



2025 REPORT ON THE STATE OF THE CITY

Given Tuesday, January 14, 2025 - 7:00 PM
Gardner City Hall, City Council Chambers

The Address was broadcasted live on Gardner Educational Television, WGAW 1340AM Radio Station, and the GETV Video On-Demand. The broadcast was also recorded for later playback on Gardner Educational Television and the City of Gardner YouTube Channel.

Good Evening,

President Tyros, and Vice Chair Cormier, congratulations on your recent elections to your new leadership positions.

Councilor Elizabeth Kazinskas and School Committee Member Jennifer Pelavin, thank you for your time and service in leadership of the City Council and School Committee, it has been a pleasure working together. Thank you for the impact you made on the City and its residents in your previous leadership roles.

To the other members of the City Council and School Committee, Lt. Governor Kim Driscoll, Representative Zlotnik, Senator Durant, Welcome.

Other guests, family, and friends, thank you for joining us tonight to hear about the great work being done in our City.

To my staff- Katharine and Rachel, to our Department Heads and City Employees- thank you. We are truly grateful for the work you do in Gardner and know how lucky we are to have such a dedicated team of individuals working for the people of this City each and every day.

Lastly, to my family- thank you for the constant love and support you have always shown me.

Over the past year, we brought projects to fruition, we advanced others and embarked on new endeavors spanning across the entire city.

Successes of the Past Year:

Updates to Improve Efficiency:

Just over a year ago, when I delivered my inaugural address for this term, I said we would review our ordinances, policies, and procedures to make sure they were meeting the needs of a modern, growing community. Many of our ordinances in the City Code had not been reviewed in decades and, in many cases, caused unnecessary red tape to stunt growth and stall development.

We lived up to this promise through the work done to update the Administrative portion of the City Code. These changes that my administration submitted and were approved by the City Council now allow our departments, boards, and commissions to have increased accessibility, transparency, and communication with our residents while reducing needless and cumbersome red tape.



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Additionally, just last week, Governor Healey signed the new amendments to the Gardner City Charter into law. After almost a decade since the first Charter Committee was formed, our most recent Charter Review Committee put together these proposals, reviewed by the City Council, and approved by the voters in the last election, to officially undertake one of the most substantive updates to our City's official governing document in over 100 years since the Charter's enactment in 1923.

While this may seem like a small task, the benefits of these updates in the service that is provided by the City to its residents will be a large improvement. I would like to thank all of those who took part in reviewing, proposing, and approving these changes- to our boards and commissions, city employees, City Council, legislative delegation, and, most especially, our voters. This is just one example of our citizens and government working together to overcome past obstacles for the betterment of Gardner for years to come.

Schools:

We also continued to make improvements in our school system. In 2018, Gardner Public Schools set a goal to decrease the number of students leaving Gardner. At the time, 300 Gardner students were leaving our district to attend other schools. Since that time, we have cut that number in half and have also increased the number of incoming students by 70%. This brings in new revenue for the district and substantially reduces the money we pay out for Gardner students attending elsewhere. This is significant, because instead of our tax dollars being spent paying for Gardner students to go to other schools, they're choosing to stay right here. This current school year is also the first year more students are attending Gardner Public Schools than choosing to school choice out of the district since 2013.

What does this mean? It tells us that we are on the right track to better serve our students and community. We are keeping Gardner students in Gardner and attracting students from other communities. This makes the foundation of our budget more secure and is the direct result of investments we are making in the City's schools.

One improvement strategy has been to create a more relevant educational experience for all of our students - to guide them into the career paths they are drawn to. We have accomplished this by providing an enriching and well-rounded experience through a variety of opportunities in which they can try new things, venture out into different fields, and see where their passions take them.

Our Early College program has continued to be a success. Many students are taking the opportunity to earn college credits while in high school, and some will graduate from Gardner High School, with an associate's degree in addition to their high school diploma.

Additionally, we have partnered with Mount Wachusett Community College to create career pathways in automotive mechanics and manufacturing, allowing our students to earn career credentials as part of their regular high school education.



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After seeing the success of this partnership, this year, we newly partnered with Monty Tech to design a first of its kind collaboration. Our students attend regular academic classes during one week at schools here in Gardner, then attend shop classes at Monty Tech the following week throughout the year. The students still receive a Gardner High Diploma, while obtaining valuable trade skills at Monty Tech earning industry credentials in the electrical and carpentry trades. This program was so successful during its trial period, that we are adding a plumbing option for our students next school year.

At the elementary and middle school, we have invested hundreds of thousands of dollars into implementing new curricula in English, math, social studies, civics, science, and social/emotional learning. Professional development for staff has focused on collaboratively using these materials to create interactive lessons that motivate, encourage, and push students to do their best in a positive, supportive environment.

Our music, art, and athletic programs are also thriving, as a result of our investments. Over 500 students played at least one sport last year, and around one-third of our students are in music programs across all grades.

I would like to take a moment to thank all of our school employees- the Administration of the district and our individual schools, teachers, paraprofessionals, staff, coaches, and everyone who has dedicated their time and efforts to setting our students up for success.

What we offer young people in this city is not just in the classroom, but all around the City as we invest in ourselves and set ourselves up for future success.

Recreation Program:

Our Summer Recreation program had a record year in 2024, with over 400 students participating.

When the program first began in the summer of 2018, we had 40 students participating in a half-day outdoor camp environment at Gardner High School for children in grades 2 through 7.

Today, we have opened our full-day program to all students in grades K-8, added a second location at Gardner Elementary School, provide two hot meals a day, offer athletic clinics, and academic enrichment classes in art, drama, gardening, nature, robotics, and STEM.

Grant Funding:

We've seen first-hand how the investments we've made in our students are already benefiting the City, and we've taken that mindset across the board.

We realized that we need to do all we can to be competitive amongst other communities when it comes to grant funding. The funding is out there, and if we don't make every effort to bring it to the Chair City for the benefit of our citizens, it will go to enhancing another community elsewhere across the country. To pursue these efforts, in the two previous years we have increased our grant writing capacity and brought in an outside firm. This allows us to pursue



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more grant opportunities with increased flexibility at a fraction of the cost, while, importantly, freeing up our own staff to focus on the execution of those projects.

As a result of this new partnership, since we first hired grant writers for the City, we have taken in over \$52 million in grant funding for various projects. This is equivalent to 65% of our annual operating budget and double what we took in before having these services in place.

Every dollar that we receive in grant funding provides greater flexibility in our project budgeting, enables us to undertake larger projects beyond what we can do on our own, and strengthens our city.

Infrastructure Improvements:

One area in which the success of our grant applications has been the biggest help has been in our infrastructure improvements.

Funded by a \$1 million grant, we recently completed the installation of a new water transmission main line. This is the main pipe that connects the Crystal Lake Reservoir Treatment plant with the storage tanks located at the top of James Street. While we maintain the South Gardner Snake Pond Well as a backup for the system, the water supplied by the Transmission Main to The Reservoir Hill storage tanks acts as the main source of water for the entire City.

This project, coupled with the millions of dollars of our own investment into the City's water system during the last four years have resulted in the City saving approximately 80 million gallons of water a year from leaky pipes. -Which, aside from wasting water, still costs the City the same, even when all it does is leak into the ground. - This is equivalent to an additional 40 days of water that is remaining in Crystal Lake, rather than leaking out of pipes around the City. We now have a stronger, more reliable system ready in the event of drought conditions and climate change concerns like we saw this fall. This affords us the ability for further growth and development across the City.

On August 3, 2021, there was a catastrophic water main break at the uptown rotary, which lasted approximately 16 hours and resulted in the loss of just under 4 million gallons of water flowing down Central Street. The reason for this extended loss was that the shut off valves in the system were over a century old and were either rusted shut or broke off when crews tried to close them. This year, utilizing both City and grant funds, we implemented a valve exercising program in which we will be testing every shut off valve across the City's water system to see where our greatest vulnerabilities currently exist, and then correct and replace the failed equipment before a problem arises.

We have also begun construction on a new salt shed to get us better prepared for winter weather events, completed a full reconstruction of the runway and taxiways at our municipal airport, begun a full parking development study of the downtown area to better plan for our anticipated commercial and housing growth, expanded our bicycle infrastructure, and purchased a new Ambulance, Fire Engine, Heavy Rescue, and Ladder truck for the Fire Department, all greatly or entirely supported by state and federal grants.



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Community and Economic Development:

One of the largest projects we saw break ground this year was the Rear Main Street Redevelopment project, with new parking, event plaza, water park, food truck court, and outdoor seating area expected to be completed within the next year. This was coupled with the City receiving a \$3.5 million HousingWorks Grant to complete this project with the eventual creation of a multi-story housing development at the location as well.

These public investments in Gardner have been matched ten-fold by private investment.

In March of 2023, we created two vacant storefront revitalization districts in our Downtown and the Timpany Boulevard corridor, focusing our attention on bringing in businesses to these areas. When these districts were approved, there were 34 vacant locations in the Downtown area and 10 in the South Gardner Timpany Boulevard district. Today, we are down to 11 in Downtown and 2 on Timpany Boulevard.

New Community Center:

The development of our new community center has entered its next phase. When we opened our new elementary school in 2022, it left several former school buildings vacant. We have seen what happens when we let buildings sit with no plan. It sits, and it sits, until the wrecking ball is the only option. As a city, we must commit to having a plan in these instances.

This is exactly what we are doing with the former Waterford Street School; taking this building and creating a new non-profit community center where our partners in the non-profit sector can better collaborate and cooperate with each other to grow their services and better serve the residents of our region.

This year we worked with a group to create a new farmers market at the center. Over the summer this brought thousands of residents and visitors to the location, pumped thousands of dollars into local agriculture, and increased access to local produce, crafts, and other goods. In fact, this was so successful, it was recognized by the state as an example for other communities. It was no small undertaking as they coordinated with MART to provide transportation, state agencies to be able to process Healthy Incentive Program funds, and more. Thank you to Erica, Shelby, Kat, and everyone who helped bring this market to fruition.

We've also entered into new lease agreements for the Community Center with the Gardner Community Action Committee and Growing Places, both of whom are currently working to build out their spaces.

At this location, the CAC will be expanding their food pantry and community assistance programs. The CAC is an essential non-profit partner for the City as they have continued to serve the community in significant ways. Last year, the CAC provided necessary services to several thousands of individuals in their programs varying from fuel assistance, to access to personal care items, to food and toy distributions, and many others in between.



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Growing Places will be creating a new food distribution center, partnering with local farmers to purchase locally grown produce, and sell the food they process to individuals and organizations in the community to assist those experiencing food insecurity and help create a direct connection between farms and tables in the area.

Our Senior Center will be the next to move and we are currently finalizing the plans to build out their space. Our senior center already offers a wide range of programs, and this new space will greatly enhance what we can offer our seniors.

We have an RFP for other spaces at the building that will close soon, and we are planning space for the historical commission there as well.

I am truly thankful for everyone who has helped to create a space for these nonprofits to provide support to the community and to be able to grow and expand as a result. In particular, I'd like to thank Representative Zlotnik for proposing the original idea for this project and your partnership along the way.

Transportation:

As we bring in new opportunities for our residents, ensuring adequate public transportation exists is an equally important step.

To fill transportation gaps in the City, we've partnered with Wood's Ambulance to create a new locally owned ride share company, known as SwiftRide. This initiative offers low-cost transportation opportunities to our residents looking to get around the City on an on-call basis. We've also expanded this service in partnership with MART, where SwiftRide provides regular public transportation around the City from 5pm to midnight when the buses would normally stop running.

Additionally, Gardner, MART, and Wood's have partnered together to provide shuttle services to the Wachusett Commuter Rail Station to create an alternative method of traveling for those looking to get to the Boston area besides taking Route 2.

Veterans Services:

We have also increased services and opportunities for veterans and their families.

As a means of recognizing those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice for our country, the City Council unanimously voted to approve my Administration's proposal to waive 100% of property taxes for our Gold Star Families. These families have already paid far too high a price in the efforts to preserve our freedom and way of life, and we owe them every ounce of our gratitude and support.

We waived all parking meter fees for individuals with certain veteran license plates.



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We've launched a new program for our veterans by expanding the Volunteer Incentive Program, adding opportunities for veterans of any age to participate. This program has been successful with senior citizens for many years. It has helped seniors, and now also veterans, get a break on their property taxes, and gives the city access to their expertise while keeping costs down, ranging from clerical work, technical assistance, groundskeeping - including at our municipal golf course - and many more areas. The application period for the first year of this program recently opened and closes at the end of this month. I look forward to the success of this pilot, with an eye towards continued expansion in the future.

The State of The City:

We've seen that the path of progress takes time, effort, and dedication to make a true difference. Simply put, moving a City forward is a marathon, not a sprint. As one project gets underway, another begins its planning stage, and another its initial conceptual ideas. But while things take time, a lot of behind-the-scenes efforts are being made to allow that next step to happen. But that's what we do. We work every day to build a community in which people can be proud to call their home.

As a result of the continued investments in our residents, our infrastructure, our outreach and our programming.

As a result of this City being willing to adapt to the changing landscape around us and our resolve to break away from the "that's how we've always done it" mentality;

As a result of the commitment, we have made to keep Moving Gardner Forward;

The state of our City is strong.

Future Plans:

As we build upon the successes we have achieved and look to the future, we should be proud of what we have done. However, that does not mean that the path forward is going to be easy. The economic trends of inflation, price increases, and budgetary cautions are not going to be a stranger to us here in Gardner. But we will continue to plan ahead to be able to maintain the quality services our residents deserve.

Thanks to the diligent work of our School Building Committee and additional funding from the Commonwealth, the new Gardner Elementary School project came in \$8 million under budget. In working with our bond counsel, independent auditors, and our financial departments, I will be presenting a full plan to the City Council in the coming weeks re-allocating these funds to various other 30-year capital improvement projects in our Schools and across the City. Many of these projects have been deferred for years and cannot be delayed any longer. Thanks to the work done by those overseeing the new school project, and the proper financial planning that was done, we are now able to do that work.



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We also have to be cognizant of the fact that there are several challenges that we must overcome and correct if we want to continue moving forward as a stronger community.

Gardner is no stranger to the housing crisis facing the Commonwealth. In the last fifteen years, Gardner has seen a population growth of approximately 5%. During the same time, the number of houses annually on the market has decreased by 21%, and both the average sale price of a single-family home and the average rent of an apartment increased by over 100%.

Like many other communities in the area, as more and more people relocate out to Central Massachusetts from the Greater Boston area, and as our population looks for their own housing, we're seeing a simple Economics 101 issue of supply and demand. The demand has skyrocketed, and the supply has stayed stagnant, and in some cases, decreased. I saw this firsthand with my experience buying my first home. After almost 2 years of looking and 38 declined offers over asking price, I was finally able to find somewhere. For many of our recent graduates or younger professionals and couples in the City - both current residents looking to stay here and new residents looking to come in - those types of odds are forcing people to look to live elsewhere. Last month, we contracted with the Barrett Planning Group to draft the City's first ever Master Plan. As part of this process, I've directed our staff and the Barrett Group to include a housing production plan for the City to create a path to open new housing opportunities to alleviate these market pressures. At the same time, I have instructed the team to review and draft a proposal to address current and long-term issues of unnecessary red tape that hinders development - particularly for multifamily properties, accessory dwellings, and tiny homes; addresses issues of housing insecurity and homelessness, identifies areas for future growth, and notes the specific types of housing that we are currently lacking based on the demographics of our populations and the needs they have.

This Master Plan will also review issues of parking city-wide, update our urban renewal plans, draft our first hazard mitigation and vulnerability preparedness plans, and create a new Economic Development Plan for the City to guide our steps to attract new businesses and projects, and to correct the deficiencies and shortfalls we previously experienced.

Aside from these plans, however, there are some immediate steps being taken to strengthen our development efforts.

The Maki Park construction project last year highlighted breakdowns in interdepartmental communications and project oversight. Over the course of the coming weeks, I will be providing the City Council with a series of reforms and updates to the way all of our departments interact with each other, reporting is conducted and formalizing the structure of the committees and groups overseeing projects through to completion.

Additionally, and specifically, there will be more changes in the Community Development and Planning Department with the goal utilizing the department and its resources to the fullest.

We have a lot of projects ready to move, that quite simply are only waiting for the warmer weather to fully mobilize and get underway. With how much momentum we have built in moving the City forward, and how much we have in the pipeline, we cannot settle for any unnecessary delays or unforced errors. With these updates to process, policy, and better



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guidance, these projects that have been in the queue for too long will be completed more efficiently. We cannot, and will not, settle for anything less.

Work for the Revitalization of the Greenwood Memorial and at the Rome Square Redevelopment site are primed to be fully underway and will be completed by the end of the year. Opportunities for growth and development at the Garbose and S. Bent revitalization sites in South Gardner must be realized and focused on.

Conclusion:

We have a lot to be proud of here in Gardner, and we have certainly gotten a lot done.

In the last five years, we've celebrated the opening of a new school, the reinstatement of several of our arts and athletic programs for our students, the creation of over 10 miles of bicycle paths and lanes, new parks, recreational upgrades- a new disc golf course, outdoor fitness center, and pickleball courts, and more.

We have seen private investment to a level which we haven't seen in my lifetime.

We've already cut back red tape, but more needs to be done. We removed many of the barriers for businesses to open, but more needs to be done. We addressed problem properties, and again, more needs to be done.

We've cleaned up several long-standing legacy issues that had simply been put on the backburner for many years and through our updates, initiatives, and programs, we've finally just done the job.

To put it simply- we've been busy- and that's what we want. There's a lot left for us to do to continue that progress - and we're ready.

The work that we've done and the successes that we've achieved is entirely thanks to the amount of collaboration and cooperation that our officials at all levels of government have had. I would like to thank the members of our City Council, School Committee, our legislative delegation, and all our partners in government at the state and federal levels for constantly coming together to build a community that the people we represent can truly be proud of. We may not, have not and will not agree on everything, but we all share the same commitment to our residents.

This is how the government should work. In today's political climate, collaboration and effective governance often seem so rare and elusive, that when it actually happens, it leads some to look for something broken, because it's actually working the way it's supposed to.

Here, disagreements are respectful, criticism is constructive, and our conduct is professional.

Far too often, people view political office as a theater for character attacks, false claims in social media posts, and deliberate misinformation for political gain and click bait. However, we refuse



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to let it distract us from the work of serving this city. Here in Gardner, when a problem arises, we come together, find a solution, and get the job done. Our residents deserve nothing less.

As we look ahead to 2025 and what it will bring to the City, I look forward to working with you all to move Gardner forward to a stronger tomorrow.

God Bless you all, and God Bless this great City.
Thank you.