

## **Challenges and Solutions**

### **Interview with Gardner Mayor Michael Nicholson 4-24-25**

This is the complete text of the entire interview. To listen to the interview on any device, [CLICK PLAY](#) on the AUDIO.

#### **Intro and on Running for Reelection**

Q: Today we have the honor of speaking with Gardner Mayor Michael Nicholson about challenges in the City of Gardner and the Mayor's sometimes very unique solutions to various problems. Mayor Nicholson, I understand that it's very possible that you are running again for re-election.

A: I am, and that is very possible. I did pull my papers out the first day that the papers were able to, so on April 1st I went to the City Clerk's office, pulled my papers, I'm currently getting signatures, but I am running again for re-election this year.

#### **Challenges of Major Screwups and Solutions**

Q: Alright, so here's the big question. There have been some major screw-ups in certain departments, and do you think that in the totality of the evidence that the success of the Chair's City should propel you to a second, well, would it be a third term now?

A: I'd say a third and a half, because I came into the special election the first time. And there's always going to be challenges along the way, but I think if you look at the totality of everything that we've done here in Gardner in the last five years, you know, we've brought music back to our students. We've invested in our infrastructure and seen various different projects through the downtown. You look at Park Street Park and compare it to the old substation that used to be there five years ago. You look at the roads in the downtown from the old, the water pipes that used to be in there, the old sidewalks that used to be in there, the old mining fixtures that used to be in there. We fixed the parking meter issue where the parking meters hadn't worked since 2017, and the businesses were looking at those. We've, you know, brought new revenue in through the airport, so that's more self-sufficient and self-sustaining now, where before it was something that we were losing money on. There's a lot of things that we've gotten done, but there's a lot more we have left to do, and I'm looking forward to doing that.

Q: All right. Is it fair to say that if you try to do things that nobody else has done for a while, that some things just aren't going to work out?

A: Oh, yeah. That's anything in life.

## **School Street School**

Q: All right. So let's talk about, like, the School Street school.

A: Yeah.

Q: You had the great plans of actually making money for the city on it. You found out you couldn't do that, but nobody else found out about it because they never tried.

A: You know, and you're right. We did go to sell that a couple years ago, and then a question got raised on a deed issue with that property. We're actually now working with the law department, who's, you know, our city solicitor is new this year, about a way to get around that, so that we can continue with that project and put it back on the tax rolls and get more housing for the community, especially in that neighborhood, and get that going. But I think what that shows, too, is that sometimes things in government just take time to work, but you have to start to ask the questions in order to start that timeline to get the answer that you need. And there may be twists and turns along the way, but in the end, you get a better price.

## **The Rome Building**

Q: All right. Tell me this. How come you were the guy that got the whole Rome building in the process of getting torn down? Why did it take decades to actually realize that that needed to happen?

A: You know, for that property in particular, over on Willow and Main Street, the city had been in talks with the previous owners for quite some time, and they just weren't at the point where they wanted to sell. And so when I saw that they were selling the lot in the area that they had owned around the building, we put an offer on the building, too. And it's one of those things that, you know, we called up the state to see if we could get any grant money to purchase the building. We explained how, you know, this was a building right at the entrance to our downtown, and it was really one of the first impressions people make when they're driving off Route 2 into downtown Gardner, and sold our case. And the state provided us the grant funding to purchase the building. So we purchased the building, and here we are with the building. It should be down within the next two weeks, and we'll put the lot that it's on out for some type of redevelopment sometime by the end of the summer so that we can spruce up what the downtown looks like and breathe life into an area that was once viewed as dense.

## **Waterford Community Center**

Q: Now, it's funny that people gave you a real hard time on Waterford. All of a sudden, everybody's really loving what's going on down there.

A: And I say, you know, one of the things with that, Werner, is I say that, again, sometimes government timelines are just longer. And it's meant so that you, you know, dot every I and cross every t three or four times over. But I think people are starting to see the vision behind the building. Getting all of these nonprofits and community organizations together under one roof so that they can collaborate in a more efficient and effective manner was always the goal from it. And now we're actually seeing it with the CAC and Growing Places doing all the work to outfit their spaces over there. It really has been a great collaboration that we've had over there. I mean, Growing Places is now providing food to Gardner Public Schools for our students to have as part of their school meal program. And all of that stuff that they're doing through the work over at that processing center. It's really great. And we're seeing the direct impact of it now.

## **Challenges in Development Department and Solutions**

Q: All right. So, obviously, you're on top of most things to the point of people saying you work too damn much. All right. But then you've got this nincompoop, and I'm going to call him that, that was running the development department. Now you've got more than a million dollars of expense in the Rear Main Street area. Maki Park was developed, and it wasn't ADA compliant. How the heck did you miss that?

A: You know, you're always going to have challenges like that. And it's one of those things from the first moment I took office and someone said, how do you plan to work with your department? And one of the responses that I said was, you have to remember in these seats that the department heads and the people who work for your various departments were hired for those positions for a reason, because they were viewed as the experts in that field to help you along the way. And you have to give someone a chance. But when those chances run out, you have to make a change. And I think that's what we saw recently. And if you watch any of the city council's economic development subcommittee meetings and you see our new director, Jason Stevens, and the reports that he's been giving since then, we've gotten probably a year's worth of work done in the first quarter of 2025, because we finally just sat down and gotten the work done. And has there been some hand-holding along the way? Of course there has. Has there been some times where you wonder if something's going to work out? Absolutely. But that means you're taking a chance, and that means you're actually doing some type of work to get there. And that's why if you look at Rear Main Street now, we're moving ahead. The work is actually being done right now so that that can get back on track over there.

There's a plan for Maki Park. Now that Park Street Park has finished its construction, if you drive by Park Street, by the Elks, and by the new park, you'll see there's some sections of the sidewalk that still have asphalt and two poles on there, rather than the concrete sidewalk like there is with the rest of it. And the reason being is National Grid has to come and remove the original poles that were there and move all of the wires to the new poles that they installed. Once National Grid's done with that and the old poles are removed, we have money left over in that project to go back and put in the concrete slab in the sidewalk that's missing. So all of that asphalt will go away, the concrete will go in. And that project came in so far under budget that we have the needed funding to go in and put the handicapped accessible ramp over at Maki Park. So all of that is now in the works. You look at the Garbose property over in the Mill Street corridor. We've gotten four or five different offers on that property in the last month alone. The Gardner Redevelopment Authority actually had a meeting just last week to review those offers and figure out which one to send acceptance and P&S to with their realtor that they have.

Q: Now why did that happen in the last month?

A: Like I said, you hire the right people for the right job, and Jason was the right person for that job. I'm very proud of Jason Stevens. Honestly, he was a great hire. I'm really happy that we were able to get him on the team here. He's gotten a lot of energy for it too. Jason comes to us with a different background than what you would expect. For someone in that seat, he worked in the marketing and communications department for the Greater Boston Chamber of Commerce. And having someone from that background step into a planning and community development role may not seem like a smooth transition, but it was. And the reason being is when you're in that role, you're the city's biggest cheerleader. You're the city's biggest marketer. You're the city's biggest person to go out there and say that we're open for business here. And that's something that Jason's really taken that role and run with it, worked to reform the department itself in terms of its operations and staffing and everything. He's just done a great job.

## **Board of Health**

Q: All right. So let's talk about the Board of Health. Okay. All right. It's a mess. And I don't know where the mess is, but I watch the meetings, and I think I mentioned this to you before. One meeting, they took 19 minutes to argue about minutes. So who's the screw-up over there, and who's actually doing a good job, and should the chair of that Board of Health be replaced?

A: You know, I'd have to see the specific meeting, but I will say this is just about any of our boards and commissions. We're working on training for all of our commissioners.

And the reason is a lot of these members of these different boards and commissions that we have, they're volunteer positions who have full-time jobs and other stuff. And when you hear things like, you know, the open meeting law or minutes or things like that, it's not normal things that if you don't actively work in this sphere of work that you hear on an everyday basis. Sometimes you wonder, like, what, you know, is this the important thing to be thinking about right now? Is this the way to handle things? And just, again, public sector is different than private sector. So we are working on different professional development things and training just to make sure that all of our boards and commissioners know, you know, what it is that needs to be done in terms of meeting the legal framework, making things efficient, running the meetings the way they're supposed to be run. That way they don't have to worry about things like, you know, 19 minutes on minutes or things like that.

Q: Do I hear you saying don't judge them too harshly because it's hard enough to get people?

A: You know, that's a good way to put it. Yeah, we're always looking for people. We've got vacancy now in some of our boards and commissions.

## **Ordinance Updates**

Q: All right, so you've done some administrative ordinance things, and I understand you were frustrated the other day because the vendors not actually updated the e-codes. What's up with that?

A: It normally takes around three months for the e-code to update on the website. The difference with the administrative legislation that we passed in December with the city council is that it was a 48-page document where most of our ordinances are two-pagers. So it's one of those, not only was it a 48-page document, but it actually reformed the full layout of the code itself. So it is going to take some time on that one. You know, after that meeting where we brought up, we did follow up with e-codes, and they are working on it. They're just trying to find a way to make sure that they can reformat things. Because if you go on the city's e-code right now, so that's the city's law book on the city's website, you'll see everything in part one is now reformed. That's the layout. That's the content. That's everything that's in there is now different. So they basically have to start out the code from scratch now on their end. Because it's not just a simple copy-paste, because we updated things in there too. So all of those things are there. So I'm hoping by the end of the fiscal year, so by the end of June, we'll hopefully get that updated. But there's a lot of work that has to go into that. And it is frustrating for us in our issue, because if we have to reference, you know, a ordinance, if we have to reference a process or anything like that, that means that, you know, we have to do a little extra digging out there. And it can be confusing for our residents who are looking to see what the new code says when it's not updated on that. But the process is

underway, and we're going to be doing everything we can to push that vendor to get it up as best as possible.

Q: Is there any place where you have the code in another format? Not yet, but we are working on that, actually.

A: That is our backup.

Q: Like in a PDF format?

A: Exactly. We have the printed book here. You can't see a printed book online, so we are working on a PDF.

Q: And how big is the printed book? How many pages?

A: It's a lot of pages. It's a full binding. It's a full two-inch binding.

Q: So literally, you're talking hundreds of pages. Yeah. Yeah, that's a little bit of work, right?

## **Historical Commission**

Q: So the Historical Commission, it's become quite active of late.

A: Yes.

Q: Tell us about that.

A: You know, I'm very excited about the Historical Commission, and I find it poetic. I'm going to use that as an adjective for that, that the Historical Commission is being so active this year when we're celebrating the 250th anniversary of the United States. You know, Boston just had their celebration of the 250th anniversary of Paul Revere's midnight ride. And you hear all these things, you think Lexington, Concord. You think Boston. But if you go in the rotunda of Gardner City Hall, there's actually a memorial right on as you're coming in the front door facing the elevator on your right-hand side. It's a memorial to all of the individuals who signed the original letter to send to the governor at the time, Governor John Hancock, to incorporate a new city named Gardner. And Gardner was named after Colonel Thomas Gardner, who was a resident of Roxbury. We don't know if he ever set foot in what is today Gardner. But Captain Eliza Jackson was a founding member of Gardner who serves with Colonel Thomas Gardner. And you look at those people who are there, and you look at their histories, and many of them fought in the American Revolution and were part of these events. You've got someone buried in the old burial grounds behind the church up on Green Street that took part in the Boston Tea Party. And his grave is marked with a gold marker. His name was Joseph Payson. And his homestead in Gardner is now Hunter Farm. So we have these historic landmarks that have tied to the American Revolution. So having a newly active historical commission like this really helps breathe some new life into that and connect people to those stories and see how our community here played a part in that role.

## **School Curriculum – Challenges and Solutions**

Q: Now as a segue to history at Gardner High School, you and the school committee have spent an awful lot of time since COVID updating that curriculum. Tell us about the success of that and what you're seeing in reading scores among young kids, older kids, kids that are going to college and high school.

A: Yeah. I mean, our early college program makes up about 60% of our juniors and seniors. Our history programs have always been strong. In fact, our history programs is kind of what drew me into interest in a job like this with my AP Gov class that John Gardella had. That's why a couple of inaugurations ago, we asked him to be the master of ceremonies for the inauguration because I had him for AP government. Council President Tyros had him for AP government. I think if you looked at the current city's elected officials, probably two-thirds of them had John Gardella for a teacher in his AP Gov and history classes. And now it kind of set the spot and I felt like maybe we could do this one day. How could we carry that on to the students that are currently in the high school? So we've been looking at the curriculum. We've been looking at new ways to engage people. I can't thank our teachers and our principals and the staff regarding public schools enough because they're the ones who are actually doing the work. We can come up with whatever idea we want, but they're the ones who are on the ground implementing it. And they are doing a tremendous job at inspiring our students because that's really what it is. It's trying to give students that little spark that they can take and run with and get their passions that way. And they've really been doing a great job.

Q: Let's talk about DEI. Big subject. President Trump wants to eliminate it. But it occurred to me that Gardner says it's implemented it, but it really hasn't because what it's done is it's actually taken each individual as a separate entity and tried to lift up each person rather than dummifying everyone down, which is what some of the DEI folks actually have done. Are you proud of that, that Gardner's met the challenges of people coming in like non-English learners and actually lifted people up rather than just trying to say, well, you know, you're not doing well on that, so let's have everybody not do so well on that?

A; Yeah. I mean, I will say that we always try to work to lift every individual student up because every individual student's experience is their own experience. We've got one kindergarten class right now in Gardner Elementary School that there's seven different languages spoken in the homes of the students there. Gardner's always had some type of other language spoken here. It was French and Polish before, and now it's Spanish and Arabic. If you look at our student demographics right now, English is still the language that's the most spoken at home, but 35% of our students speak Spanish at home or of Hispanic or Latino descent. And then about between 5% and 10% of our students speak Arabic at home or of Egyptian descent. There's always been some other language spoken in Gardner. It's just shifted from one language to another. But when you look at the

student demographic and population that we have, that's our future of the city, too. So when you look at the ways that we have tried to lift students up and give everyone opportunities to be there with each other and when I say with each other, I mean at that same standard as their peers and give them the resources so that they can lift themselves up, too. That's the goal of all of this is to keep the same standard and keep the same rigor, but find ways to get the students there individually because not every student has the same resources at home. Not every student has the same intellectual interest, let alone background in the knowledge that they're studying in their classes. But that doesn't mean we can't get everyone to the same finish line at the end.

Q; Well, you've talked about it many times about people having an interest in athletics, some having an interest in art, some having an interest in music. But what makes Gardner stand out, and I find this very interesting how Gardner has met this challenge, is Gardner has tackled it like one step at a time over here, a person over here, this over here. You go out to California, they don't do it that way. Harvard has a remedial math program. Have you ever heard of something so crazy that you can get into Harvard and you don't know how to do math? It doesn't make any sense. Now, people from Gardner are probably actually more academically suited to Harvard than some of the people that are there today.

A; And that's actually quite a testament to the city.

## **The Challenge of Transparency and Solutions**

Q: So let's talk about the transparency of various meetings. That's something that you've started to do more of. Just so people know it again, what's the effort involved there that you're trying to accomplish?

A: So back in 2020, when I was first elected, at the time, myself, then-council president Kazinskas, and then-school committee vice chair Jennifer Pelavin all signed an order saying that all of our subcommittee meetings and boards and commission meetings had to be filmed and put on the city's YouTube page. That way citizens could get engaged and watch and see what's going on. And it also helps the members of those committees who aren't able to be in attendance in those meetings because life may happen and work may come up or family situations, still see exactly what happened and what went down in those meetings and give us an extra record and a lifetime view on what's actually happening. And I know that we've tried to expand that more in making sure that people have visibility on that. Our city council meetings are live online on the city's video on demand. So if you go on a Monday night that there's a city council meeting at 730, you go to the city hall website and you go to the Gardner Educational Television page on that website, there will be a live stream there where you will be able to watch the city council meetings live as it's happening. And that will be uploaded the next day to the city's YouTube once the recording is done. And we're working on seeing if we can do that with



any of the other meetings that we have there too. But we want people to know what we're doing in city hall on their behalf for them. And that's been the goal of all of this is making sure that people can see what's happening.

Q: I can tell you one of the most popular meetings listened to on my platform, believe it or not, is the ZBA.

A: Really?

Q: Zoning Board of Appeals. They just love those and I can't figure out why. I mean they're very engaging but I can't figure out why. Maybe it's like an episode of some movie on TV. I don't know.

## **Staffing Challenges and Solutions**

Q: So we talked about the development department and you obviously have staffing issues with respect to all the departments in the city. In the past DPW has been an issue. How has that been mitigated with the changes that have occurred?

A: We have a new contract with the DPW union so that we were able to bump up the pay a little bit right now. We do have still some openings with the DPW but nowhere near what we were seeing a couple of years ago. So it's actually working pretty well.

Q: Now similarly four years ago you had to deal with a change in administration of the police department. A lot of challenges there. What solutions have you implemented and how have they been working?

A: I mean I couldn't be prouder of Chief Mcavene and Deputy Chief Maroni. They've been tremendous over at the Garden Police Department and you look at everything that's happened in the last three years and it's something that I was reflecting on this year when they both got reappointed by the city council just last month. There's a lot that they've been dealing with lately that hasn't been there before. You look at the changes to the police reform bill with the post commission and the certification of our officers. You look at the new equipment that's available for our officers right now in terms of the drones or the scanners for those who go on drug search warrants so that you don't have to touch the substance but you can just scan it through a plastic bag and it'll tell you which substance it is. All of those things are new and they've done an excellent, excellent, excellent job just making sure that the job gets done and that the Gardner Police Department truly is Gardner's Police Department. It knows its community. It's reflective of its community and it keeps things safe for our residents who are here but also relatable for our residents who may run into situations. They know that they have a police department they can trust.

## **Fire Department Headquarters – Roof Challenges and Solutions**

Q: A few years back, a gust of wind took the roof off the Gardner Fire Department. By the grace of God, a camera captured it. It was covered by insurance. Is that finally done?

A: It is done. It is done and it took a long time to get done and the reason being for that, Warner, actually is when we took the roof off, we saw all of the structural deficiencies that were there from the original construction of the roof in 1978 and that's what was causing us all of the issues that we were having before. I remember back in 2020 when I was talking to Richard Ares about the issues that happened with the roof where when it rained, it rained more in the station than it did outside the station. But when they were taking the roof off, one of the first things they noticed was that it was only quarter inch plywood and for a roof with that grade, it's actually supposed to be a three quarter inch plywood. So we're half an inch short on the plywood for the decking of the roof itself. Because that plywood was thin, the majority of the nails that were holding the previous metal roof on weren't actually all the way in because the nails weren't going through the steel joists and beams that were supporting the roof underneath it. So the nails where half of them were bent or not all the way in or were sticking out or had fallen out or things like that that happened over years and years and years. So the new roof that we have now, the reason why it took so long is we had to order some new decking to make it so that it was one, weighted for the weight of the new roof but also met the requirements of what should have originally been put on the roof. The nail fixtures all had to be redone so that they weren't half bent nails but were actually securing the roof the correct way onto the structure. And then the brand new metal roof was put on top of it after all of that was done. And then we repointed the chimney too because the chimney has all of the radio equipment for the fire station on that. So the product that we have now not only stopped the leaks that were in there but also makes the building a lot more structurally sound because it corrected all of those deficiencies that were there before.

Q: And what do you want to do next door at that utility building that used to be Cumberland's?

A: That used to be Cumberland. Right now we store an ambulance in there. Eventually the fire station is going to need some type of addition or something like that. There's just not enough room for all the trucks that we have. That's why we actually store a fair amount of apparatus down at the South Gardner Station because some of the trucks need to be heated at a certain temperature because there's water in them. So eventually the long term goal, and when I say long term, I mean 20 years. This isn't going to happen any time in the near future. We need some type of addition over there in the station in order to fit the needs of a modern fire department.

## High School Building Challenges and Solutions

Q: Recently the Gardner City Council allowed approximately \$8 million from the Gardner Elementary School project to go into other 30 year projects around the community. However, a couple years back there was talk about perhaps the Gardner High School would have to be replaced within a decade or so. So how does that equate? Do we need to replace the high school at some point soon or is that going to last for some decades?

A: At some point, yeah, we'll need a new building. Are we okay with what we have now? Absolutely. It's nothing that we need in the immediate short term by any stretch of the word.

Q: Now that's one thing I've never understood because one time or another Gardner's had all these school buildings. I understand you want to have it consolidated when they used to have neighborhood schools years ago, so I understand that part. But the enrollment of Gardner Public Schools for 2025 is like one shy of what it was in 2015. It's definitely grown back up there. So back in 2015 if they didn't need a new school, why would you need a school now? Is it structural or is it capacity?

A: Well that's what I'm saying. That's why we don't need one right now is what I was getting to. I'm saying eventually we'll need one probably because buildings get old and I understand that too. But for now, I mean honestly, it's space. If we didn't have the early college program that we have right now where students are half the time at the mount, it's the classes that we have. Because it's not like we have every student at Gardner High School in a regular sit-down classroom. There's labs in there. There's art rooms in there. There's the life skills classroom with the ovens and the cooking supplies in there. There's a lot to a new modern high school than just your traditional reading, writing, and arithmetic. So that's I think going to be the driving force for a new building. Not in any time soon. I want to stress that again. But maybe 10 years from now. I could see that for sure. But it's more the building showing signs of aging and then the resources that have to be available for our students.

Q: So why can't you just fix the building people would say?

A: Is it an older building? I mean that's what we've been doing now. In fact, if you look at some of the money that was re-appropriated by the council, it's going to fix the stairs in the building too because they need to be the treads on the stairs need to be redone. It's just at some point in time the older environments don't meet the modern curriculum. And that's why we had to build Gardner Elementary School and take the students out of Elm Street and Helen Mae and Waterford Street School is because we just needed a building

that met a modern learning environment. And that's what it was. But again, I don't think this is within the next 10 to 15 years anyway.

## **Challenges of Other Buildings in the City and Solutions**

Q: Now speaking about other buildings around town, obviously Elm Street School has been repurposed. What's happening with Helen Mae Sauter at this point?

A: Helen Mae Sauter is moving forward right now. We have an appraisal being done on the property as well as a survey being done to see if we can subdivide it out to a larger parcel. And then we'll have a proposal before the city council sometime probably this summer on the best and highest use of what Helen Mae Sauter School could be used for.

Q: Are you thinking commercial use, educational use? What are you thinking?

A: Right now we're thinking housing, senior housing to be specific. And seeing if that's a place that we could take a look at repurposing the building for a different use right now. The educational needs in the city right now seem to be met with the buildings that we have. But again, that's not to say that that plan can't change next month. It's just right now that's what we think would be a good use for it. But this review that we're conducting right now of the property will have all of those results by the summertime.

Q: So you can't meet the challenges if you don't ask the questions. Right?

A: Exactly.

Q: So other city ordinances coming up, what needs to be changed and why?

A: Right now, we received a grant from the state last year to update our zoning ordinance with regard to housing. That's something that absolutely needs to change. If you look at the demand Gardner's seeing right now, I'm going to guess we're about 700 housing units short for the demand that we're seeing here. And what that has done is caused the average home sale price in Gardner to skyrocket. And we also just don't have the housing supply. I said this in my State of the City address earlier this year, that the demand has skyrocketed and the housing stock has either stayed stagnant or in some cases, even decreased. So it's looking at what red tape we put in place over the last 10, 20, 30 years and seeing just what needs to be cut, what's useless in terms of repetitive, in terms of making things overly cumbersome, in terms of we just need people to have a modern city. Looking at everything from multifamily housing to parking requirements to building heights and everything in between. So that is currently being done by our contractors that grant through Director Stevens of the Community Development Department to update our zoning ordinance with regards to housing. But we also only updated the first part of the ordinance. We have department heads who are now going through the second part of the ordinance and then working with me right now to see if we can have a part two of what we did last year.

Q: So I know Tom Zuppa kind of irritated some people when he came out with his request for a salary increase, but is the guy doing a good job?

A: Yeah, the building department is doing their job. You've got to remember that their job is to tell people you made a mistake sometimes and that's not going to be something you want to hear all the time. And that they too make mistakes sometimes. But, you know, they just do their job and make sure the residents have the services they need to make sure that the structures that they're going into are safe for them.

## **Challenges of Raises and Solutions**

Q: Explain to people why somebody can't just, I mean anybody, can't just ask for a raise right now when you have a budget in place.

A: Oh yeah, no. I've made it a point here that unless there's a very extenuating circumstance that's an outlier by a long shot. All of our pay for any of our employees, regular increases or anything in between, is always done through the annual operating budget process. Our pay scales are all set by ordinance for those that are non-union employees. And what that means is that the city council has to vote to approving changes to set their rates and everything like that. So all of those are done through the annual operating budget to make sure we stay on the financial plan that we have for the city.

Q: And people know that when they have the job. They know that their pay is not going to just go up because the mayor gives them a pat on the back and says, hey, you did a great job. I'm going to give you 50 extra grand. It's like, wait a minute, where's that going to come from? It's just not there, right?

A: No, exactly. That's why we have the process that we have in place right now.

## **Challenges of Technology and Solutions**

Q: So going forward, technology has been both a problem and a benefit. How are you leveraging technology to benefit the city?

A: We're trying to do all we can to bring city hall services to the comfort of people's couches. If you look at the OpenGov permitting software right now, that really wasn't existent five years ago. But now most of our departments have onboarded onto that platform where you can basically get all of your permit applications online at home and then we'll let you know when it's ready for you here. The city's website is constantly being updated and are there things that we need to correct here and there on it just because we're not checking every page every day? Of course there are. But we want to

make sure you at least have the information available to you in some way, shape, or form through those means that are out there. So the outreach opportunities through our social media platforms and websites, the ways that we're trying to bring services out to the community through things like our online permitting software, all of those things that we're trying to launch through our technological means.

## **Challenges of the Sludge Landfill and Solutions**

Q: Alright, so the good old sludge landfill. I bet you love hearing about that one. People hate the idea of expanding it, but then if you don't expand it, it's expensive. So aren't you, this is one of those things where you're going to get blamed for no matter what happens, right?

A: Oh yeah, it's going to be one of those where you're not going to get everyone happy no matter what option you pick. But it's in the process it's in right now for that reason. The MEPA process that we are currently in the middle of right now is a state required process in which we do a deep dive into every option that's in front of us, see the financial impact of that, see the operational impact of that, and come up with a solution based off of all of that to show that we've done every ounce of homework that we could possibly do on a topic, and that's exactly what we're in the middle of right now. So working with our state agencies at MEPA and Mass DEP, that's exactly what we're in the middle of right now, just to make sure that when a decision gets made, it's clear to say this is why that decision was and why it was chosen.

Q: Okay, the head of the Conservation Commission, Greg Dumas, he gets pretty irritated sometimes. So my question as I've been following that is one of the irritations is sometimes the city just doesn't get back to him. Why is that and why does he have to press so hard to get some simple answers?

A: I mean, again, I'd have to see which specific agency it is there, but particularly with regard to the topic that we just talked about with the landfill, sometimes there hasn't been an update from the state yet, and a lot of it is in the state's review process hands right now. But our communication is something that we're always working on in this building to make sure that our boards and commissioners have what they need for their meetings, but also have our boards and commissioners understand that there's only so much information we have and if we have to re-justify the information itself, too, it may take a little bit.

Q: Well, my take from the meeting is they showed up. They pretty much were a little perplexed as to why he was so irritated because they're just doing what they're supposed to be doing. So, there seemed to be like a disconnect there. They explain the whole process, and the process is, in fact, the board of health was involved in that process. So,

why is it that they're not putting their heads together and understanding what everybody's doing?

A: I'd have to look into it specifically, Werner, but I think that, again, it's one of those sometimes you're just going to pick up the phone and make a phone call and just have a conversation with someone.

## **Challenges of Human Resources Department and Solutions**

Q: All right. So, the human resources department.

A: Yes.

Q: You made some changes there. One person's actually a manager of that department. Yes. So, how's that working?

A: It's going great. Director Morse took over after our former director Pond resigned for a different position in a different company, and she's been doing a really good job making the position her own, updating some of our processes that we have, consolidating the positions that were there, because, you know, the human resources department had a full-time position and a part-time position in it before. And, you know, one of the things that Director Morse saw was that having the position in a half like that really made it so that you were splitting things in ways that things weren't getting done to the fullest that they could do. So, what she did was she consolidated the positions into one and got that confirmed by the council now, where almost the HR manager is now almost like an assistant director for the department, and makes sure that if she's not there, stuff still can happen, and makes sure that the department basically doesn't shut down any time the director has, you know, calls up sick or has a vacation or has another meeting and isn't in the office at that time. And it's really made it so that it's increased the ways that, you know, we're able to get services out to people who are looking to get hired here in a really effective manner.

## **Challenges of Rising Costs and Solutions**

Q: Now, one thing the director can't do, or you can't do, is sometimes you can't control rising costs. Every city and every town in the commonwealth is facing a rising cost of health insurance. Why is that, and why isn't there some pushback on these greedy insurance companies?

A: Oh, it's insane, Werner. It's insane. You look at the cost that we're paying right now, it's through the roof. You look at, you know, how we pay our insurance company for health insurance is, you know, we have an annual monthly flat payment, and then if our payments come in any higher than that monthly payment, we owe them basically a shore-up payment at the end of that month. Our shore-up payments this year are greater

than the last two years of shore-up payments combined at this point. And really what it is is that a lot of the contracts that were in place before or during COVID got renegotiated now and had their cost increased. That's now passed off to the consumers in that way. There's a lot of people who had put off medical treatments due to the issues with the pandemic and original inflationary concerns that are now having them done, so that's all in there. And also one of the biggest drivers in our insurance uptake is the prescription cost. And our prescription costs probably make up about 60% of the increases that we're seeing in our health insurance payments recently this year, with the biggest share of those being cancer treatment and weight loss drugs. And so those are all things that play into all of that right now. In fact, we worked with our health insurance broker this year to see, you know, do we stay with our current insurance provider, Blue Cross Blue Shield, or do we look at other things like the group insurance commission or the GIC, different carriers like Harvard Pilgrim, Fallon, Cigna, anything like that. But the rate increases range anywhere from 10% to 26%. And when you have to think of our employees in mind with that, you have to think of our own budgetary costs with that because the city pays 75% of everyone's health insurance plan and the employees only pay 25% of their plan through their payroll deductions. We decided to stay with Blue Cross Blue Shield with a 12% increase for this year compared to the 20% increase that we had last year. It's something that every single city and town is seeing now. And it's really just because of those trends in the market, and 99% of those trends in the market are being run by prescriptions.

## **Challenges of Veterans Support and Solutions**

Q: Talk about veterans' support and how that's working in the city.

A: I couldn't be happier with Corey Hasselmann, our director of veterans' services. Lynette Gabrilla, who was our previous director, who now works with the state department of veterans' services, really set him up for success, and Corey's taken it and run with it. The work that his department has done with him, Chad Adams, who's the admin in that department, our former assistant director, Nolan Buck, who's now the director of veterans' services at Fitchburg State University, everyone who's been in that department has been tremendous in providing services to our veterans. We have a new assistant director who's going to be starting with us in about a week and a half. I'm really looking forward to seeing how she plays a part in that role. I don't think a lot of people realize that the director and the assistant director of that department, by law, have to be veterans themselves. And that's where you can relate to the people who you're talking to and working with on the benefits and services that the city provides. But Corey's taken it to a point now where we're adding Winchendon onto our veterans' service district. So Gardner will be providing the veterans' services for not only Gardner, but Ashburnham, Westminster, Princeton, Ashby, and now Winchendon added on top of that, too. And where that comes as a regional benefit is that a lot of these smaller towns only have their veterans' agencies as part-time agencies and part-time departments. We're only open a



handful of hours a week right now. They have full-time access to our veterans' departments to make sure that they get the benefits that they've earned and deserve.

Q: So in some ways, Gardner becomes a hub.

A: Exactly. For the area.

## **Challenges of the Water Suit and Solution**

Q: So on a subject dear to people, H<sub>2</sub>O.

A: Yes.

Q: Supposedly, that water lawsuit was going to be settled.

A: Yes.

Q: Any word?

A: So right now, it's actually in the minutia of the court system right now, if you will. The court has to, the two parties negotiate the settlement itself. That negotiation is currently in process, at which time the court will appoint a claims administrator and then anything that's negotiated between the parties can be, claims can be submitted to the claims administrator at that point, based off of the final settlement agreement that's agreed upon. That agreement does have to be approved by the court still, too. So we're still a little bit out from that just because of the court's timeline with that, but it is true we did settle that case and that final settlement agreement is currently in negotiation. So there's really nothing more I can say besides that.

Q: And that's because until it's finalized, basically both parties have their mouths zipped.

A: Exactly.

Q: And that's pretty much the case with any type of case like that, right?

A: Absolutely, yeah. That's just how the court process works.

## **Challenges of the City Charter and Solutions**

Q: All right. So some changes were made to the city charter.

A: Yeah.

Q: How's that working?

A: I think it works great. A lot of the assistance that it's bringing to us has really been helpful. Before, we needed a contract for everything that was over \$1,000. Now, that's \$10,000. So the purchasing is a lot quicker for some items. The processes have become more effective and efficient for our modern type of city that we have in terms of making sure that information gets published rather than having to publish everything in a newspaper. Now we can utilize our website. Rather than things living in 1923, we finally at least come to 2005. We're almost at 2025 with the upgrades that we're doing right now. All of those things right now, we're just making sure we're a modern city in a modern environment.

## **Challenges of the Coming Years and Solutions**

Q: Tell us about some of the challenges you see coming about now in the coming years. What are your proposed solutions to those challenges?

A: I think you just have to take each day as its own thing. We're working on the budget right now. Gardner looks like we'll be okay with our budget this year, but you look at some of our area communities, Templeton and Winchendon, that have financial concerns moving forward with Winchendon with their override and some other situations there. We don't have that here in Gardner, but that doesn't mean we're not cautiously watching our finances each and every day to make sure we don't end up in a situation like that. And if we do end up in a situation like that one day, what would our plan be? We're constantly almost doing drilling exercises, just like a fire drill in a school. What would we do if we were in that situation this year? The progress, I'm really looking forward to seeing those move forward. The Rome building should be down by the end of next week. The Greenwood School bid for that demolition is closing this week. The Rear Main Street project is moving forward. There's a lot that we have going forward that we're taking off on, and it's going to be something that we just make sure that they all stay on track.

## **Challenges of an Override and Gardner's Solutions to Avoid Needing One**

Q: What was the last time that Gardner actually had to do an override?

A: We've proposed overrides several times in the past. Not one has passed in Gardner's history. And if you go to the Division of Local Services website through the Massachusetts Department of Revenue, you can actually see each and every year that an override vote has been proposed per community and what the vote threshold was for yes or no. So if you click on Gardner on that list, you'll be able to see all the times. The last time we had an override vote come forward, there were two of them. One was a general tax override for funding the school budget, and then the one before that was a debt exclusion. Debt exclusion is a capital project where temporarily you're allowed to tax over your tax levy for a specific capital improvement project, and then once the project is done, you go back down. A general override is a permanent increase in taxation for annual operating budgets. We did a school budget general override in 2018, and that failed in Gardner. Before that, there was a debt exclusion vote for the new police station that was done, and that failed, and we had to find a way to pay for the new police station back in 2013. We have not had one ever pass in Gardner's history.

Q: Why is it that Gardner seems to find a way to meet its obligations, and other people don't? It's just very puzzling to me. It just seems that there's something you're doing right that other people aren't.

What is it you're doing right?

A: I can't speak for the other communities, but what I can say is if you fail to plan, you plan to fail, and we're constantly thinking what's our next step. You have to do that in any type of job like this. Otherwise, you're going to get surprised and then not know what to do at that point.

## **Challenges of Sound Fiscal Management and Solutions**

Q: Very often, I've seen your auditor present at meetings, and he's the guy that's supposed to make sure you're dotting the i's and crossing the t's, right?

A: Yeah, and he does. He does. John Richard is a great person. We're very blessed to have him.

Q: Now, is that unusual? I mean, it's a good thing, but is that unusual that an auditor would be so involved?

A: No, it's a good thing, and I think it's not unusual in medium to larger cities in that we have a full-time auditor. I think back to my days when I was town administrator in Rutland, and my auditor was only in one day a week, and it's one of those where smaller communities can only afford so much. When you have a part-time position like that, it's harder to be as present, harder to be as active, and harder to catch things before it's too late. So, I think that that could be a reason, but again, I can't speak for our area communities because I don't know the situation.

Q: Let me ask you this. You have a meeting. John Richard shows up. You propose something. Does he ever say, Mayor Nicholson, that's kind of dumb. We can't do that.

A: He doesn't say it just like that, I would say, but there are times where he's like, oh, I've got an idea. What do you think about this? Or he's like, well, let's think about that a little more before we get to it, and he starts the conversation.

Q: So, just having somebody who's like right on the bottom line and he's fiscally tuned in, that helps a lot.

A: Yep, absolutely. So, we implemented a new policy this year that John Richard and I had talked about, where now any purchases over \$3,000, he has to sign off on to make sure that the money's there, the long-term picture and our financial projections are there, the cash flow is there, and everything in between. So, he has to sign off on anything that's over \$3,000, and I have to sign off with him on anything over \$10,000.

Q: Well, that's kind of cool.

A: Yeah.

Q: And why those particular thresholds?

A: It was just kind of us seeing, you know, with the new strategy changes that we had, we knew we wanted to get above the \$1,000 limit for a contract. So, seeing now when we've taken the first step, you know, we don't have that contract now at \$1,000, so we have the flexibility now, but how do we still make sure people are sitting on track with where they need to be?

## **The Crazy Question and an Answer**

Q: All right. So, I'm going to ask you my crazy question I ask every once for a while.

A: All right. Let's go for it.

Q: Okay. You get a grant for \$5 million. I've asked you this a couple times before, right?

A: Yes, you have.

Q: All right. So, the \$5 million, you can direct it anywhere you want, but you have to use it for the benefit of the city. What this year would you use it for?

A: Well, I feel like you've just got \$8 million to do a lot of projects around the city, too. So, if you add another \$5 million on to that, it's grant money, so I'd like to do it for a one-time thing. I'd say some of the infrastructure work that we are working on in the downtown and the... There's a complete streets project that we applied for a grant through the federal government last year that we didn't get that would have done a complete reconstruction of Cross Street and Chestnut Street, and I think that would have been where I would put that grant towards, is making sure that those two streets got the, you know, sprucing up that we were hoping to get, and right now we're working with another couple of grant applications right now to see if we'll be able to implement that.

## **The Parking Garage and Solution**

Q: And how's it looking on the parking garage?

A: The parking garage, I mean, the study has to be done first, so that's still active right now. It's just, you know, we only got funding from the feds for 75 percent of the initial design. We have to fund the remaining 25 percent, and after that we'll be eligible for construction funds.

Q: So you have to do that, and then you apply next year... Yeah. ...in the process?

A: Exactly.

## **Challenges in General and Solutions**

Q: All right. Anything else you want to tell the public about the challenges and how you solve them in the city?

A: No, just, I mean, there's challenges that arise every day, big and small, but so long as you know that you're working for the benefit of the city and the residents here and making it so people have a place that they can be proud to call their home, that's the whole job, and that's the whole point of it. So have there been challenges along the past five years? Absolutely. Inflationary trends, the economy, the COVID-19 pandemic, everything from those larger problems to staffing issues and personnel changes and everything like that to the smaller problems of those. Working through each of those in between does give us a stronger city, and I'm proud of how much we've been able to accomplish through the challenges that have arisen along the way.

Q: Great. Well, thank you very much, Mayor Nicholson. I really appreciate your time.

A: Thank you very much, Werner.