

## Briefing: Key Themes and Priorities from Representative Jonathan Zlotnik

### **Executive Summary**

This document synthesizes the key accomplishments, strategic priorities, and governing philosophy of State Representative Jonathan Zlotnik, as detailed in an interview regarding the 2026 legislative year. The central themes emerging from the discussion are a commitment to fiscal responsibility through pragmatic efficiency, targeted state investment in local infrastructure and services, and a governing approach rooted in bipartisan compromise.

In 2025, significant achievements included securing over \$10 million for water and sewer infrastructure in the district, championing a revised road funding formula that benefits rural communities, and advancing major youth service initiatives like "The Hub" in Winchendon and the Gardner Community Youth Center. A cornerstone project, the redevelopment of two Winchendon schools into 44 units of veterans' housing, moved forward with approximately 90% state funding.

Looking ahead to 2026, Representative Zlotnik's top priorities are twofold: ensuring the full and continued funding of the Student Opportunity Act to provide stable support for K-12 education, and aggressively addressing the regional housing crisis through state investment in redevelopment projects. Supporting priorities include ensuring the financial sustainability of Heywood Healthcare, continuing investment in youth services and infrastructure, and strengthening local food security systems. Throughout, Zlotnik contrasts the Massachusetts legislature's track record of consensus-building with federal-level gridlock, underscoring a pragmatic approach to governance.

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### **I. Fiscal Prudence and Budgetary Outlook**

A core theme of the discussion is the imperative for fiscal responsibility and efficiency, particularly in light of a challenging state budget environment. Zlotnik highlights the end of the "post-COVID boom," significant cuts in federal spending, and a legislative reduction of nearly one billion dollars from the governor's proposed 2025 budget as factors necessitating a search for savings.

### **The Gardner-Winchendon District Court Consolidation**

A key example of this approach is the successful consolidation of the Gardner and Winchendon District Courts. Zlotnik identified a "bureaucratic hangover" where the two courts, though co-located in the same building for years, operated with redundant systems.

- **The Issue:** The separate administrative structures for the Gardner District Court and the Winchendon District Court cost the trial court over \$100,000 annually in redundant expenses.
- **The Solution:** Zlotnik proposed an amendment, passed in the 2025 budget, to merge the two entities into a single "Gardner-Winchendon District Court."
- **The Impact:** This administrative change produced over \$100,000 in annual taxpayer savings with no change to personnel, operations, or front-end services, as the courts had already shared staff and a judge for many years.
- **Broader Principle:** Zlotnik uses this example to illustrate the difficulty and importance of finding "wasteful spending," which never appears as a specific line item. He argues, "...if the 200 legislators in the state each found something in their district of similar size and similar low actual impact, the budget savings, you know, would be in the tens of millions of dollars."

## **II. Key Accomplishments and Investments in 2025**

Representative Zlotnik detailed several major state-funded initiatives from the past year that directly impacted the communities of Gardner, Winchendon, and Ashburnham.

### **Infrastructure Upgrades**

- **Water and Sewer:** A focused effort resulted in over \$10 million in state and federal investment to replace aging water and sewer infrastructure across three of the four towns in the district.

- This initiative was spurred by a catastrophic failure of a water valve that was installed when "Ulysses S. Grant was president," highlighting the urgent need for modernization.

- The grant funding offsets costs that would otherwise fall on local ratepayers and taxpayers.

- **Rural Road Funding:** A significant increase in funding for local road and bridge repair was achieved through a new compromise on the distribution formula.

- **The Problem:** The traditional formula, based on population, road miles, and jobs, disproportionately favored denser, more urban communities and did not account for a community's wealth.

- **The Compromise:** The existing \$200 million program was kept in place, but several hundred million dollars in new funding was added, to be distributed via a new formula that "generously benefits road miles."

- **The Funding Source:** This new investment is supported in part by revenue from the "millionaires tax," which is earmarked for transportation.

## **Youth and Community Services**

- **The Hub in Winchendon:** This facility serves as a "one-stop shop" for community services, combining the operations of the state-funded Project Heel, the Winchendon CAC, and a new teen center located in a former bowling alley.

- **Gardner Community Youth Center:** The state funded a pilot program to establish this new center, replacing the former Gardner branch of the Fitchburg Leominster Boys and Girls Club. Having completed its first semester, Zlotnik intends for the state to continue the pilot for at least another year based on its initial success.

## **Housing and Redevelopment: The Winchendon Project**

This project represents one of the largest state investments in the region and is the area's first major housing construction project in approximately 20 years.

- **Project Scope:** A joint venture between the state and the Montachusett Veterans Outreach Center (MVOC) to redevelop two former school buildings in Winchendon into 44 units of permanent supportive housing for veterans.
- **State Investment:** The state is funding approximately 90% of the project's total cost.
- **Project Timeline:** After a "stutter step" where initial funding was withdrawn, additional state and private funding (from Home Depot and the Robinson Broadhurst fund) allowed construction to resume. Completion is anticipated in 2027.
- **Community Impact:** The project repurposes important community buildings, provides critical housing for veterans, and is strategically located next to the Winchendon Senior Center and G.A.R. Park.

## **III. Strategic Priorities for 2026**

Representative Zlotnik outlined a clear hierarchy of priorities for the upcoming year, focusing on education, housing, and the sustainability of core local services.

### **Top Priority: Education Funding**

The absolute top priority is to ensure the Student Opportunity Act (SOA) continues to be fully funded.

- **Context:** The SOA is a multi-year reconstruction of the state's K-12 funding formula. All school districts in Zlotnik's legislative district are "majority aid districts," with Gardner and Winchendon receiving over 70% of their budgets from this state formula.
- **The Goal:** To provide consistent, predictable funding to avoid "roller coaster" budgets that are detrimental to student outcomes. Zlotnik notes that inconsistent

funding in the past meant "some years you'd have electives. Some years you wouldn't. Some years you'd pay for sports, sometimes you wouldn't." The SOA aims to eliminate this instability.

### **Co-Top Priority: Addressing the Housing Crisis**

Sharing the top of the pyramid with education is the need to address the region's acute housing crisis.

- **The Crisis:** Housing costs in North Central Massachusetts have "tripled or quadrupled in a 10-year period," with supply falling far short of demand. Zlotnik states the current situation "is not sustainable for anybody."
- **The Strategy:** Continued state investment is essential to make redevelopment projects viable. This includes advancing numerous projects involving the repurposing of former school buildings in Gardner (Prospect Street, School Street, Helen Mae Sauter, Waterford Street), Templeton, and Winchendon. The next six to eight months are considered critical for the Waterford Community Center project.

### **Supporting Priorities**

1. **Healthcare Sustainability:** Ensuring the viability of Heywood Healthcare (including Heywood and Athol hospitals) is critical for both public health access and the regional economy. Zlotnik argues that the fundamental financing models for rural healthcare are decades old and need to adapt to prevent the loss of services seen in nearby communities like Leominster and Fitchburg.
2. **Youth Services and Natural Resources:** Building on the successes of 2025, the goal is to continue supporting youth programs in a budgetarily sustainable way. This includes not only centers but also investment in parks, playgrounds, and the region's network of bike trails and hiking paths.
3. **Sustained Infrastructure Investment:** The work on roads, bridges, water, and sewer is not a one-time injection of funds but requires a sustained, efficient, and effective multi-year effort to complete.

#### **IV. Governing Philosophy: Bipartisanship and Pragmatism**

A recurring theme is the effectiveness of the Massachusetts legislature's commitment to compromise and consensus, which Zlotnik sharply contrasts with the political climate at the federal level.

- **Track Record of Compromise:** In his 13 years in the House, Zlotnik has participated in 13 budget debates. He notes that "only one of them passed on a party-line vote," with all others passing with near-unanimous support.
- **Avoiding Shutdowns:** While state budgets have often been completed a month late, the legislature has unanimously passed one-month stopgap budgets every time to "keep the lights on" and avoid a government shutdown while negotiations conclude.
- **The Principle:** Zlotnik emphasizes that this record exists despite significant disagreements. The prevailing approach is a commitment to reaching a compromise. He states, "I think that people are better served by that approach that we have chosen to take to government here in Massachusetts and that spirit of bipartisanship and compromise."

#### **V. Addressing Community Needs**

##### **Food Security**

The strategy for addressing food insecurity focuses on supporting and strengthening existing local resources.

- **Supporting Local Pantries:** Direct state investment has been made in the Gardner CAC, Winchendon CAC, and the MVOC food pantry for veterans.
- **The "Growing Places" Initiative:** Zlotnik is a strong supporter of this initiative, located at the future Waterford Community Center. Its model strengthens the entire local food system by:
  - Acting as a "buyer of last resort" for surplus crops from local farms.
  - Processing fresh food to make it more shelf-stable and easier to use.

- Distributing this nutritious, locally grown food to those in need.

## Constituent Services

Representative Zlotnik highlighted that constituent service remains a major priority, with his office handling over 1,000 cases annually on issues ranging from healthcare and housing to unemployment assistance.

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