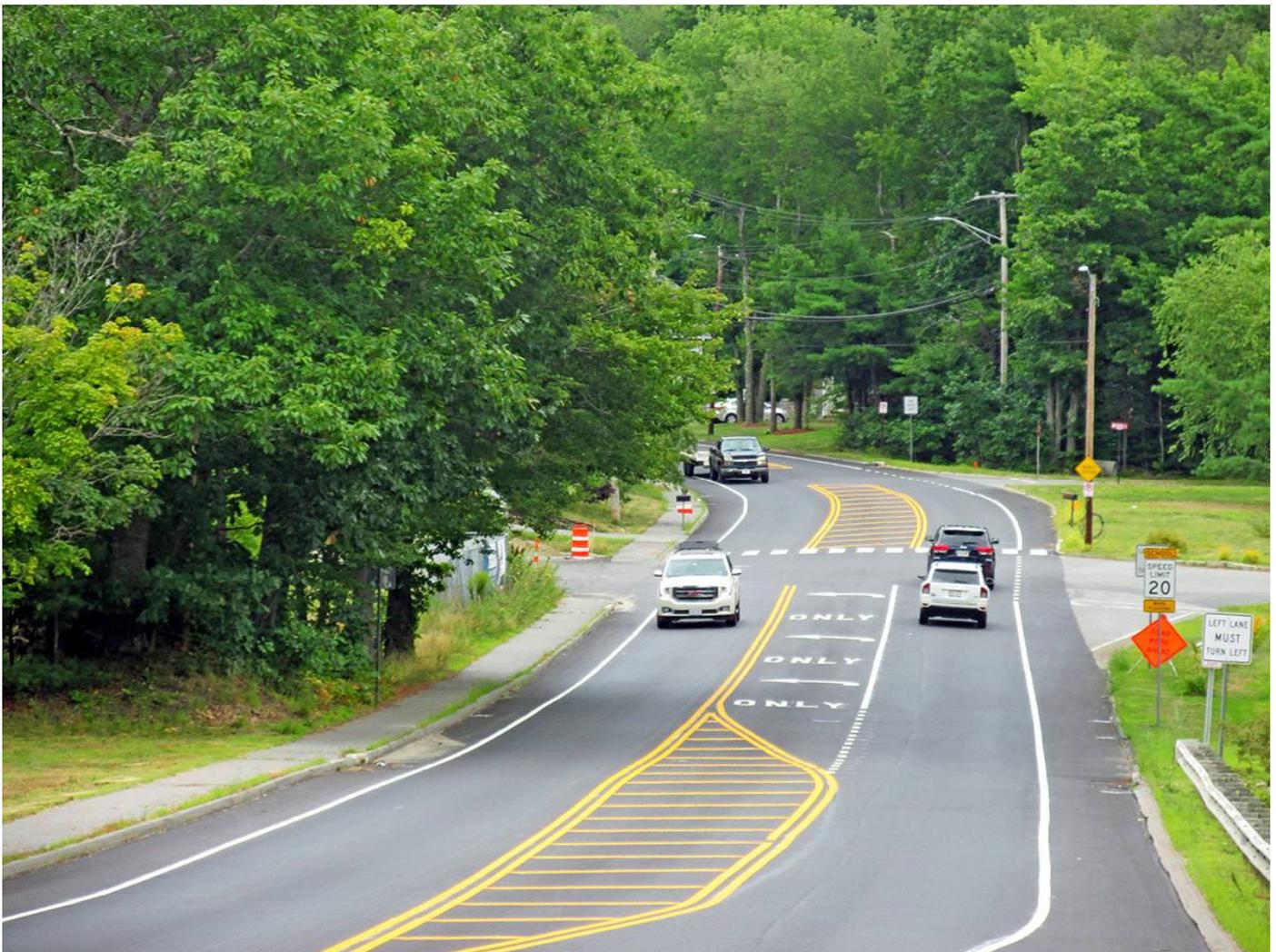
Mayor Nicholson: You know, I've got my fingers crossed on that one. I think we're going to see a little bit of a bump in our Chapter 70 funding for our schools and what we receive in our school transportation funding and our out of district placement funding . Governor Healy's already committed to that. Local aid is something that I know Lieutenant Governor Driscoll as a former mayor, has been focusing on. I've yet to hear something on Chapter 90. I'm not expecting us to go down any in Chapter 90 I don't know what our increases are yet , particularly now, where Governor Healy has said that the state's budget won't be filed with the legislature until March First, as compared to its usual January 15th ballpark start date. But I'm hopeful, I'm hopeful they've they have reached out to several different mayors across the commonwealth for input, and I think that that's gonna come through.

Question: Now, let's say that we have a winter that's, you know, not really bad going forward. And there's actually more funds left for paving towards the end of the year. Can you physically pave more roads or do you have to give paving companies a lot of notice before you can actually issue those contracts?

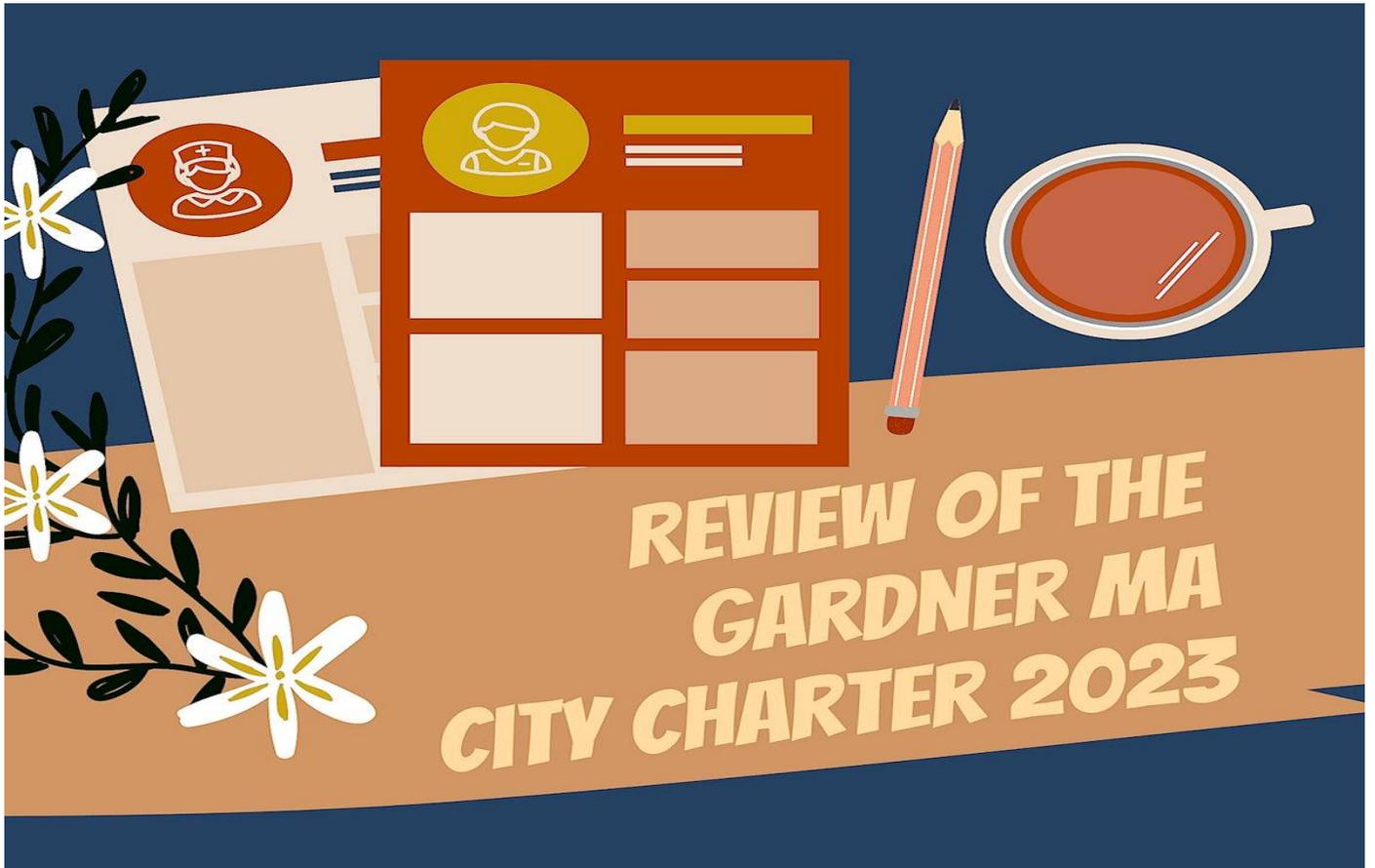
Mayor Nicholson: It's a yes and a no answer. It's we can if we have the money, we can do it, but it's all on their schedule that we have now. Luckily we go out for contract every couple years for an on call paving services. So Mass Broken Stone is our paving contractor so do they have to fit it into their schedule? Yes . However, when you have a contract as big as what the city has, they do prioritize that. .

About Paving continued

So hopefully we'll be able to do that . I know we had a project delayed last year, and that was the new sidewalks on Lawrence Street, just because we weren't able to get that done in time before school started , and we didn't want to interrupt students who were walking to school , so that's a project that got delayed from last summer, that has to now carry over into this summer, because, again, we don't want to start until school is out and have an impact on kids walking to school. So you juggle those different priorities there. But we should be okay.



Paving Pearl Street, Gardner MA 2022



About the City Charter

Question: Now, the City Charter is now up for review after confirmation of 5 members of the Special Act Charter Review Committee. What has happened in Gardner's 1st 100 years as a City which the Committee should immediately review and consider in making recommendations?

Mayor Nicholson: I think the bones of the Charter work, the system of having a Mayor as the chief executive and the council as the legislative body of the city, I think, works quite well. But where I think the city charter falters is a lot of its language was copied and pasted from directly from state law in 1923. So to put this into perspective, there's about six sections of the charter that the city legally cannot follow because they currently violate state law. And as most people are aware, the city can have laws or ordinances or a charter that is more stringent than state law, but not less stringent than state law. So state law actually trumps a good majority of our charter. But then you look at things that are more stringent it actually kind of really restricts and ties what the city is able to do. So, for instance, there's a section of the city charter that says if the city has a contract of anything over a thousand dollars, it needs to be approved by the mayor, and before it gets to my desk, it has to be approved by the purchasing department, the city auditor, the city's legal department, signed by the department head, who's issuing the contract. And that goes through this whole big process here that can take probably up to two weeks, and that's with our current DocuSign system that I

implemented back in 2020, with our purchasing agent, Josh Cormier. Now go back to when we had paper contracts the year before that, and it took about a month before a contract was signed for something that's only a thousand dollars. So a thousand dollars in 1923 is a lot different than it is now, and state law actually governs that saying that you don't need to go through that system unless it's over ten thousand dollars. But again, where we can be more strict than less strict, that really does limit what we're able to do and actually turns away several different people who would be normally bidding or participating in our purchasing processes because they don't want to go through that much of a process for something as small as a thousand dollars.

Question: Now, does that increase the shipping costs to the city? Because obviously some people would try to have smaller orders if they could, to speed the process along. So then you have to have shipping more often?

Mayor Nicholson: Yea, a hundred percent.

Photo shows Mayor Michael Nicholson (right) and the Gardner MA City Council as constituted until end of meeting on December 19, 2022



Gardner MA City Council



About Updating Gardner City Hall

Question: The electrical system in Gardner City Hall dates from before the Second World War. The bathrooms certainly don't have gold faucets. Do you think it has been a mistake not to place priority on updating the building you work in every day?

Mayor Nicholson: I do, I do, and I know a lot of people may say that, you know, spending money on City Hall when there's other priorities in the City might not be the best option, and I understand that, and I understand where those people may get that idea from. But I agree with something that Councilor Mack has said several times before on the council floor: it's great that we're able to do what we do and have what we have, but if we can't maintain it, we're doing nothing but really bankrupting us in the long run. And the longer you delay the maintenance and the up-keep that you need to be having on all of your buildings, the more you're going to impact future projects that you should be having, but you can't afford now, because now you're in a spot where you have to address the issue. The City Hall electrical system is actually something that I'm working with our Building Commissioner right now on. We currently are in talks with National Grid because we have to get some engineering plans about getting a brand new electrical system and upgrading all the boxes here in City Hall to see what that price would be and moving forward from there. Like you said, the bathrooms in city hall are embarrassing and it's something that we need to be looking at. But there's also things like we need a new roof on the

About Updating Gardner City Hall continued

fire station. The fire station's roof is original to when it was originally built back in the 1980s., and it was patched in the early 2000s ,but it needed a new roof in the early 2000s, and all we could afford to do is patch it. And now we're paying the price for it over there. So there's a lot of maintenance that needs to be done that, if you just kept up with it as it came up, would be costing us a fraction of the cost of what we're looking at now. So these are all things that we're evaluating now to see if we can at least get back to zero so that we can get forward on a regular maintenance schedule and not have to worry about being really stuck in these positions.

Question: Would those ideas, be some things you might add to the Capital Plan when you have that meeting this year?

Mayor Nicholson: Yeah, most likely, yes.. The Fire Department roof has actually been on the capital improvement plan for about ten years now, but the electrical system that's newly added there, the bathrooms have been on the plan for about two years now. So we're really working on seeing what we can knock off that plan. We've made a lot of progress this year in what we've been able to do on our capital improvement plan, but there's still a lot more we have to take care of now.





About the Fire Department

Question: You spoke a little bit about the Gardner Fire Department, and in fact, in 1923 in his Inaugural Address, Gardner's first mayor spoke of his desire to make the Fire Department completely motorized. 100 years later the Department is completely motorized, but a recent grant for hoses showed a lack of updates for almost 20 years, a fire truck is known to be needed, and the headquarters needs repairs. What lessons can be drawn from these facts?

Mayor Nicholson: I think one of these things, again, is we, just like the price tags were so big that there was an issue of sticker shock. But what you don't realize is initial sticker shock only gets bigger the longer you wait. So that's why, you know, utilizing our American Rescue funds, we were able to knock off the three biggest things that have been deferred at the Gardner Fire Department and that's our fleet was all getting old and looked like it had to all be replaced at the same time. That's why we purchased a brand new six hundred and fifty thousand dollar fire engine truck, a three hundred thousand dollar ambulance and an eight hundred fifty thousand dollar heavy rescue truck. Those were our three biggest concerns there, because we just didn't know how we were going to afford them but we knew the fleet was all gonna get up at the same time. Now that we have those trucks there's, a request going before the finance committee, coming soon, for about a hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of equipment to outfit those trucks so that we can take

About the Fire Department continued

care of everything that's on there. Again. Our goal is to get us back to zero so that we can get on that regular maintenance schedule like we have with the police department, because we're really doing really good over there and maintaining the fleet and maintaining equipment there on a regular schedule. But it's really been pushed behind in several other departments, so trying to again get us back to a spot where we can get on that schedule and not be so far behind.





About Unused City Buildings

Question: Now speaking of schedules: In your 2 years in office, the City of Gardner has made extraordinary efforts to get unused City Buildings back on the tax rolls. Why do you think this issue was ignored before you took office and what lessons can be drawn from this?

Mayor Nicholson: I think a lot of it was that the real estate market was just different than it is now. you know, there was questions as to whether or not the City would have to use these buildings later on , but you look at School Street School, it's been vacant since before my mother moved to the United States. It's really something that a lot of people in the past just didn't know how to deal with . And I think, what worked out for us is that the real estate market was as hot as it was . We're seeing a lot more interest in Gardner than we saw before . If you look, I think I looked at the sales report for last year of all residential and commercial properties in Gardner, and Gardner saw four hundred and twenty million dollars in property purchases just in last year alone. So adding to that , that we haven't seen before, we're able to get these properties back into private hands , because that demand is now there, which wasn't there before , and I think that that's been really good for us. School Street School, we're in the , process right now of awarding the deed. Chad King was the winner of the RFP that went out there . Prospect Street School's RFP will be released by the end of the month. Same thing, we'll be releasing a RFP for the factory

About Unused City Buildings continued

that the City now took in tax title, located at 73 Stewart Street, at the corner of Nadeau street and Stewart street, the Leamy Street property from where that factory went down, the corner of Nichols and Parker street that the city owns there . These are all RFP's that we're going to be putting out within the next month or two , so we'll see a lot more of this progress continuing, hopefully within the next quarter .





About Music Education in Gardner Public Schools

Question: Mayor Nicholson: Recently, gains have been made regarding Music Education in Gardner Public Schools. What lesson has been learned from the funding cuts which were made about a decade ago and led to less band participation at the High School level? What lessons have been learned from the cuts made at various times over the years to funding Education in Gardner?

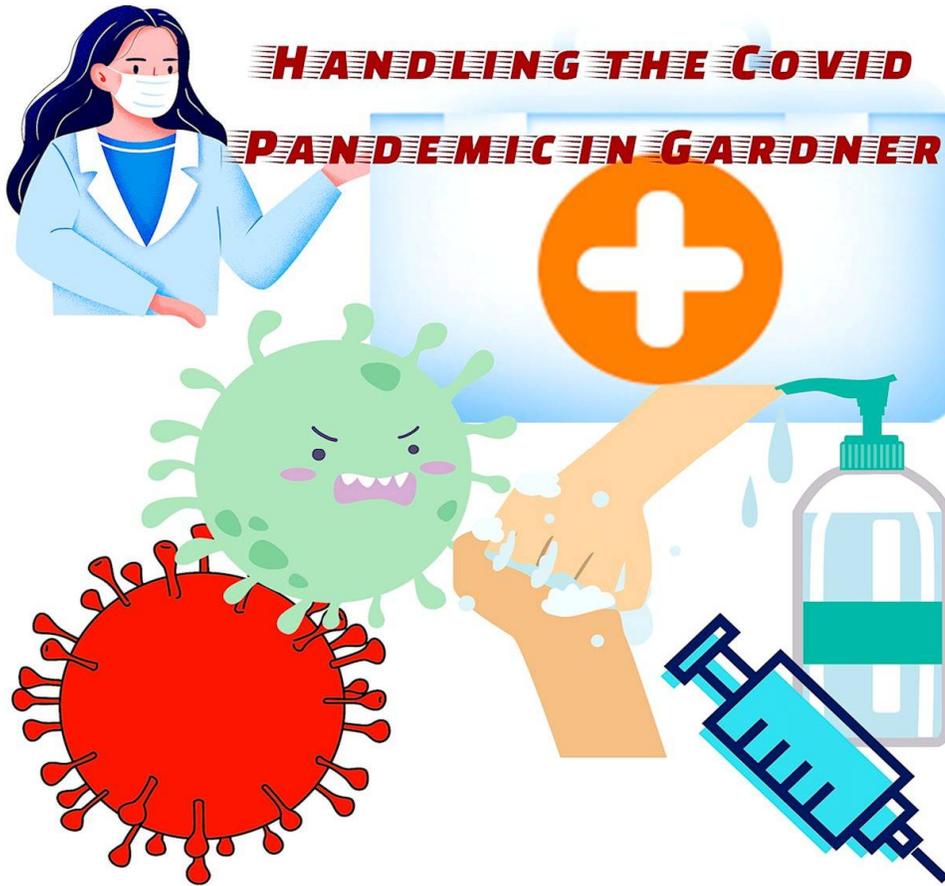
Mayor Nicholson: So this is something I actually view in a kind of unique lens, in that when these budget cuts were made at the beginning of the Great Recession I was a freshman at Gardner High school. So a lot of the times, particularly with the music programs, when I go back and see how things have changed , I go back to my freshman year. We had ninety students, that we're all marching together and part of the Gardner High School Band, and I should also say the regular band too , because it is a full year program. And now there's . I think last year there was mid twenties now there's mid thirties and yes , it's coming back up , but we're seeing that when you cut these feeder programs out , it really does have a long lasting effect. So I'm , I'm hoping now in ten years that will go back to at least closer to where we used to be. But when you cut funding and you look at what normally gets cut, it's the art it's the music, it's your elective, it's the things that our students need to take a break from the regular rigor of an academic curriculum that we should be offering to our students , and our students deserve to have. But that doesn't mean they

About Music Education in Gardner Public Schools

don't also need that break to find ways to express themselves in ways that just click with them. Not every student is a music student. not every student is an art student, not every student is a math student . But we give them the options and the abilities to find their ways to find themselves through our curriculum . And that's something that I think any time we make those cuts to our education system harms our students more than helps the budget.



About the Covid Pandemic



Question: When you first took office, the nation and Gardner was in the middle of the Covid pandemic. What did you personally learn from the pitfalls and successes of that initial period?

Mayor Nicholson: I'm very proud of how we handled the Covid 19 pandemic here in Gardner.

One of the things that I think, set Gardner apart, that allowed us to keep our vaccine clinic open when the state cut so many across the state as being inefficient in their systems, is that I got sworn into office on July 13th. On July 14th we had our first meeting about planning for a vaccine clinic. Now, vaccines hadn't even been created at that time, but we knew they were on the, the cusp of, you know, they were in research phases and all this other stuff. So I had a meeting with our team that we had with our Health Director and Police Department, our Fire Department, and I said, what is the plan for when these vaccines get out, that we can just go and that's the moment we found out our plan for the high school just wasn't working, so that's when we started having those conversations, and so when everything became ready in February, All we had to do was say, go and just move, that's, something we did not only with the vaccines but with our testing giveaways that we had with information out to the public, starting the Mayor's Update videos that Councillor Kazinskas had done when she was Acting Mayor, as a Facebook update once a week, and then trying to grow that in different ways, keeping the public up to date as to what was going on, talking with our business community about what they were dealing with and seeing what programs we could start. This is all because we proactively planned, we were willing to have conversations with people and we knew the public needed to know what was going on. And I think those are why we ended up the way we did after the pandemic in an economic gain, a successful effort in combating the pandemic itself and also just making sure that the public didn't feel in the dark.



About Staff Development in the City of Gardner

Question: How is the City of Gardner doing with respect to staff development and what changes, if any changes,, would you like to make to the City's approach to upgrading the skills of its employees?

Mayor Nichoson:

Professional development and staff development has always been a priority of mine. If you stay stuck in your ways, that's when you get into the hole. this is how we've always done something, and this is how we can only do it mentality which I've always been against and I think has always been something that's held Gardner back.

So I've always encouraged our staff to go to things like different conferences, development seminars, educational trainings and one of the things that we're currently doing right now is actually working with Mount Wachusett Community College to see if we can get new Microsoft office training for our clerical staff, to see if they can be better in terms of using things like excel and think programs that they use on a daily basis and are using well with what they know. But they may be something out there that they don't know that could make it quicker and easier for them, because they've just never been trained on it. We've also been contacted by a couple of the staff members here about potentially partnering with a Mount Wachusett Community College to do a Spanish class because of the number of constituents who we have coming into our office who are, have a language barrier there, just enough to get them by the process of working them through a permit application, even if that . So there's a lot that we have goals for, and now it's just trying to find the right partners to cooperate with for those goals.



About the Construction and Use of School Buildings

Question: In the early days of Gardner, there were school buildings serving many grades at once throughout the community until a legislative change right after the Civil War which made buildings grade-based. How has the City handled its construction and use of School Buildings over the years and what changes, if any, would you like to make in the approach taken in the future?

Mayor Nicholson: I think it's good that we have all of our students in one school for the grade that they're in now, rather than having several different buildings throughout the city. If someone's in first grade, they should be getting a first grade education, not a South Gardner education versus a North Gardner education. You should be getting the Gardner education. So I think it's good that all our students are in the same class, learning the same curriculum, at the same pace, in the same day. I think there's a lot more we could be doing just to make sure that the public understands what's in Gardner's curriculum. I think if you go around now, people have a certain conception of Gardner Public Schools that's probably ten to fifteen to twenty five years old. And if you saw the work that our students are doing now, I think we'd really be changing a lot of perception of what's going on in our classrooms because our students are achieving and succeeding in much more than people are realizing and I think, it's just a mentality change and a perception and marketing change that we need to make here.

About the Construction and Use of School Buildings

Question: How do you handle things like planning for the future size of classes and then figuring out, well , can I add to a building or do I have to build a whole new one?

Mayor Nicholson: Well , I think we're actually seeing that in Gardner's Elementary School right now. When the building was originally approved by the Massachusetts School Building Authority, we had, I believe twenty five less staff members who were servicing our elementary school students. So when the new school did open, we did have to play a little bit of musical chairs trying to find homes for everyone, but it worked. And I think that just following data that we're seeing from the state, we get a report every October from the Commonwealth as to how many students are enrolled in Gardner. We can kind of make projections off of that . We do get some surprises so, for instance, this current school year, we have two hundred additional students at Gardner Public Schools that we didn't have last year. That's much more than what we expected to have , but that's because so many people are moving to Gardner from the Greater Boston, Greater Worcester, Greater Springfield areas that our school population just grew by two hundred students, so we can project as best we can. But you also have to tie those projections into what's going on citywide, not just on an educational basis, because that's how you get the population changes that are occurring there and just other shares that are occurring in the City.

Question: Well , you know , the more effective you are about promoting Gardner and your successes this problem is only going to get worse.

Mayor Nicholson: But it's a good problem to have Werner, and that's the best part of it .



Gardner Elementary School



About Signage Used by Gardner Throughout the City

Question: How effective is the signage used by Gardner throughout the City? What works, what doesn't, and how would you like to improve the way Gardner communicates with the public through signage?

Mayor Nicholson: I think we do a good job on our signage now that we have a lines and signs subdivision of the Gardner Department of Public Works.

Doug Monroe, who is the new foreman of that subdivision there, has really done a great job in making sure the public knows what's going out there and asking what's going on. That way he can preemptively prepare for what's happening. One of the first things I did , I think it was in August of 2020 was promote Doug to a foreman's position. That way it made it a full subdivision of the DPW. Now what that does is we can do stop signs and street signs and all that other stuff in house now, but also the sandwich boards that you see around the city, the Victorian signposts that you see at, like the intersections behind Hannaford or up the Uptown Rotary, although that one is down now because of the planned construction, it will be going up at the new part that's there .

Things I'd like to see improved in Gardner are adding a couple more of those Victorian signs . So you don't have a situation like at the top of Monument Park where we have the two A frame sign sandwich boards that are zip tied to the regular street post there. I think that kind of looks a little cheesy in my opinion, so I'd like to improve the way that that looks there. But Gardner is doing a good job. If you look . I think back in in 2013 , when I was first starting as an intern in Mayor Hawke's office, my first job was to work with Lyman Signs to replace all the welcome to Gardner signs that were around the city , that were the wooden signs with the yellow paint that were made by NCCI. Gardner back in the day, to get the new black and gold signs that we have around the city. So it's really neat for me, as my first project of

About Signage Used by Gardner Throughout the City

the city of Gardner was to make those new welcome signs, to improve our signage and now seeing the capabilities that we have in house, as now that I'm in a Mayor's position and not an intern in the mayor's office, it really is a lot of growth , and I'm really proud of that

Question: Now, what can you tell us about future programs coming down the pike? I believe some grant funding for signs that explain where things are in Gardner and where to go for this and where to go for that.

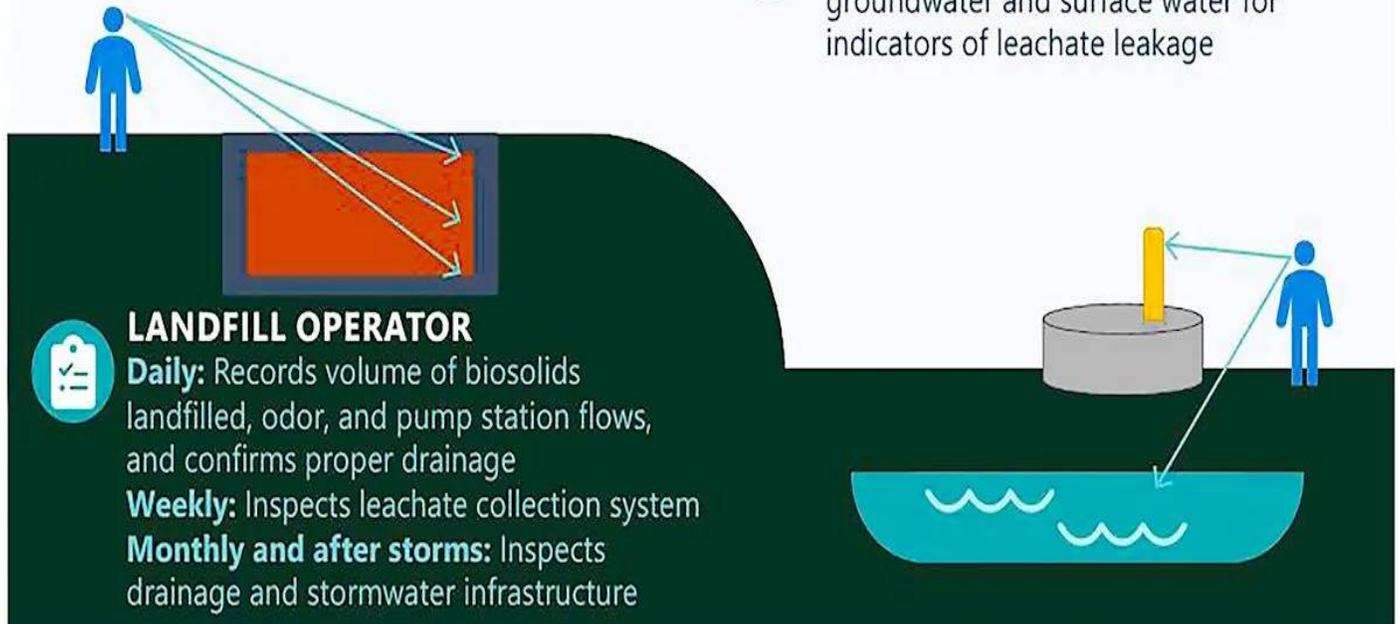
Mayor Nicholson: Yeah, we received a Wayfinding grant from the Commonwealth. It's gonna really focus on the Downtown Area and the Timpany Boulevard areas , but we're hoping to add some other spots across the city as well . And if you go through these to other cities, even Fitchburg you've got posts in the sidewalks that say this store this way , parking this way , garage this way, library that way, City Hall that way, and there's just wayfinding things to help people figure out where they're going in the City. So we are going to be working with a different group of people. We're required by the Commonwealth as part of this grant, to actually appoint a committee to oversee some of the aspects of where these signs should go and what these signs should include on them? So the Council President and I are currently going through some list of people to help work on this advisory group to work with Jessica de Roy, our City Economic development coordinator, to really get that process off the ground and going. So it should be good. I'm really, I'm excited to see what it's going to come out with within the next year and a half.

Question: Now, when you appoint people to that committee, do you give them a spelling test?

Mayor Nicholson: We probably should. So we don't end up in one of those buzzfeed ads that you see of some other communities around the area.

Protecting Our Environment:

MONITORING PROGRAM



About the Sludge Landfill Expansion

Question: Now, the Sludge landfill expansion has been a source of considerable debate, balancing safety considerations with the very real costs to the ratepayers. What lessons can be drawn from the current situation Gardner finds itself in?

Mayor Nicholson: I think this is another perfect example of the saying that if you fail to plan, you plan to fail. This is something that now we're dealing with, because we have three years left before we really need to find a solution, because that's how much we have left at the sludge landfill. And I understand that these conversations started back in 2015, but the fact that now we're still debating these questions and we have three years left before we're out of capacity and looking at potentially having to triple or quadruple at this point with inflation sewer rates, if we don't come up with something by that three year period, is something that's a disservice to the citizens who live here. We need to figure out the process right now so that we can have an immediate plan, but also plan ahead in the future, so that once that's done, we're not in the same spot we are again in the next fifteen to twenty years, but we have something already started, so once we can get through this very painful process, we already have something planned to go. So we are working on different alternatives. We're exploring those now at the DPW, but we need to fix the problem that we're seeing right now, and we need to figure out how to do that in a way that's not going to price people out of Gardner.



About Lighting in the Chair City

Question: Mayor Nicholson, since 1785, Gardner residents have seen a variety of different lights at night, based on things like the invention of electricity, for one. What has been learned over the years in providing light at night in the City and what would you like to see in the years ahead?

Mayor Nicholson: You know, I think there's been some progress made now that the City owns the street lights. Except for a couple areas of the City we don't own, the only places we do not own street lights are on Pearson Boulevard and then around the two Route 2 rotaries, those are still maintained by National Grid.

I tell this story a lot. When I was, back in 2020, I think this was in October, we had a sit down meeting with DOT. Excuse me, the Massachusetts Department of Transportation, for those who may not know the acronym and National Grid. And the reason was, is that the lights around the two rotaries and along Pearson Boulevard had been out for over a year and a half and we needed to figure out how to fix that but neither side wanted to take responsibility of it. National Grid thought that Mass DOT had an issue with it when they caused an issue with the wiring underground when they redid the rotaries. MASS DOT said it was a wiring issue on the National Grid side and I remember sitting in the chair. Has anyone checked to see if the light

About Lighting in the Chair City continued

bulbs have just burnt out ? And they all said no . The next day they went out and changed all the light bulbs and boom, every single post lit up that night and it's just no one bothered to check the simple solution to the problem. So I think having conversations like that to make sure that we aren't making a mountain out of a molehill will help us with that program . And I believe this May, people will be excited about a new lighting program that we have planned for the Downtown , just to make it look like a little bit more of a vibrant area of the City. but I'll save that for that special announcement that gets made at that time.



About Blighted Properties



Question: Let's talk about blighted properties. You've made a concerted effort along with the City Council to make a priority of doing something about the problem. What lessons have been learned along the way?

Mayor Nicholson: I think the lessons that I've been learning are again, part of what we've said other times here is that you need to pre-plan for these things and that issues of blight and vacant buildings are something we need to be dealing with now, but also preventing from occurring, because if you fix one and another comes up, you still are at net zero. So that's why Councillor Tyros



and I really did a lot of work in drafting the city's new, vacant, abandoned, and nuisance property ordinance that was unanimously passed by the City Council last year, while still working with the Gardner Redevelopment Authority, the private sector and other different parties to try to see if we can fix some of the issues of absentee landlords and just blight removal around the City so that we're burning the candle on both ends in a good way that's gonna have a positive effect on the City in the long run, because if you can't, if you don't work to fix the problem while also preventing it from re-occurring you're just going to be that hamster on the wheel that keeps running but going nowhere.



About Satisfaction in the Gardner Police Department

Question: Last year you were dealing with turmoil in the Gardner Police Department. Now, two previous lieutenants are serving as Chief and Deputy Chief. What lessons can be drawn from the no-confidence votes in their predecessors which can contribute to greater officer job satisfaction now?

Mayor Nicholson: You know it's hard to believe it's been a year, and in fact, I didn't even realize that until the question came out that it's already been that long. But I'm very happy with how the Gardner Police Department is running now. I think the main lesson that we've learned is listen to your people. If any time there's a no confidence, vote it's, because there was a break in communication somewhere. And just sitting down and listening to those who are under you and realizing that it is a team effort, I think can take you a long way, and I think it is exactly what we're seeing right now.

About Learning at the Massachusetts Municipal Association About Grants



MMA

Massachusetts
Municipal
Association



Question: Recently you and your Executive Aide Colin Smith got some valuable info along with leaders from other communities at an MMA Meeting. What did you learn which will help in the grant writing process and what else did you learn?

Mayor Nicholson: You know , working with the Massachusetts Municipal Association or the MMA , like you just said, is something that I find is very helpful and valuable. If we can find ways to avoid making mistakes other people made, but also copying the successes that other people made in a way that we don't even have to figure out the process to deal with , because they already did that for us , does nothing but help Gardner . In the end , the things that Colin and I , along with Jessica DeRoy, our City



About Efforts Which Didn't Turn Out as Well as Expected

Question: Mayor Nicholson, Baseball players know that you'll never hit the ball unless you take a swing at it. And Not every hit is a home run. What efforts have you made which didn't turn out as well as expected and how has that affected your willingness to try new things?

Mayor Nicholson: I mean, I think Pleasant Plaza is an example of that, that I think there's a lot more that could have been done communication wise in terms of, you know, getting people to there, having events there, maybe getting a couple entertainers there on a night and working with the business community there, but having something not work out in a way you expected it doesn't always mean it's a full failure. If you don't try something and you're not willing to fail in the long run , you don't learn those lessons. And I think that that's something that's really been a disservice to people in Gardner before is that so many people were set in the that's not Gardner way , or the we haven't done it that way , or we've never done that before , so we can't do that way or the line that I've heard a lot of people say before is Gardner's a hamburger town . We shouldn't be looking at a steakhouse lifestyle . I don't even know where that came from , but everyone seems to say that. I feel like. You really put yourself back and you solidify Gardner as this place that's not gonna grow and stay stagnant if you're not willing to try new things, you make it so that you're bound to fail in the long run and if you're not willing to try and not willing to fail

About Efforts Which Didn't Turn Out as Well as Expected continued

because you tried , you don't learn and you don't grow. So I'm always willing to try new things , and nothing that hasn't worked out the way we've expected has stopped me from feeling like that.

Question: Well, is it fair to say that some of the initiatives that you've done, such as with blighted properties, such as putting or getting Gardner properties back on the tax rolls, increasing paving funding those are new things, those actually worked out really well? Is it fair to say that when you try a lot of new things that in your case, like ninety nine percent of them actually worked out pretty well ?

Mayor Nicholson: Yeah, I agree with that . A hundred percent. Again , if you you try things, you're gonna fail sometimes, but you're also gonna succeed more than once, and it's probably going to surprise you in the long run.



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About Advice on Purchasing a Home



Question: Now speaking of trying something: Last Fall, you became a homeowner in the City of Gardner after putting in what you have described as many unsuccessful offers on various properties. Based on your experiences throughout the process, what advice would you give to people interested in purchasing their first home?

Mayor Nicholson: You

know, buying a house is a very interesting process, one that took me over two years and thirty six offers because of how the market was. I think the biggest piece of advice I'd give someone who's interested in purchasing their first home right now is don't be afraid of the sticker shock that you see if you look at. If I look back at the homes that I looked at, if you would have asked me in July, 2020, when I started looking at homes, what the cost of a home would be when I ended up getting a home in September of 2022....

There were so many houses I just passed up, even looking at, because I thought I'd never be able to be in a house like that, that I look back now and I was like, okay that's a lot cheaper than what I thought it was because I was just in sticker shock. So listen to your realtors, listen to the people who are experts in that field and really weigh out all of the options and look at the big picture rather than just being shocked and surprised at first..

Question: Well, you were talking about some city expenses earlier, for example, a fire truck, and you were saying that, you know, if you don't plan for it now, it's just gonna be more expensive later.

Mayor Nicholson: Correct? And that's the thing is, it's the same exact thing on your own personal end here. It's an investment in yourself. And while it's a massive purchase and probably one of the biggest you can make. You may just sit back and look at the big picture.



About Whether Gardner Should Spend Money Instead of Waiting for Grants

Question: Now, obviously you're thrilled that Gardner will be getting a million bucks to replace the main water line and also have redundancy. Given that Gardner doesn't generally tax its people up to the maximum allowed by Prop 2 ½, has it been a mistake to wait this long to tackle this task? Should Gardner have spent the money on its own instead of waiting for a grant?

Mayor Nicholson: You know, this is one of those things that you have to weigh out what the City had and not, this is, particularly with the water main line. This is something that would have had to be paid out of the Water Enterprise account. We actually can't use tax dollars on it, because it only benefits people who have City water in the City. It's one of those. It's called a Janus issue, and that's because there's a State Supreme Court case from the Supreme Judicial Court where one of the party's last names was Janus and it basically said that you can't take property tax dollars that everyone in the city pays to only benefit a small section of the population. So where not everyone is on sewer and not everyone of those on water because they may have a well and septic system, we can't use their tax dollars that they pay to cover a cost like that. The water enterprise account hasn't always been as healthy as it is, so I don't fault people for looking at the financial side of it.

About Whether Gardner Should Spend Money Instead of Waiting for Grants continued

However , if there was ever anything in Gardner that got cited by the Commonwealth as something saying this is one of the top three most vulnerable places in the state because of the situation that this pipe is in , I personally would not have put it off as long as we have here in Gardner, and I'm glad we're able to fund the replacement of that water transmission line.

Question: You have to wait how long to actually do that construction of that main?

Mayor Nicholson: I expect we'll see a groundbreaking this summer.



Gardner Elevated Water Tank



About Whether Gardner Athletics Has Been Properly Funded Over the Years

Question: Mayor Nicholson, as you are aware, Sports is very popular in any school system. Has athletics been funded appropriately over the years and what approaches would you change based on your observations?

Mayor Nicholson: I think we've invested a lot in our sports recently in Gardner. I think there's a lot that our Athletic Director, Dan Forte, is doing very, very well. You look at the number of students who are picking up again in hockey and basketball, in football and cheerleading which is one of our most successful sports in Gardner. We've really seen a lot of growth and development in our programs, I think just supporting what we can in terms of our infrastructure. So, for instance, again, we've redone Lachance gymnasium at Gardner High School. We've redone the fields that our baseball teams and our softball teams use, our soccer teams practice on, and that facility at Gardner High School. We're finishing up the build out of the Watkins Field facility, and it's one of those. If you build it, then they'll come. So now that we have the facilities in place, we have an athletic director who's reaching out to our feeding programs to get students to stay involved in sports and athletics. It's really helping us in the long run.

Question: Mayor Nicholson: What lessons can be drawn from the successes that the Gardner coaches have had in actually having these successful teams? You know, the

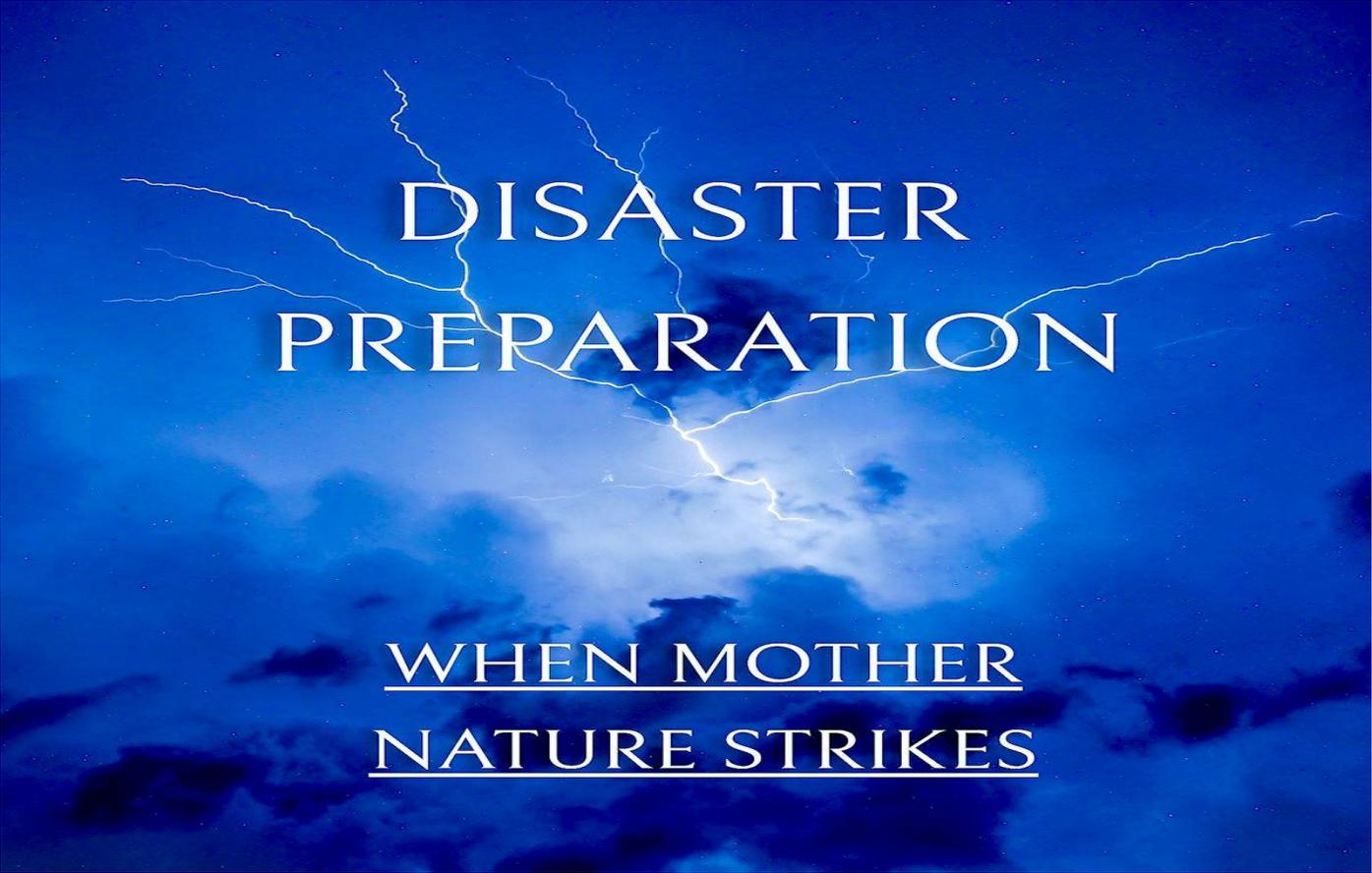
About Whether Gardner Athletics Has Been Properly Funded Over the Years continued

cheerleaders, the soccer team , the other teams . What can you draw from that?

Mayor Nicholson: Again , I think it's just working with our students when they're younger and making sure that they spark that interest when they're young and staying with it there too . If you look at the programs that have specific feeder program ,the sting hockey teams, the Gardner Youth Soccer , now , the Elementary school band program, the different cheer clubs that we have in the area, those are the most successful sports, even flag football and Chair City Lions and everything like that for our feeder program, for the football teams as well .So working with our students when they're younger and building connection, but with those feeder programs to their schools, rather than having them operate on their own and seeming like two fully separate programs, is what builds that connection, to get people to want to stay involved in sports when they're older, in our Middle School and High School.



Field at Gardner High School



DISASTER PREPARATION

WHEN MOTHER NATURE STRIKES

About Gardner Disaster Preparedness

Question: How well has Gardner handled disaster preparedness over the years? What changes would you make to better prepare the City for the unexpected?

Mayor Nicholson: I think we've done an all right job in handling disaster preparedness. Paul Topolski our Emergency Management Director, actually is very, very involved, and he's very good at what he does. He's the one who really got us through the ice storm, helped us out with a lot during the pandemic and he really deserves a lot more credit than he gets. I personally would like to see us evaluate more frequently how the plans that we have in place are. That way, we probably would have caught that something like the vaccine distribution at Gardner High School doesn't work, a lot earlier in the process.

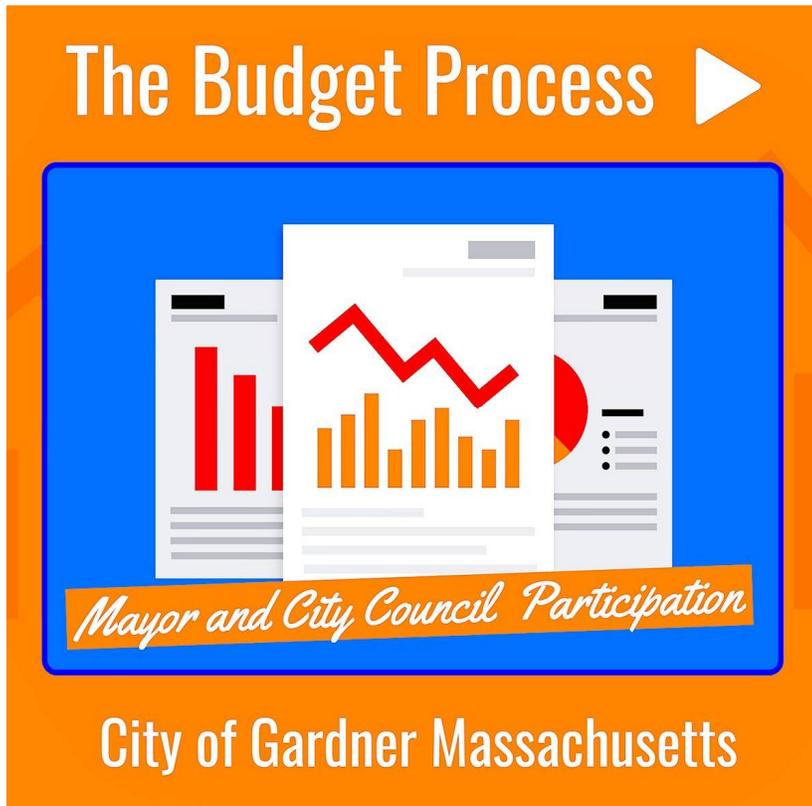
I think we need to drill these plans on a more frequent basis and really evaluate how they work and are done an actual physical process more frequently than we do, rather than just judging theory on a paper. But we've done a lot more of that in the last two years, and I think we're on a good footing

Question: How does it work in an emergency Mayor Nicholson, when you need emergency funding for something that happens, how does that work?

About Gardner Disaster Preparedness continued

Mayor Nicholson: So normally when we need emergency funding for something like that happened, nine out of ten times, the state of emergency would have to be declared, there's very specific benchmarks when that has to be happened. And if the state declares a state of emergency, we can actually put in requests for the state to cover those costs that we incur. Declaring a state of emergency, All that does is allow us to spend over budget on certain items in response to the emergency that's at hand . Otherwise, without a state of emergency, you are bound by state law that you cannot deficits spend in anything other than snow and ice removal. So really, just declaring a state of emergency is a budgetary procedure, but it also opens up avenues for us to request extra funding from the state to help cover those costs .





About the Budget Process

Question: Speaking of budgets, when it comes to the annual budget process: What have you learned about budgets from your experience over the years? And what are you doing differently this year based on last year such as shifting priorities, for example?

Mayor Nicholson: You know, I first started dealing with City budgets when I was working as both an intern and then as an aide for Mayor Hawke and him showing me what happened.

Then as a town administrator in the town of Rutland I saw firsthand how budgeting worked in a different manner, where I had to, you know, justify the budget that the town was proposing to their general residents at a town meeting that had over eight hundred people at it , because there was another hot button issue on that town meeting warrant that you really had to be able to talk and explain everything that's there and why the priorities that are there, your priorities and why certain things weren't funded but are funded in a long term plan. And so there's a lot that goes into budgeting that. Then I came back here and Gardner and tried to carry over here with the information that we give to the Council , different Mayor's updates that are specifically budget based , so that the public can understand what we're doing, even though the general public doesn't vote on a budget in Gardner, like we did in the town of Rutland, but it's just keeping people up to date on what's going on . Now. one thing we're doing differently this year in the budgeting process for the fiscal year 2024 budget , is I've asked department heads not just to give me their regular budget request for next year , but also their magic wish list . And what that means is , if money wasn't an issue , how would you like your department to function in terms of staffing levels , in terms of program offerings in terms of software and budget for those as if you had an unlimited budget ? That way I can see what is the goal for us to have in an ideal situation , but what is also realistic and what that does is it allows us to build a ten to twenty year plan as to we should be building and trying to focus to get to these points in this department so that we can better the process for our City. .

About the Budget Process continued

Now, we're always going to keep into account that we don't have that ideal number and we don't have a magic wand to make it so that we can fund everything , but we can at least start to plan , and by planning ahead , it really makes it so that we're not blindsided when these expenses come up in the long run .

BUDGET



DOG



About the Financial Approach

Question: Now speaking about a magic wand: Somehow recently, the City of Gardner has had 2 perfect audits. The stabilization fund is in better shape. What are you doing better now than what the City has done in the past and why?

Mayor Nicholson: I think it's really just increasing our checks and balances that we have in making sure that we maintain our fiduciary responsibility to our residents who live here . We're constantly meeting once a month with our full finance team to go over everything that we have . If we need to meet in between, we meet in between. But it's also just actually listening to the recommendations and best practices that are out there and breaking away from the, this is how everything's been done system to, if we did this , this will actually increase our transparency but also increase the checks and balance system that we have here, and that's really something that's helping us out a lot.



About Promotion of the Chair City

Question: When you have perfect audits, that makes the City look good, and it's great in promoting the City. What is your opinion on how well the City of Gardner has promoted itself in the past and what alterations would you make to the present plan so that the Chair City could be more successful in its efforts?

Mayor Nicholson: I think there's a little more we could have done in the past to help promote ourselves instead of waiting for people to come here . We could have reached out proactively and I think that's exactly what we're doing now. That's why ? You know , my office is working with a company called CGI to update our promotional videos that are on the city's website . We maintained the videos that we received from the Dennis Quaid Viewpoint program that we had last year that we can now use as commercials for the City . We're working with Guidebook which is a company out of Pittsfield to make a new community guidebook that we can put in all of the different new residential apartment units that are going to be built around Gardner, so that people who are new residents here know what's in the community that they can then take advantage of there's a lot that we need to do in terms of our promotion of the City, not just to outside groups , but also to our residents, so that they learn the new things that are here, just in their backyard that they may not have realized.



About Gardner Growing Business

Question: Now, what positive lessons can other communities draw from Gardner's record in growing business during the pandemic and after? What did Gardner do right?

Mayor Nicholson: I think what Gardner did right is we didn't wait for the pandemic to be over for us to bulk up our economic development measures . A lot of places were so concerned and siloed in this one aspect of daily life. There was a massive aspect in daily life at the time, and I don't blame them at all , but it's one of those that you can't forget there's other stuff going on as well . If you waited for things to be done in the shutdown to be over before, and kind of really put a pause on all of your outreach and economic development efforts during that time, you hurt yourself in the long run . We went out, we recruited, we found ways to get people here during that time and basically what they're saying . We know things are rough right now ,but we'll be with you through the thick of it, and we are there with you through the thick of it right now to prove that we're there , and I think that that's something that, by being that proactive has helped us in the long run.

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About Serving the Public

Question: What mistakes has the City of Gardner made serving the public in the past and what changes have you specifically instructed staff to make with the goal of better serving the citizens of the City?

Mayor Nicholson: That's an excellent question. I think one of the mistakes that may have been made in the past is being too afraid to change., And what I mean by that is adding different, new , different and new programs and processes to make, to help us bring the services of City Hall to the comfort of people's home . And that's something that we're trying to do right now with our new online permitting system that we have fully implemented in our Health Department and our Building Department. We're working right now to get the Fire Department fully online and the City Clerk's office fully online , so that you don't have to wait for City Hall to be open in order to get things in the business that you need to get done, done. By letting you do it from the comfort of your home, even if it's on a Saturday or Sunday morning that we don't may not be able to see it until Monday on our end here, in terms of our staff members. You've already taken care of your part then, and you've already put the ball in our court at that point. So by trying to increase these offerings and what we're able to do with the public, it really allows us to be a lot more efficient.



GARDNER MA EVENTS



About the Number of Gardner Events

Question: Do you think Gardner should have less events, the same number of events, or more events and on what do you base this opinion?

Mayor Nicholson: I'm all for more events in the City. I think people build their ideas on the ways in which a community spirit is alive and thriving by the times that our community is able to come together. I think that we have a good set of events that we have now, but I'm always willing to see them grow, because any time you can get the community out together is never a bad thing. And it just shows again that we're in a city that's alive and involved and wants to be active.

Outcomes of Gardner MA City Ordinances



About Effectiveness of City Ordinances

Question: Now, you spoke about city ordinances helping in the area of blighted buildings, for example. How effective are City Ordinances in getting the outcome intended and how can Gardner use this tool better in the future?

Mayor Nicholson: I think there's a lot of our ordinances that have been revamped that really do help us with our intended outcomes, and we've seen this. Like I said, with our nuisance property, Blighted and Vacant Abandoned Building Ordinance that was just adopted last year. There's a lot of our ordinances that need to be changed. So, for instance, right now, the ordinance that oversees our City Engineering Department still refers to it as just the Survey Department. It really doesn't really reflect some of the operations that are needed that that department oversees now. So that's just an example of some of them that need to just be updated and looked at and see if they currently meet the needs and operations of the departments that they oversee. But overall, I think we have a good set of ordinances that are there that, again, you just have to constantly keep looking at and evaluating if they still fit what we're trying to do.



About Serving Senior Citizens

Question: Now, let's focus on Senior Citizens for a second. Based on the successes and/or failures of the past, how can Gardner better serve its Senior Citizens?

Mayor Nicholson: I think we're going to do a lot of that with our new senior center that we're going to be opening within the next year, year and a half . Over at Waterford Street School . I think one of the , if you want to call it failure in the past that we have here , is that we have a senior center in a multi floor building .You know , a lot of the calls that we get now over at the senior center is because someone fell because they were trying to utilize the stairs. By making a building that's more accessible to everyone is there . By having all of the services on one single floor , we really can increase the population that can use the facility 1. avoid any safety concerns, 2 , but also then grow the programming that's there because we're able to bring in more people. And the funding that we actually receive from the Commonwealth for the Senior Center's purpose is based off of how many people swipe in, and when I say swipe that , you actually get a tag if you join the Senior Center , swipe into the senior center every day and check in , and the number of people checking into the Senior Center on a daily basis throughout the course of the year actually determines how much the state pays us so that we can offset the cost , that

About Serving Senior Citizens continued

the taxpayers here in Gardner for utilizing the Senior Center . It's actually similar to chapter seventy with the schools, but it's solely based on , you get x number of dollars per number of people who have entered the senior center over the course of the year .

Question: So literally, the more people go there, the better it gets.

Mayor Nicholson: Absolutely. A Hundred percent.



Current Gardner MA Senior Center



About a Visitors' Center and Tourism

Question: Was it a mistake for Gardner not to have an operating Visitors Center and what plans does the City have for that building now? And how can Gardner increase its tourism in the future?

Mayor Nicholson: So this is one that is a little bit of a mix of a city and state issue in that, the Gardner Visitor Center located at the old Lake Street Fire Station, was actually a state owned and operated facility. And the Commonwealth cut funding for that building probably in the early years of the Patrick Administration, so that was something that the City really didn't have that much control over, but where I think the City can improve on that, as our plans now with the building. Now legislation was filed to allow the Commonwealth to be able to sell the building back to the City of Gardner. We are in negotiations with the Department of Capital Asset Management, DECAM for those who know the acronym to get that back in the city's hands. But we're also working with Mass Development to see if there's an easier way, and that can happen, seeing if we can partner with someone to help develop the area, new business opportunities. There's been several ideas about a lunch restaurant in the area that's there, but we're all just those are all just conceptual ideas now until we can get the building back into the City's hands there. In terms of increasing tourism to in the future, for Gardner, I think that that's just part of the whole overall

About a Visitors' Center and Tourism continued

economic development plan that we have here . We can't increase our tourism if we don't have the amenities to bring people into the City , and that's our restaurants , our businesses and everything else that comes with it . So while we improve the look of our city , we work to , you know , fix these vacant , blighted properties that we have , and then we can really work to bring people in that way , because we've built a City that can accommodate more people here visiting.

Question: So Maki Park and the Park Street Park, those should help this year.

Mayor Nicholson: Very much. I think especially , and I also would add in the new Pavilion at the Greenwood Pool site as well.

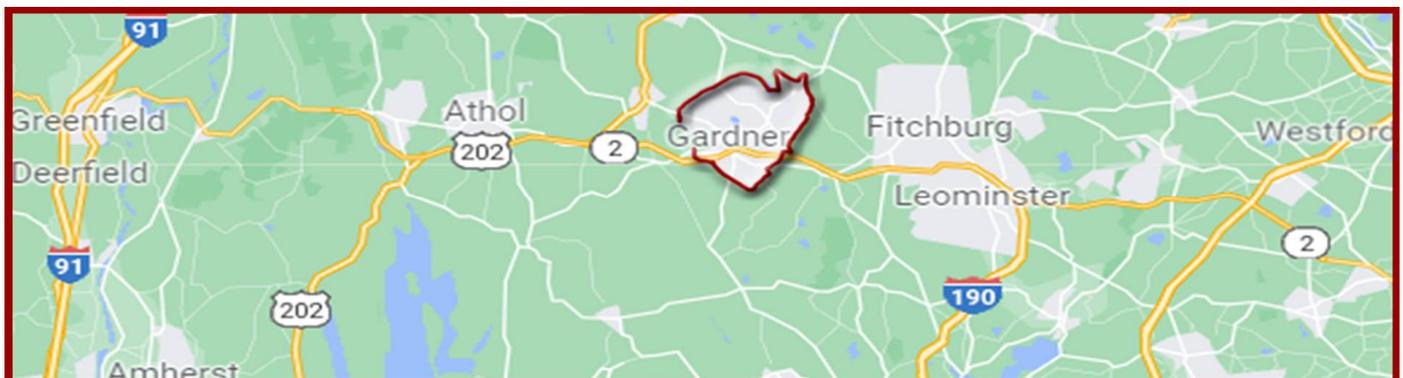




About Downtown Gardner Traffic Flow

Question: Traffic flow in Downtown Gardner has changed a few times over the years. How happy are merchants, citizens, and your own Public Safety Department with the current traffic flow. Based on input, what can you say about any future changes?

Mayor Nicholson: You know, right now we've gotten good feedback on the traffic flow that we have here. You know, people are always gonna be , you know, have their opinions about the Downtown Square and how that could be improved there. But with what we have right now , the traffic flows and the traffic volume that we have right now , I'm happy with the traffic patterns that we have Downtown . And so we really , the merchants and our Public Safety Department's been as well.





About Funding Priorities

Question: A question about funding in general. Over the last 100 years, what funding priorities have surprised you. What has the City gotten right and what has it gotten wrong?

Mayor Nicholson: You know , I think when you're in a City that really like us, has been strapped financially any grants that you can get are a big help, whether it's for a park , for road paving, for programs at the schools ,that really does help . I think something the city's gotten wrong with that is just kind of hoping something sticks and applying for everything that you can without really having a plan for it. And I think something that we've since gotten right is that really making a master plan for the City in terms of what our goals are, so that no one's applying for something in a silo. If we're applying for a grant for the School Department , we understand how that benefits the City in the long run , and I'll use our Manufacturing Integrated Pathway at Gardner High School as an example for that. That's something that started because we got to work skills grant from the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development from the Commonwealth , but it's now something that we can use to help market our students in a workforce for the future. If something that opens up internship opportunities , if someone's able to graduate with their full OSHA certificate , if someone's working in a manufacturing field or wants to go see what manufacturing is like in a actual manufacturer's place , like Advanced Cable Ties or Seaman Paper or Garlock Printing or the other locations that we have in Gardner . But it also connects our students with places that , again , they may not know is in their backyard so finding ways to tie this all together into this big picture goal is really what I think is helping us now .



About Environmental Concerns

Question: How well has Gardner handled environmental concerns over the years? Based on your opinion, how would you like concerns over pollution, air quality, water quality, soil quality and any other related issues handled?

Mayor Nicholson: I think we've done a good job with our environmental concerns that have been raised over the years .

We always do make an effort to dot our I's and cross our T's, working with our Conservation Commission, our Conservation Agent, our DPW, our Department of Public Works, and our Health Department to make sure that we're doing everything we can to really protect the environment that we have here. There's over a third of the City and protected open space right now, and any time that we have a project like the sludge landfill or like anything else that comes up that may cause environmental concerns, were in constant contact right now with the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection or MEPA, the Massachusetts branch of the Federal Environmental Protection Agency, that we really help make sure that experts are looking into these to see if there's a construction project that just needs extra waddles put up to make sure that something doesn't run off into a water, a body of water in the area. We're really doing everything we can, and I think that that's how I want that to continue, so that if concerns are raised about pollution, water quality, air quality , soil quality, we can, you know, have those conversations not only internally but with the experts at the state to make sure that we're dealing with all of those as best as we can.

Question: Now, for those who would criticize how this sludge landfill issue has been done and say, oh well, Gardner just hasn't spent a lot of time on this. How many hours would you say you have personally spent in your office talking about

About Environmental Concerns continued

this thing?

Mayor Nicholson: Several. Days. And you know it's honestly probably a couple weeks once you add up all those hours together. It's , it's something that, again, is very, very, very involved . And I think that's why , if you talk to people at the – at DEP at the state level, or MEPA at the Federal level , they actually commended the City on how much we've done with the sludge landfill because of how often and consistent we are in trying to make sure that we're, we've got a safe system that's going in place there. But you, you can't be that well off if you don't put in the time with it , and I think that that's the main part of that, because we've put in the time and now we're ready to go.,





About Supporting Industry

Question: Now, speaking Mayor Nicholson about industry: How well has Gardner supported industry in the past and what can it do to improve upon this in the future?

Mayor Nicholson: I think we've done well in supporting our industry here. I think there's definitely been times in our history that we've not been as supportive as we could be, and I think we saw that when Simplex left to go to Westminster. However, we're doing what we can now, the fact that we've got pretty much two full industrial parks in Gardner – excuse me, three full industrial parks in Gardner, when you have the Industrial Park located on Fredette Street and Watkins Road, the one over on Linus Allain Avenue and then the one at Suffolk Lane as well. We've only got two spots that are open, and one of them is currently under agreement. So we've seen how industries want to come here and want to grow here. Now we're looking at building a potentially fourth industrial park in Gardner, because that demand is there. So it's something that we're gonna continue to support and look to, and seeing how we can work with developers. There's different programs that we can have available to us, like when Advanced Cable Ties expanded, they were able to get a TIF from the City. If you don't know that acronym it's tax increment financing where we actually spread out the increase in property taxes over the course of a, you know, several year period. So it's not like the person who wants to invest in the city has an upfront cost of the build out, but then also gets slammed

About Supporting Industry continued

in taxes at the same time , but the city still gets the same amount in the long run. It's just spread out over a course there , working with people to see if that's needed to help them. Here really is trying to get people here is the main part of that, and we've done a good job at that.



Advanced Cable Ties Gardner MA

Gardner MA

The "Chair City"



WORK AND BUILD



About Criticism from the Public

Question: Mayor Nicholson, all public officials get criticized whether deserved or not. What criticism from the public has led you to make changes to priorities?

Mayor Nicholson: You know, the way I like to describe this to people is that I could say I'm going to go into my office and take care of A, B, and C, and then we get a phone call. Something gets posted on Facebook. There's an

email that comes in, and I have to jump to X, Y, and Z before I can go back, and my whole day is completely different because of it. But that's okay. People in the city again, whether they're driving around and notice something or something happens to them, they're calling us because something's affecting their daily life, and that's. What our job is to deal with here, is to work with people to make sure, again, that they're happy and proud to call Gardner their home. And if there's something that's happening that affects them directly, it's because there's something that we need to address with them. Now, there's certainly things that affect people that I may not think about and having those conversations and having them call in or having them write to us is exactly what we need to do to find out those problems, because if we don't have those collaborative conversations, we're never gonna know, and it's gonna just hurt the city in the long run. So I can't really, you know, pinpoint a specific change to priorities that's been made, because it really does happen on a constant basis and on a daily basis here, and that's how we're able to really juggle and use the teammates that we have to make sure that while the DPW is working on something, if someone else can help with another matter, we're getting those people the connections they need.

Question: So is it safe to say that not only are you proactive but also you are reactive based on what the citizenry tells you?

Mayor Nicholson: Absolutely you always have to be. Otherwise you're not doing your job as a public servant.



About Changes in the Topics of Calls from the Public

Question: On a similar note: Calls come in from the public to City Hall. What changes in the number of calls on various topics have occurred which has given you valuable information on which to base future decisions?

Mayor Nicholson: I think one of the biggest things that we have a drop in calls is people asking what's going on in the City , and I think that we've done a more concerted effort of getting information out there, whether it be via the Mayor's Update videos that we released weekly or through different Press Releases that we put out, or just getting information out to the public in a lot more consistent manner, rather than having to have people call and ask what's going on here or what's out here. Why is this road closed or things of that nature. I mean, well , I'll use the tax bill as an example. We were able to put information out to the public as to what the tax anomaly was last year, how we've addressed it , how we've handled it, what to expect. That, I thought we were going to get a lot more calls than we did with that process, but, again, it's because we were able to already preemptively tell people what's going on . And I think getting that information out to the public has really helped people feel like they know what's going on , rather than having to call and ask what's going on .



About Challenging Financial Times

Question: Mayor Nicholson, downturns of the economy seem to be cyclical and unavoidable. What has the past taught you in better preparing for the challenging financial times should they occur?

Mayor Nicholson: I think you should always be planning for that downturn to occur. The fact that our stabilization account is the healthiest it's ever been right now is a result of that.

When I took office in 2020, the state was allowing a longer use of free cash past the normal July 1st deadline to use it. When we had a couple hundred thousand dollars left over, I asked the City Council to put that into our stabilization account. That way, we were able to give ourselves that extra cushion and we've continuously put more money into that account. That way, if we ever need to spend it, because something comes up and there's an issue that we need to afford right away, we've got that cushion already there. It's something that's just a best financial practice that you always make sure you have enough in your savings to cover your expenses if you can't afford on your regular budgetary accounts., Also making sure that we're not using one time money to fund long term expenses that's why I'm a very big believer that you never use free cash to fund budgetary expenses because your free cash amount could change from one year to another. That you don't want to then put yourself in a spot where you're then very restricted in what you can do and what you can't, because you lost a funding source for a portion of your budget. Having all of those ideas in mind and making sure that you solidify those increase the strength of your financial foundation that make it so that you can go forward in a lot better planning situation.



About the Effectiveness of Various Approaches

Question: Mayor Nicholson, my last question – drawing from your experiences over the last couple of years and the results of various efforts, what approaches have worked the best and what approaches need the most tweaking?

Mayor Nicholson: I'm proud of how much we've been able to communicate with the public. I think that we've been very – my administration has been very out there, talking to people, getting ideas, hearing what people have to say. I think that we could increase that a little more. I just – we're still working on ways to try to find ways to get better feedback from people. I always want to make sure that we're not siloing ourselves into what a professor at UMass once called, and that I had in my political science classes the politics of a false consensus, where you only talk to the same people over and over again, that you think everyone agrees with you. In reality, there's a lot more feedback you could be getting. So we're always looking at new, better ways for feedback, better ways for public input on projects, better ways for idea gathering, because, again, someone in the community may have the idea, we just need to implement it. But I think we've done an excellent job so far in that work, and it's just you can never stay stagnant. If you stay stagnant and just complacent you put yourself in a spot like we've been twenty years ago. But by finding new ways to get all of that, we really strengthen the city and set us up for a better future.

About the Effectiveness of Various Approaches continued

Question: Now what's the best way for the public to reach the Mayor's office and give you some ideas that they have?

Mayor Nicholson: You can always call my office at (978) 630-1490. Myself, Colin, or Rachael are always happy to talk to you. Or you can email me at Mayor@Gardner-MA.gov. And we'll be sure to get back to you as soon as we can.

This ebook is dedicated to the good people of the City of Gardner Massachusetts.

Settled in 1764

Incorporated as a town in 1783

Became a City in 1923

Continued its future from here: February 1, 2023.

Thank you to Gardner Mayor Michael Nicholson. Without the work he put in to give thoughtful answers to all of these topics, this ebook would not have been possible.

Thanks for Reading
Lessons About Gardner History
with Mayor Michael Nicholson