

## **5 Years of Moving Gardner Forward – Interview with Gardner Mayor Michael Nicholson by Gardner Magazine Publisher Werner Poegel on 10-27-25**

**Poegel:** Today we have the honor of speaking with Gardner Mayor Michael Nicholson about moving Gardner forward in the last five years. Mayor Nicholson, from what I understand, it's been quite a journey since you arrived in office in July of 2020.

**Nicholson:** That's for sure, Werner. It's been a journey and a half, but it's been fun. We've definitely gotten a lot accomplished here in Gardner, but there's a lot left that we've got to do. I'm looking forward to continuing the momentum that we've started and really continuing to push us forward.

**Poegel:** I'd like to go over just some basics for people out there.

**Nicholson:** Sure.

**Poegel:** Tell us about your background.

**Nicholson:** My educational background, I grew up here in Gardner. I went to Holy Family Academy, graduated from Gardner High School, then went to UMass Amherst. I have two bachelor's degrees from UMass Amherst, one in history and one in political science, as well as two undergraduate certificates in international relations and public administration. I've got my master's in public policy from UMass Amherst, and I have a Juris Doctorate degree from Suffolk University Law School, as well. That's my educational background. After I was done with my master's program, I got hired here in the mayor's office as a staff member, and then after that, I ended up in the town of Rutland as their town administrator for a couple years before coming back here to be mayor. I love working in local government. It was actually my high school education that kind of gave me my first interest in local government. My senior year of high school, we had an advanced placement government teacher. His name was John Gardella. And when the school year started, he told us that we had an option. We had an option to either, right after the AP exam in the spring, for our final exam project, we could either write a 20-page research paper, or we could do an internship on a local campaign and see how local government runs and how the local campaign works. And if we did a one-week, one-page reflection for the duration of, you know, once the school year started until election day, that would count as our final project for the year. So I think what most high school seniors would do, when I picked the one-week, one-paper response instead of the 20-page research paper, honestly, I loved it. Getting able to see just how much local and state government impacts people on a day-to-day life, getting to see the interactions with the public, getting to see the difference that can be made, was really one of the first things that got me interested in local government. And it's because of that experience that I had my internship with my predecessor, former Mayor Mark

Hawke, with Governor Baker, with Senators Steve Brewer and Jen Flanagan, with Representative Jon Zlotnik and everyone else in between, was because that, you know, project back in high school really started that spark of, I'm going to look into this. And so to be able to now sit in the office that I interned for through that project, really, you know, kind of made things full circle for me, and I'm really happy with that. But I'm really proud of the route that I've taken, and I'm excited to see what comes in the future.

**Poegel:** Now, fast forward five years later, you're in the sixth fiscal year of being Mayor and Gardner, and some people, mainly people like me, have referred to Gardner as the model city for America. Did you ever dream that you would have the level of successes that you've had over the last five years?

**Nicholson:** No. You always had hope, but you always had to be realistic with it, too, and it was one of those things that, you know, you want things to get done the right way, but they have to be done the right way, and that does take time. And I'm very proud of the amount of collaboration and cooperation that I've had with the members of the city council, the members of the school committee, our department heads, the members of the public, our private sector partners, everyone coming together the right way and showing really what happens when government works in the way it's supposed to work, is the reason why we've had as much success as we've had here in Gardner over the last five years. You look at the downtown, it looks completely different. That's because we've partnered with our private sector developers on helping to re-spruce up the area and re-license to another area that was viewed as run down before. You look at the progress that's being made in our business community, that's because we've challenged ourselves to market ourselves to new endeavors. You look at the progress that's been made in increasing programming in our school, that's because we've worked with our school committee members, our parents, our children, our students, our teachers, and everyone who's there, and we bring people to the table. That's the thing, is I've often had the mindset of people are policy, and when people are policy you have to bring everyone to the table to make sure you get the more holistic view rather than a siloed view, and I'm very proud of how much we've done that here in Gardner.

**Poegel:** Some people might refer to you as Gardner's big repairman, because you've fixed a lot of things. Now, you've fixed the local ordinances, you've fixed so many things with respect to how things are handled in the city. Tell us a little bit about that Mr. Fix-it attitude of, this is raw over here, I'm going to go fix it.

**Nicholson:** Well, again, when you bring people to the table and have those conversations, like we just said, you find out what's working and what's not. Talking to people and being like, you know, what would stop you from opening a business here in Gardner, or what would stop you from looking at housing development, or what would stop you from looking at Gardner as a place to call your home, and taking that feedback

and working with it, and using that in a constructive manner. We saw that there were some processes internal here at City Hall that weren't updated with our city charter that was originally adopted in 1923. So, going through and working with the public and the city council to update those, and update our ordinance code to make sure that when people come into City Hall, they have a 21st century experience working in a modern working environment rather than something that's stuck in a previous century. We worked through our zoning code to make sure that we were open for business. Right now, Councilor Harden and I have a joint proposal before the city council to cut back a lot of the needless red tape that was put around housing production, because we just need housing. The demand has gone up and skyrocketed, while the supply has stayed stagnant, or in some cases, decreased. There's a lot that needs to happen in that realm, too. So, it's really just taking the feedback that we heard from people and putting it into practice. If there was any other time that you asked someone, like, hey, what could we do better? And then you don't act on it, then why are you asking the question? But if you act on it, that's what sets you up for success.

**Poegel:** Well, maybe it's worth explaining that a little bit. In Karen Harden's ward in the city, you could have a three-family property. You might not have rented it out for a while. Then, all of a sudden, you find out that it belongs to her grandfather. And you want to change that to keep the housing stock up. Is that correct?

**Nicholson:** Exactly. So, right now, if there's a house on Sherman, Pine, Washington, or a lot of places in the city that's a three-family, and it's either been vacant or not fully rented out, now you're stuck with a situation where you have to treat it like a single-family home, or go through spending several thousands of dollars to get that back as a multifamily unit, and people either give up, or the building just sits there and rots, rather than get to its full potential there. So, what we came up with together was created a zoning situation, where the property owner would be able to do a multifamily unit by right. And what that means is they can fix up the property without having to go through the minutia that we put them through, and the amount of red tape that we have here, and just get the project done. That makes it so that it opens up new housing units for us here in Gardner. That makes it so that people are incentivized to revitalize their properties, rather than let them sit there and rot, because they're actually able to do something with it. And if they don't have the return on investment of being able to rent out those extra units, because they feel like a single-family home, then why would they even bother to start the project to begin with? So, this really helps incentivize growth, incentivize revitalization, and incentivize redevelopment.

**Poegel:** Now, another part of your work on housing that's reflected in the ordinance is these accessory dwelling units, so that people who have an existing property could add a dwelling unit, not only for in-law, but also they could rent it out for income, if they wish.

**Nicholson:** Yeah. So, back last year, Governor Healey was signing the Affordable Homes Act into law, which made this a requirement for every city and town to say, right, but we took it even further. And having these accessory dwelling units, as you said, they used to be called in-law apartments. Us here in Gardner, we used to require you to submit to the Board of Health if you had one of these either attached or detached accessory dwelling units, a notarized letter that said the person living there was an immediate blood relative of someone who lives in your household. Your in-laws 9 out of 10. But what that did is it made it so that people who are looking to downsize, particularly our older population, weren't going to these places because they didn't know the process. Or when you hear, oh, I need a notarized letter of this, and sometimes just feeling that there's extra work you need to do, stops you from continuing the process, no matter how easy that extra work may be. But it also just stunts us in housing growth. So, by making it so now that it's just anyone can live in these accessory dwelling units, the state has put their foot forward saying that we just need these housing units. We took it even further. The state law said we needed a maximum of 900 square feet per accessory dwelling unit. We made that 1,250 square feet so that you could add an extra bedroom onto it so that people can look at, honestly, these pre-fab homes that are available online for anywhere between \$7,500 to \$12,000. And I'm going to say that again. \$7,500 to \$12,000 for this accessory dwelling unit that's detached or people finishing their basements or finishing the attic and they've detached the garage or anything like that, and creating another housing unit that can then house someone else. That makes it so that someone's elderly parent can go in there and free up their single family home in the market for someone who's looking for a new home. Or for kids who are coming back from college to start out on their own somewhere else rather than living in the house. Or, honestly, just someone who's looking for an apartment and looking to get some rental income as a landlord. All of these things are now open to the process that we've done here too, and we've expanded on what the minimum state requirements are because we know that we can set the example here in Gardner.

**Poegel:** During the last five years, there's been a lot of housing expansion in Gardner because of what's been done in downtown. You've also got the Rear Main Street project coming in.

**Nicholson:** Yes

**Poegel:** Tell us about that.

**Nicholson:** So the housing in the downtown really started with the old Ryan Block building, the Temptations building, and the Gardner News building. Those buildings have all been converted into market-rate housing units for apartments, mainly one- and two-bedroom apartments. Same thing over at the old Wheelen Supply building that is now the Diamond Hearts Art Studio on the first floor and five additional apartments there. To put this into perspective, there's 33 apartment units over at the old Ryan Block

and Temptations building. That had over 500 applicants for those 33 units. The Wheelen Supply building had five apartments there. That had 427 applicants for those five apartments. The Gardner News building has around 15 apartment units in it. That had over 436 applicants for those 15 units. The demand for housing is there, and they're all full. They all filled up on the first day that applications were available for those apartment units. So we know that there's more housing growth that's expected. We know in the upper floors of the Garbose building and the Shawmutt Bank building at 25 Main Street that they're planning some apartment units up there for those buildings. The Rear Main Street project moving forward with about 100 units of housing at that project. That will be done probably within 2026-2027. We know at the old Prospect Street School site that that's going to be converting into condominiums. There's a lot of housing growth that's happening in the city, but we need to meet the demand. We're about 750 housing units short for the demand that we're seeing right now from the studies that we've done.

**Poegel:** One of the other initiatives you've undertaken is to deal with the not-so-big, but nevertheless consequential homelessness crisis in the city. Can you tell me what you've done with respect to that?

**Nicholson:** We work a lot with the Gardner Emergency Housing Mission nonprofit through our community development block grant program. Last year we were able to give them \$5,000. Last year we were able to give them \$50,000. What that does is it supports them basically paying rent for apartments for individuals who are experiencing homelessness and putting them through a six-month preparation plan, if you will, on how do you get a job, how do you work through financial literacy to make sure you know how to balance a checkbook, to work through different financial factors, and get your life back under you because everyone has situations that come up every now and then that just put people through hard times. It's just getting someone so that they can get their feet back underneath them and know that they have the support that they need and the community behind them for it. We've done a lot of work with the Gardner Emergency Housing Mission. We've done a lot of work with the Gardner CAC. I've done a lot of work with North Star Family out of Leominster. There's some stuff that we've done for sure.

**Poegel:** People like to feel safe in the city.

**Nicholson:** Yes.

**Poegel:** How do you feel about the fact that statistically over the last five years, crime is down by almost half?

**Nicholson:** I'm very proud of that. I am very proud of that. We've invested a lot of money into our public safety departments, not just the police department, but our fire and dispatch departments, too. The police department, we've given a lot of resources. We've done a lot of emphasis on community policing. I've got to give a special shout-out

to Deputy Chief Maroni, Lieutenant Chesnowski, Officer Spain, Officer Latterroute, and everyone at the Gardner Police Department because our city police department is truly our community police department. The amount of people who are willing to go out of their way to make sure that they're just a familiar face in the community rather than being a scary police department like you hear in some of the horror stories from other cities. We set the example here of what it means to be a community member. I think that that plays a big part in the reduction that we've seen in crime rates in Gardner over the last couple of years. We've got officers that are willing to just sit down with people and get to know them and explain from an early age to our students in the schools, to our elderly people in our nursing and assisted living facilities, that people know who's there for them all the time. I think that all plays into it.

**Poegel:** You've often mentioned that Gardner is a city, but in some ways it's also a small town. There are many sections of Gardner. What it looks like, there's growth in every section. There's growth over near Walmart, the new health center over there. I understand there's some news even in South Gardner.

**Nicholson:** Yes. I will say that we've tried to hit every where in the city that we could. There is some news coming soon with the Garbose site over in South Gardner from the GRA that's currently under negotiations right now. But I will say that we were lucky to announce recently that the city was able to receive a \$1.5 million grant for the South Gardner Village Center. Back in 2023, in my State of the City address, I announced that one of the things that we were going to be looking into on behalf of the administration was the feasibility of removing all of the telephone poles in the South Gardner Village Center and moving all of the wires underground and putting in new Victorian lights and sprucing up the South Gardner East Broadway section from the South Gardner Baptist Church down by the Victorian haunted house and that whole area that had been a historic center of that village of the city. And we got it. So thanks to funding from the state and some partnerships that we've had, you know, Councilor Dernalowicz was huge on bringing this idea to us to begin with and Representative Zlotnik kind of took it and ran with us as we partnered through the application process. In the construction season of 2026, we are going to be doing a full project of removing all of the telephone poles from the Standard Chair area of East Broadway down to the Gardner Martial Arts Academy and putting all of the wires into underground conduit, installing brand new sidewalks and curving, paving the road over the top, installing new Victorian light posts like we have in the downtown and really fully reinvigorating that section of downtown South Gardner. We've made a lot of investments in downtown Gardner itself and this is us bringing that further somewhere else into the city. We've seen progress made over in the Timpany Boulevard corridor. We've seen progress in the downtown. We've seen a lot of stuff happen in other areas of the city and now we're bringing it to the next chapter in that story.

**Poegel:** A lot of things start out with feasibility studies.

**Nicholson:** Yes.

**Poegel:** It was just approved a feasibility study for the Gardner Golf Course.

**Nicholson:** Yes.

**Poegel:** You got some money to study a possible parking garage in downtown.

**Nicholson:** Yes.

**Poegel:** Can you tell us about other feasibility studies that are underway and what the consequences may be if you can proceed forward, as you move Gardner forward, if you can proceed forward with those projects?

**Nicholson:** I will say state law requires us to undertake these feasibility studies before we undertake any major construction projects. That makes sure that we do all of our due diligence that we have to do before we undertake a project, you know, substantial cost with it. You talked about the feasibility study for the parking garage over on the West Street parking lot. That's moving forward. We've talked about the feasibility study for the new building at the Gardner Golf Course to see if we can consolidate our Pro Shop restaurant and some type of function hall over at the Gardner Golf Course to see if we can keep some of the tournaments that are going elsewhere here in Gardner. You know, there's other feasibility studies we're looking at, you know, some of our facilities at the airport to see if we can get those updated, and particularly the main hangar wing to see if we can do some type of a little restaurant cafe in there. There's some work that's being done over at the Gardner Middle School with a new roof project that's been done over there, the locker room upgrades at the Gardner High School. There's a couple other, you know, feasibility studies that we're currently looking into right now. As those projects, you know, get more towards the development stage, we'll be sure to share a little more details on them.

**Poegel:** Route 140.

**Nicholson:** Yes.

**Poegel:** A bridge. I called it the \$5 million bridge because it's a big project when you take all the trails into account.

**Nicholson:** Yes

**Poegel:** So what's new with that?

**Nicholson:** So, we are lucky enough that just last week the state announced that they were going to be awarding us additional, about \$250,000 from the MassTrails grant program to complete the design of the bridge. The bridge is designed at about 75% completed right now, and with this funding we'll be able to continue on task so that the bridge construction can move forward with a sometime in calendar year 2027. We'll expect the shovels hit the ground to begin that project.

**Poegel:** So, let's talk about taxes.

**Nicholson:** Okay.

**Poegel:** You can't do much about property taxes. They're going to go up because your costs go up every year. You pay more for pencils every single year. You pay more for

paper. Although you've tried to reduce the cost of paper, haven't you, by going electronic?

**Nicholson:** We have. We have. A lot of the departments have moved to fully electronic here, particularly in our purchasing department and a lot of our financial departments. Those are auditing treasurer, and the purchasing department tended to use more paper than anyone else just because of the amount of processes that they follow. So, we have been able to do a lot that way. You know, property taxes is always an interesting situation because it always falls under how state law dictates that process can go and how that process is written out in the state law, and however the real estate market went two calendar years prior is how the value of your property then gets valued. And if you look back two years ago in the 2022 to 2023 time frame, the market was through the roof. We were lucky if we had a house on the market in Gardner for a day and a half, let alone anything longer than that. So, since the market was so hot, prices were going up for sale prices, and that's what we have to base valuations on now based off of the law. So, it is something that we always do evaluate. How can we save money here and there to try to alleviate the burden that we place on the taxpayers?

**Poegel:** But you've done a couple of things, right? The meals tax, you took advantage of that?

**Nicholson:** *Yup*, Yeah, that was, you know, proposed originally by Councilor Paul Tassone. What it does is for every \$100 you spend on a pre-made food here in the city, 75 cents. So, for every \$100 bill you drop down, three-quarters of that comes back to the city. Now, that's brought in almost half a million dollars to the city's revenue here, and it allows us to, you know, free up some of the other funds that we have so we can get to the projects that we need to do and have new revenue sources done that way for us here in Gardner. It's actually been a big benefit to us out here. But it's also the least regressive tax that we have here in the city because people who go to our restaurants, use our roads, use our services, are able to call 911 when they're in the city, put their trash in the trash cans that we have on the sidewalks, but they may not be from Gardner. So, they're not paying our property taxes, but they're still entitled to all of the services that we offer here. And we always welcome our visitors here, but we've got to make sure that we're doing things in a fair way for people. So, this made it so that our property owners aren't subsidizing our visitors to as great an extent as they used to before.

**Poegel:** A few years back, you came up with what some people thought it was an absolutely crazy idea of getting a third-party grant writer for the city. And I wrote an editorial and I said, this is a great idea, it's going to bring in like \$6 million. But you know what? I was wrong. How much has it brought in? **Nicholson:** 52 million dollars, Werner. That's been one of the best decisions that we've made here, too. Our staff here has the capacity to manage projects. But when you're managing a project, and then also

tasked with finding new grants for other projects, and then writing those applications, you get so spread thin that things can fall through the cracks. Where if you clearly told this is the project you're working on, this is what's going to happen, because we have other people looking for those grants and we have other people writing those applications for us and managing that process, then it makes it so that we get a better product in the end and also get more competitive in the end because we're now able to have the capacity to apply for grants that we just weren't applying for before because we didn't have the time to do the application. It's paid for itself more than 20 times over, and I'm really happy to see that project continue. That's one of the reasons why I requested last year that the city council allow us to give that grant writing firm a contract for five years, because we've already seen that there's basically already paid for the 5 years of the contract in the grant that they got us in the first year, and it's nothing but a benefit to the city and a lot of them.

**Poegel:** I'd like to talk to you about the trust sector. So many individuals, so many officials have put their trust in you. Can you tell us about what the governor has done and put her trust in you? Can you tell us about the folks at the White House and how they put their trust in you? Can you tell us about how the other mayors of Massachusetts have put their trust in you?

**Nicholson:** There's the old Spiderman saying that I'm going to change it for this one. With great amounts of trust comes great responsibility, and that's what I say because the phrase itself being with great power comes great responsibility. The power here is with the people and what they want to see is for their community to move forward, and we're just a steward of that mission of trying to build a community that people can be proud to call their home. And so they put trust in their elected officials that they put into office to make sure that they are building a community that they feel proud that's safe and comfortable and happy to call their home. So when you do that and you take that lens, that's where you get the model that people are policy. And when you take that to a larger scale, you know I was very honored that Governor Healey appointed me to the Transportation Funding Task Force and working at ways that we could address issues of transportation-related funding across the Commonwealth and bringing that on behalf of all cities and towns in Massachusetts, not just Gardner. Through that work that we've been able to do, we've now seen the benefit of that with a revamp to the Chapter 90 road paving program where instead of doing the traditional formula of \$200 million a year from the state, going out to cities and towns based off of miles of road, population, and workforce, taking some of it in that way but also just taking miles of road rather for communities that have seen dips in population since that formula was originally proposed in that. What that did is it more than doubled every single community's road investment fund in Massachusetts. No single municipality in Massachusetts saw less than at least a 45% if not a 50% increase in their funds that they received this fiscal year as a result of those conversations that we had at the task force level as the governor

moved forward. I was able, lucky enough under the last administration, to visit the White House on a couple of occasions to provide input on infrastructure funds. I was asked to testify in front of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus on the way that Gardner has used federal infrastructure funds to move the city forward. And then this year having the honor of serving as the chair of the Massachusetts Mayors Association, working with my counterparts in the 48 cities across Massachusetts on seeing how we can either partner with each other or share our ideas with each other so we're not reinventing the wheel and coming up with the best progress and product for our residents in our respective cities.

**Poegel:** During the last five years, there's so many areas that have produced just unprecedented levels of success in Gardner. What stands out to you as being the most consequential for the city?

**Nicholson:** You know, that's a tough question. That's a real tough question. I think the new elementary school. I think opening the new elementary school was going to have decades of impact on our students because of what it allowed us to do. It created a new 21st century learning environment for our students in the elementary schools so that they could become our next generation leaders. And when one of them is sitting in this seat one day, I hope one of the things that comes to mind is that they were given an opportunity through the, you know, ability of the new elementary school that that inspires them to do something to invest in the students at that point in time. But that building coming open allowed us to do the reinstating of our elementary school band program. That building opening up allowed us to come up with new ways to expand our recreation program in the summer. That building opening up, allowing us to expand our recreation program, led to us thinking about the creation of our new youth center. There's a lot of things that that project has done that I think is going to have a lot of impact on a lot of people in the city for the next several decades.

**Poegel:** As you go into thinking about the next five years and moving Gardner forward, what's at the top of your list?

**Nicholson:** You know, if I'm lucky to be here still in the next five years in this seat, because I really do love the job, there's a lot of things that we're going to be looking at too in terms of programming with our schools. In terms of the infrastructure upgrades that we've done here in the city, you know, we've done a lot of work even with our water enterprise and how I'm fixing our water pipes and water mains and pipes that we have around the city. Do we continue that work? Where does that move us forward to there? Our housing growth that we've already talked about. Managing that so that it's done the right way. There's a lot of stuff that we have on the horizon for us here in Gardner, and I'm hopeful that if I'm still here that we're going to still be pushing Gardner in the right direction.

**Poegel:** Mayor Nicholson, when people want to know more about what's going on in the city, there's so many pieces of information that they can get from the City of Gardner website because of the transparency that your administration by far has made. Tell us about what they can find.

**Nicholson:** You can find a lot on the city's website. You can find any press release for any announcements that we've done, any upcoming meetings, all of the agendas posted on there, even though we're not required to post any of our agendas and minutes on the city's website, we do that as a way to try to be more transparent so that people have access to that information. You'll see information on our contact list for every office here in the city and what every department works on on a breakdown list, so you know if you have a question on something, you know who to call. There's a lot that's there. You can even get to our open checkbook where you can find down to the penny how much money was spent on individual things here in the city with the public funds that we have. So there's a lot that you can find out there, probably the greatest source of transparency we have.

**Poegel:** What else would you like to tell the people of Gardner, Massachusetts?

**Nicholson:** We're very blessed to live where we are. There's a lot of things that, you know, we touched on it earlier. I've always said Gardner is a city with a small town heart and that this community cares for each other. This community has a lot to offer and there's so much potential for this city to be truly, as you said earlier, a model city for other locations across the country and here in Massachusetts to follow. I'm looking forward to seeing what happens in Gardner and where Gardner goes in the future.

**Poegel:** I'd like to conclude with something that people have said about you. This mayor, he's got common sense. When you first came to the city, there were some lights that were out. You've related the story before. I'd like you to tell it again.

**Nicholson:** That was a fun one. All of the streetlights along Pearson Boulevard were out for several months at that point. And I remember we sat in the conference room at the Department of Public Works and it was the DPW, myself, National Grid, MassDOT, and a bunch of people in the room with us. And people are pointing fingers at who caused the lights to go out. The Route 2 Rotary had just been redone by MassDOT and National Grid was blaming MassDOT for cutting some other ground wire. MassDOT was saying that they didn't do any such thing, they didn't dig in that area, that it was a National Grid issue. And then we started talking about when the lights were originally installed. And I was like, that seems like it was a little bit ago. And I was like, have we sent anyone up in a truck just to make sure that the lights, the light bulbs themselves are good? And they're like, well, no, we didn't. Why would we do that? I was like, to make sure at least step one is done. And when they put someone up in the truck and they changed the light bulbs, immediately the lights went on. And it was really just the fact that all the light

bulbs had burnt out at that point in time that MassDOT could check to see if the light bulbs were burnt out. So that was definitely a fun way to start my career here in Gardner. It was a fun time. We now make sure the light bulbs are checked on a regular basis. Let me put it that way.

**Poegel:** And in the last five years, you've turned on many, many lights with many, many initiatives. Mayor Nicholson, thank you for your time today. I really appreciate it.

**Nicholson:** Thank you, Werner.