

GARDNER RECEIVES \$925,000 FROM COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT BLOCK GRANT AWARDS

Funding awarded for demolition of School Street School and social service programming in Gardner

Gardner, MA – July 29, 2024 – On Monday, Mayor Nicholson, State Representative Jon Zlotnik, City Council President Elizabeth Kazinskas, along with other members of the Council were joined by community partners for the announcement of the most recent round of the Community Development Block Grant Awards from the Commonwealth and Federal Government. Gardner received just under a million dollars in funding for a range of projects that will be underway in the coming year.

"These funds are transformational for Gardner," said Mayor Mike Nicholson. "In the last few years, we have made a large effort to revitalize the City, deal with the problems that we've been facing for decades and work to turn blight into promise. The projects we will be able to do as a result of this grant continue that momentum and help us move Gardner forward."

The Massachusetts Community Development Block Grant Program is a federally funded, competitive grant program crafted to assist small cities and towns in addressing a diverse range of community development needs. This program is designed for cities and towns with a population under 50,000 who do not receive direct funding from the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development. Community development needs supported by this program include but are not limited to; needs in housing, infrastructure, revitalization, economic development, and public social services.

"As the Council's designee to the CDBG Steering Committee, I have the pleasure of working with the Committee to provide critical funding for development and social service projects that achieve the City's development objectives. The Committee works hard, reviewing many applications to determine the projects and initiatives that best support Gardner's development and growth," said City Councilor George Tyros.

The City Council has displayed unanimous endorsement and approval of the City's application for these grant funds that was put together by the City's CDBG Steering Committee. This committee is comprised of members of the City's Administration,

Community Activists, and City Councilor George Tyros, the Council's representative to the group.

"I'm very happy that a good portion of the CDBG funds is going towards the demolition of School Street School and expanding Jackson Playground. As the City Councilor for this neighborhood this is an important project to remove blight and expand open space for our residents. The building is beyond saving and I appreciate the effort on the part of Mayor Nicholson to explore all possibilities first and for prioritizing this for this round of funding," said City Councilor Karen Hardern.

"The City Council regularly supports the use of CDBG funds. One of the fundamental responsibilities of the City Council is to appropriate taxpayer money in the best interest of the community, and we are fortunate that programs like CDBG provide support for our efforts. The CDBG initiative is a primary example of how federal and state resources supplement city resources to improve Gardner." said City Council President Elizabeth Kazinskas.

A portion of the funding will be allocated to four of the city's social services and non-profit programs. These include, the Gardner Athletic Program, Gardner Emergency Housing Mission, Voices of Truth – Domestic Violence Prevention and the Gardner Community Action Committee. This program's funds allow for these organizations to continue to provide essential public services within the City.

"The Community Development Block Grant funds continue to assist the City with implementing our community development priorities through the elimination of slum and blight and repurposing underutilized properties within our Urban Renewal Area, along with supporting much needed social service programs that assist our low and moderate-income population within the City," said Trever Beauregard, Director of the Department of Community Development and Planning for the City.

Alongside Gardner were 64 other communities receiving funding for various projects. In total, \$39 million was awarded to various cities and towns. The majority of the community development projects utilizing the grant funding are focused on roadway repairs, infrastructure improvements, housing support and social services.

"This program and funding are an important partnership between the Federal, State and Local government. It provides local officials with more options to cover projects that don't always fit into other funding streams or timelines. I think Gardner has done tremendous work to responsibly and effectively deploy these funds to make necessary investments and improvements throughout the city as well as support critical non-profits." said State Representative Jon Zlotnik.

Of the \$925,000 Gardner received, \$752,000 is allocated for blight removal, \$48,000 for social services, and the remaining \$125,000 of the funds are directed towards administrative costs associated with overseeing these projects.

School Street School Demolition

A significant amount of this funding will be used for the demolition of the old School Street School that is located at 53 School Street. With the revitalization of the land, the city will be providing a new parking lot for Jackson playground and skatepark. It is hoped that with the addition of parking, there will be even more activity and usage of the playground and skatepark. This will enhance community engagement and enjoyment of these recreational facilities. The School Street School facility has been vacant since 1987 when the City stopped using the building as an elementary school. Since then, there have been several safety concerns due to break-ins and the structural integrity of the building, leading to the building being fully condemned in 2022.

Gardner Emergency Housing Mission

"The mission of Gardner Emergency Housing Mission (GEHM) is to support and strengthen the Gardner community by providing temporary emergency housing and support services to families who are homeless. GEHM exists to advocate for collaborative locally driven solutions to end homelessness," said Mary Tourigny, Secretary of GEHM's board of directors. "Many families in Gardner are one paycheck away from being homeless. Illness, change in employment or a new land landlord are all reasons families find themselves homeless, living in their car or being split up and staying on the couches or floors of friends and families."

Gardner Emergency Housing Mission will receive \$5,000 from the grant program to help support their mission. This non-profit works diligently to provide additional support to members of the community who may need it.

“While a family is in one of the fully furnished GEHM apartments, GEHM pays the rent and utilities. This allows the families to save up for the first and last month’s rent plus security deposit for their own apartment. Thanks to the funding from the Community Development Block Grant, GEHM is able to help homeless families regain stability in the community while retaining their dignity,” said Mary Tourigny.

While living in GEHM housing, families have access to a Case Worker that meets with them twice a week. The Case Worker helps to bridge the gap between homelessness and self-sufficiency through education and advocacy. The Case Worker assists families with identifying resources and applying for available services.

Voices of Truth – Domestic Violence Prevention

Voices of Truth is a vital organization in the community, working to combat domestic violence and provide support to survivors. This non-profit is dedicated to prevention and intervention and strives to provide the tools needed to leave an abusive situation. Their resources and services empower individuals who have been affected by domestic violence by helping to foster a safe and supportive environment. Through collaboration with community partners and local authorities, Voices of Truth continues to raise awareness and advocate for solutions to ensure people have an opportunity to live free from fear.

“The CDBG grant funds have given Voices of Truth the means to increase domestic violence awareness, education and open discussions by developing the Gardner Domestic Violence Task Force. Currently, having over forty members and growing, we collaborate with other organizations, businesses, and schools for resources, providing solutions to community barriers for victims and survivors of domestic violence,” said Bernice Richard, Executive Director of the Voices of Truth and Gardner Domestic Violence Taskforce.

Elimination of Athletic User Fees at Gardner High School

In continuing the City’s efforts to make programming at Gardner Public Schools more equitable to students regardless of their economic backgrounds, \$15,000 of the funds received will be going toward the elimination of all athletic user fees for students at Gardner High School and Gardner Middle School.

“With the rising cost of living, maintaining access to our programming and services at GPS has continued to grow as a priority. Funds from the CDBG Program allow us to continue to offer our Athletic Programming free of charge, while maintaining our standards in facilities, equipment, and personnel,” said Daniel Forte, Gardner Public Schools Athletic Director.

Both Gardner Public Schools and the City Administration have made a conscious effort to ensure that extracurricular activities are available to every student. Prior to these efforts, user fees exceeded \$100 per season per sport and \$500 to participate on the hockey team. This is a positive investment in the schools and in the City.

Gardner Community Action Committee – Food Pantry Program

The Gardner Community Action Committee (CAC) is receiving \$16,000 from the CDBG Program. The CAC provides essential services for the well-being of the community, as they are committed to alleviating hunger in the Gardner. This crucial support is extremely important in a time when the demand for assistance continues to rise. This funding represents an investment devoted to promoting food security in the City.

“The Gardner CAC has experienced a staggering 63% surge in program demand. The CDBG grant will be instrumental in addressing this critical need by allowing us to expand our fresh meal program, establish a pop-up food pantry, and ultimately improve access to nutritious food for low-income households,” said Julie Meehan, Executive Director of the Gardner CAC.

BUILDING STRONGER COMMUNITIES

“Our cities and towns use these Community Development Block Grants to fix their roadways, expand their housing options, and improve the quality of life they offer their residents,” said Governor Maura Healey. “Our administration is grateful to the Biden administration, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and our federal delegation for their work, and we are thrilled to see how this grant funding will positively impact our local communities. We know how important it is to invest in our communities, and these CDBG awards, combined with our Affordable Homes Act, will

help us move forward with our commitment to making Massachusetts more competitive, affordable, and equitable."

Community Development Block Grant Funds are allocated annually to the Commonwealth through the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development ("HUD") and administered by the new Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities. These funds are designed to be flexible so that recipients can use their funds in a way that will best benefit their specific community needs. Grants from this program provide qualifying cities and towns with resources for housing, community and economic development, assistance to low-and moderate-income residents through non-profit support, and the removal of slum and blight.

"CDBG Grant funding plays a critical role in giving our cities and towns the flexible resources they need to make a real impact on the lives of Massachusetts residents," said Lieutenant Governor Kim Driscoll. "From park improvements to road repairs, these investments will strengthen and revitalize our local communities."

"This investment is a big deal for Gardner and shows what we can do when the federal and local government work hand in hand to deliver for families," said Senator Warren. "I fought hard for this grant to make sure Gardner has the resources it needs to stock its food pantry, protect victims of domestic violence, and help the most vulnerable in the community."

"Community Development Block Grants represent partnership across all levels of government, providing federal support for local, community-led projects," said Senator Edward J. Markey. "I congratulate the City of Gardner on receiving \$925,000 for vital efforts to advance equity and improve residents' well-being and quality of life, including through domestic violence prevention, expanding the city's food pantry and park space, and transitional services to help people experiencing homelessness."

"Thanks to Mayor Nicholson's leadership, the City of Gardner continues to punch above its weight when it comes to securing federal dollars to make the Chair City a better place to call home," said Congresswoman Lori Trahan. "The flexibility of CDBG funds allows communities like Gardner to execute critical projects which would not otherwise be possible, like the demolition of the School Street School, which will unlock valuable space to expand the Jackson Playground. I could not be more proud to partner with Mayor Nicholson, the Gardner City Council, Gardner's state delegation, the Healey-

Driscoll Administration, and Senators Warren and Markey to make this federal investment possible.”

Funding received through the Community Development Block Grant has allowed the City’s administration has made considerable investments in infrastructure and development projects aimed at benefiting constituents in all aspects. Focus has been directed towards enhancing community engagement through elevating social services and non-profits that support Gardner.

"I'd like to thank our congressional delegation, the Healey- Driscoll Administration, Representative Zlotnik, the City Council, and all of our partners on the Federal, State, and Local level," concluded Mayor Mike Nicholson. "This program shows how government should work. Officials at every level are working to help make a community stronger. I'm looking forward to seeing those strong partnerships continue and to seeing the impact these projects will have on our City for generations."

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