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# FROM THE PRESIDENTS DESK

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YOUR CITY • YOUR COUNCIL

*May 2026*

## Finding a Better Flow: A Reasonable Rate

This month, the City Council tackled a difficult but necessary challenge: addressing a structural shortfall in our Water Enterprise Account. For many years, the city has used a staggered system, adjusting sewer rates for a five-year block and then switching to adjust water rates for the following five years. Because our water rates haven't been adjusted since 2021, the fund has not kept pace with contractual changes, inflation, and essential maintenance, leaving the account projected to fall into a deficit during Fiscal Year 2027.

While the administration initially proposed a 20% increase starting July 1st, followed by an additional 40% over the next three years, the Council's Finance Committee pushed for a more measured, yet still proactive alternative. The Council voted to approve a first printing of a counter-proposal, setting a 15% rate increase capped strictly for Fiscal Year 2027 alone to keep the enterprise fund in the black, while keeping the impact to residents to a minimum.

*"Whether we're talking about the ratepayers or the taxpayers, those are two pockets but part of the same pair of pants." — Councillor Heglin*

By limiting this adjustment to a single year rather than locking in a long-term annual hike, we are holding our municipal operations accountable. This temporary step avoids severe "sticker shock" for residents while preventing a deficit that would otherwise force painful cuts to our general fund services like police, fire, and public works.

Over the coming months, we will be working closely with Public Works Director Arnold to develop a clearer, long-term policy that ensures better ratepayer predictability and fiscal stability moving forward.

## What's the Number? Setting the School Budget Straight

On May 12th, the City Council held an informal meeting with Superintendent Dr. Pellegrino and School Business Manager Hawke to review the Fiscal Year 2027 school budget. While Gardner Public Schools have achieved remarkable educational outcomes in recent years—with Gardner High School significantly outperforming peer districts statewide in managing a high-needs student population—the end of federal pandemic relief funds (ESSER) and skyrocketing costs (including health insurance) have created a significant structural gap.

To meet this challenge, the school department implemented a major reorganization totaling \$1.5 million in cuts, which includes shutting down Gardner Academy.

However, there is a remaining gap that highlights a broader conversation about how we plan as a city. While our local school funding has increased faster than any other sector of municipal government over the last five years, relying on one-time fixes or waiting until April to address budget shortfalls puts immense pressure on our systems. Going forward, the Council is advocating for structural, joint sessions between the City Council and the School Committee much earlier in the fiscal year.

By analyzing trends and fixed costs collaboratively in the fall, we can replace short-term scrambling with a sustainable, multi-year strategy.

## Keeping Our Capital Working: Over \$1 Million Reappropriated

In a unanimous vote, the Council approved the reappropriation of just over \$1 million in unexpended bond proceeds to fund critical infrastructure and municipal adjustments. Because these funds are heavily restricted and tied directly to capital projects, this legislative move allows us to maximize existing city resources without adding any new burden to our taxpayers.

The funding package directly targets three key community areas:

- Gardner Middle School: Covering a significant bid variance to ensure the essential roof replacement stays on schedule.
- City Hall Entrance: Fixing it the right way, with structural upgrades to fill the bays underneath the main steps. This will prevent the previous long-standing water collection and prevent future foundation damage.
- Waterford Community Center: Funding the construction of concrete accessibility ramps and entryway sidewalks to make the facility fully navigable, for everyone.

## Gardner in Bloom: Volunteers Step Up to Beautify Downtown

As we transition into the warmer months, May offered an incredible reminder of what makes Gardner a truly special place to live: our community volunteers.

We owe a massive thank you to the hundreds of residents and over a dozen organizations who rolled up their sleeves for the City Keep Gardner Beautiful cleanup event. A special shout-out goes to Diane LeBlanc, who has dedicated years to coordinating these cleanup efforts and keeping our neighborhoods beautiful.

Our community pride doesn't stop there. The annual Downtown Flower Pot Program is officially underway. Volunteers will be gathered to plant 65 pots and seven large planters across our business district. Thank you to Councillor Mack for all of her efforts ensuring the success of this beautiful program!

## May Wrapped Up

Clerk Search Underway: Following the announcement of our City Clerk's upcoming departure in July, a Special Search Committee consisting of myself, Councillor Kazinskas, and Councillor Mack has officially formed. The Council has approved the updated job descriptions for both the City Clerk and Assistant City Clerk roles, and we are moving forward swiftly to ensure a smooth transition for this vital City Hall artery.

Wishing the Dean Well: Our longest-serving member, Dean of the Council, Councillor

Hardern, is temporarily stepping back from her subcommittee assignments until September 1st to receive medical attention for a severe back issue. True to her 16-plus years of dedicated public service, she is actively keeping up with all municipal business from home. Please join the rest of the Council in wishing her a speedy and full recovery!

See you all next month!