

Executive Readiness and Policy Assessment: Comparative Evaluation of Gardner City Councilors – Report by Gardner Magazine

1. Framework for Executive Readiness Evaluation

Context & Strategic Importance

Transitioning from a legislative role within the Gardner City Council to the executive office of the Mayor represents a fundamental shift in leadership scope, operational accountability, and administrative responsibility. While a city councilor functions within a collective body focused on policy deliberation, legislative voting, ordinance formulation, and constituent advocacy, the Mayor serves as the Chief Executive Officer. In Gardner's municipal governance structure, the executive office demands direct management of daily city administration, supervision of municipal department heads, oversight of collective bargaining and public safety unions, and full accountability for executing Gardner's \$85 million annual operating budget. Evaluating a sitting councilor's readiness for executive office requires assessing not only their legislative record, but also their capacity to command administrative processes, navigate complex municipal financial systems, and manage systemic operational risks.

Analytical Evaluation Criteria

To evaluate the prospective executive readiness of Gardner's sitting councilors, this assessment applies a standardized, four-pillar framework:

- **Fiscal Oversight & Budgetary Management:** The demonstrated capacity to analyze, manage, and modernize Gardner's \$85 million annual budget. This includes identifying financial discrepancies, implementing long-range financial forecasting, establishing structural audit procedures, and

exercising prudence regarding capital investments and municipal stabilization funds.

- **Administrative & Executive Experience:** Direct experience in managing personnel, leading organizational processes, executing daily municipal or professional operations, navigating crisis environments, and collaborating across governmental departments and regional boards.
- **Legislative Track Record & Policy Initiatives:** A proven history of formulating and enacting local ordinances, championing charter amendments, driving economic development projects, and advocating for structural governance reforms or community-level improvements.
- **Governance Risk & Operational Friction:** An analysis of potential vulnerabilities, including personal or professional conflicts of interest, external employment commitments, policy vetting oversights, political friction with the administrative branch, or challenges in transitioning from legislative moderation to executive decision-making.

Having established these four analytical pillars, the following section synthesizes the executive profiles of all eleven sitting councilors into a centralized comparative evaluation matrix.

2. Comparative Assessment Matrix

Context & Strategic Importance

A centralized comparative matrix provides civic stakeholders, municipal analysts, and residents with an objective side-by-side evaluation of all eleven sitting councilors. By mapping each councilor's tenure, primary achievements, operational strengths, and key governance risks against the standard evaluation criteria, this comparative overview establishes a clear baseline for analyzing executive readiness across the entire legislative body.

Comparative Analysis Table

Councilor Name	Current Role/Tenure	Key Legislative/Fiscal Achievements	Primary Administrative/Operational Strengths	Key Potential Risks/Challenges
Brad Heglin	At-Large Councilor (Sworn March 2024)	Spearheaded investigation into municipal vendor fraud (recovering stolen funds); advocated for annual 5-year financial forecasts.	Focus on financial modernization, verification protocols, and state legislative aide experience.	Very brief municipal tenure; career shift required from high school teaching; potential friction over rigid mandates.
George Tyros	At-Large Councilor; Council President	Instituted the "Tyros Protocol"; expanded charter oversight of capital planning; led CDBG economic development projects.	Extensive presiding experience; expertise in administrative protocols and legislative transparency.	Political friction with City Administration over utility bills/budgets; rigid fiscal stance opposing capital cost overruns.
Elizabeth Kazinskas	At-Large Councilor; 5-time Council President	Served as Acting Mayor (2020); Finance Committee Chair; top vote-getter in	Direct executive crisis management during COVID-19; deep charter expertise; extensive	August 2026 employment with Phillipston Select Board; operational shift from

		2021 & 2023 elections.	regional/civic network.	neutral moderator to chief executive.
Dana Heath	Ward 2 Councilor	Pushed for equal neighborhood facade grants, full economic assessments, and lower-cost infrastructure options.	Strong neighborhood-level business focus; active advocacy for vulnerable demographics and infrastructure alternatives.	Public feud requiring 2024 police intervention; withdrawn 2023 Route 140 zoning proposal due to Article 97 conservation laws.
Craig Cormier	At-Large Councilor (Multi-term)	Deep record of municipal budget oversight; relies strictly on PAC-free grassroots donor funding.	Established working relationships with city department heads; extensive institutional knowledge.	Perceived as establishment candidate; unproven direct executive command over unions and daily departmental operations.
Judy Mack	City Councilor	Uncovered unauthorized salt shed fund usage (returning funds to stabilization); identified off-street parking shortages.	Acute attention to fiscal compliance, audit integrity, and granular municipal infrastructure issues.	Executive visibility gap regarding school oversight, economic development, or broad municipal budgeting.

Paul Tassone	Ward 3 Councilor	30+ years civic leadership (School Committee, Redevelopment Authority); modernizing roads and sidewalks.	Broad civic background; pro-business stance; pragmatic "No Boloney" direct communication style.	Transition to managing citywide daily operations; navigating 13.73% poverty rate and contentious land-use debates.
Alek Dernalowicz	City Councilor (Since Jan 2020); Finance Chair	Finance Committee Chair; legal background; advocated for early capital project communication with Council/School Board.	Deep legal expertise (attorney); strong financial acumen regarding the \$85M budget; focus on governance transparency.	Balancing or stepping back from active legal practice; navigating intense public scrutiny on high-stakes capital projects.
David Thibeault-Munoz	Ward Councilor	Opposed year-long calendar parking ban; advocated for DPW wage increases and regional affordable housing.	Strong advocacy for working-class, renters, and elderly; commitment to worker pay and open communication.	Potential pushback from fiscal conservatives over wage/spending increases; developer resistance to parking regulations.
Karen Hardern	Ward 4 Councilor (14-	14 years of legislative service; deep	Extensive institutional memory;	Voter perception as establishment

	Year Tenure)	involvement in thorough Ward 4 neighborhood infrastructure and safety.	understanding of city charter and departmental operations.	figure during budget strain; operational shift from voting to daily executive management.
Calvin Brooks	City Councilor (Joined Jan 2024)	26-year Fitchburg City Auditor; advocated for 5-year forecasts and monthly auditor expenditure reports.	Unmatched municipal accounting expertise; data- driven, non-partisan analytical approach to fiscal policy.	Short tenure as elected official; auditor's cautious mindset potentially slowing fast- paced economic development.

With this comparative overview established, the evaluation shifts to a detailed, individual examination of each councilor, beginning with those who have held major presiding roles and demonstrated executive leadership.

3. Individual Profile Evaluations: Presiding Officers & Proven Executive Experience

Context & Strategic Importance

Councilors who have served in presiding leadership positions—such as Council President or Acting Mayor—possess direct experience managing broad municipal procedures, coordinating council committees, and interacting with regional bodies. Evaluating these individuals requires examining how their formal presiding authority and administrative leadership translate into full-time executive governance.

3.1 Elizabeth Kazinskas

Executive Readiness & Policy Record

Elizabeth Kazinskas presents a deep record of institutional leadership within Gardner municipal government. A five-time elected City Council President and former Chair of the Finance Committee, Kazinskas secured a strong popular mandate by finishing as the top vote-getter among at-large candidates in both the 2021 and 2023 municipal elections.

Executive Profile Summary: Elizabeth Kazinskas

- ***Direct Executive Experience:*** Served as Acting Mayor for four months in 2020, managing daily municipal administration during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ***Legislative Leadership:*** Five-time elected Gardner City Council President and former Chair of the Finance Committee.
- ***Electoral Mandate:*** Highest vote-getter among At-Large candidates in the 2021 and 2023 municipal elections.
- ***State & Regional Network:*** Six-year tenure as District Director for State Representative Kimberly Ferguson; extensive regional connections through active board and civic engagement with the Greater Gardner Chamber of Commerce, GFA Federal Credit Union, and the local Boys & Girls Club.

Her executive profile is uniquely underlined by her tenure as Acting Mayor for four months in 2020, making her the first woman to hold the position in Gardner. Her management of city administrative operations during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic received statewide praise. Furthermore, her career as District Director for State Representative Kimberly Ferguson, combined with deep civic roots

across the Greater Gardner Chamber of Commerce, GFA Federal Credit Union, and the Boys & Girls Club, provides her with an established regional and state network.

Fiscal Oversight & Administrative Impact

- **Emergency Operational Command:** Successfully executed executive duties during a public health emergency in 2020, managing daily municipal function and public communications.
- **Charter Mastery:** Possesses granular operational knowledge of the Gardner City Charter, municipal ordinances, and parliamentary framework developed through five terms as presiding officer.
- **Fiscal Direction:** Led the Finance Committee in reviewing municipal appropriations and aligned committee work with long-term stabilization goals.

Potential Challenges & Operational Risks

- **Onboarding Risk & External Employment Commitments:** In August 2026, Kazinskas accepted a professional position as Administrative Assistant to the Phillipston Select Board. Managing mayoral obligations or a citywide executive campaign could create severe scheduling friction and operational conflicts with her duties in a neighboring municipality.
- **Operational Shift Vulnerability:** As Council President, her role required acting as a neutral moderator precluded from active debate on the council floor. Transitioning to Mayor requires shifting from an impartial facilitator to an executive policymaker who must champion controversial initiatives.
- **Inherited Administrative Friction:** Stepping into the executive seat would require taking full accountability for ongoing municipal financial tensions, including resolving council concerns raised in early 2026 regarding administrative fiscal management.

3.2 George Tyros

Executive Readiness & Policy Record

George Tyros is a veteran At-Large City Councilor who was unanimously elected and reelected as City Council President, earning recognition from colleagues for legislative impartiality and accountability. His record features a heavy focus on economic development, including work on ordinances that facilitate local business expansion, revitalize underutilized commercial real estate, and oversee Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) initiatives.

Fiscal Oversight & Administrative Impact

- **Administrative Optimization:** Formulated and implemented the "Tyros Protocol" within City Hall to streamline administrative procedures and meeting efficiency.
- **Capital Oversight Expansion:** Authored charter amendments extending the City Council's and School Committee's explicit oversight over capital planning projects.
- **Budget Transparency:** Institutionalized a structural budget reform requiring councilors to formally submit proposed budget amendments prior to finance hearings, eliminating last-minute fiscal surprises during budget cycles.

Potential Challenges & Operational Risks

- **Institutional Friction & Inter-Branch Relations:** Tyros has publicly clashed with the administration under Mayor Michael Nicholson, alleging a pattern of administrative financial mismanagement that specifically involved broken communication protocols regarding the municipal budget and unpaid city utility bills. Taking office could mean inheriting internal organizational friction.
- **Fiscal Restrictiveness & Capital Growth Friction:** Tyros maintains a highly rigid stance on public expenditures. For example, he publicly stated he would have voted against the Maki Park revitalization project had its ultimate \$500,000 cost

overrun been fully disclosed at inception. Critics note this stance could lead to policy gridlock over major capital investments.

- **Operational Shift Vulnerability & Labor Bargaining**

Capability: His core strengths center on parliamentary mechanics, rule enforcement, and legislative monitoring. Shifting to executive command requires managing daily public works, public safety operations, and leading labor union negotiations.

Moving from presiding officers, the analysis turns to candidates whose readiness is defined by technical financial expertise, auditing background, and structural fiscal reform.

4. Individual Profile Evaluations: Technical Fiscal Experts & Audit Advocates

Context & Strategic Importance

In light of ongoing debates surrounding Gardner's \$85 million budget, municipal vendor management, and administrative transparency, councilors with specialized financial and legal expertise offer distinct operational capabilities. This section evaluates candidates who have built their legislative profiles around fiscal oversight, rigorous accounting, and legal compliance.

4.1 Calvin Brooks

Executive Readiness & Policy Record

Calvin Brooks joined the City Council in January 2024 to fill an unexpired term following the resignation of Carolyn Kamuda. Despite his brief tenure as an elected official, Brooks brings 26 years of high-level municipal finance experience, having served as the City Auditor for neighboring Fitchburg until his retirement in 2023. His legislative platform focuses entirely on analytical, data-driven policymaking and establishing institutional guardrails.

Technical Fiscal Profile: Calvin Brooks

- ***Municipal Finance Career:*** 26 years of direct municipal auditing experience as Fitchburg City Auditor (retired 2023).
- ***Elected Service:*** Sworn into the Gardner City Council in January 2024 to fill an unexpired term.
- ***Policy Focus:*** Institutionalizing mandatory five-year financial forecasting and monthly auditor expenditure reports to the Finance Committee.

Fiscal Oversight & Administrative Impact

- **Long-Term Budget Forecasting:** Championed legislative requirements for five-year financial forecasts to function as an early warning system against municipal structural deficits.
- **Audit Control Measures:** Partnered with Councilor Brad Heglin to mandate that the City Auditor provide comprehensive monthly expenditure reports to the Finance Committee to prevent loss of oversight.
- **Capital Improvement Transparency:** Publicly pushed for complete financial transparency regarding major capital improvements prior to authorization votes.

Potential Challenges & Operational Risks

- **Onboarding Risk & Limited Political Experience:** Brooks' background is heavily rooted in internal municipal administration rather than political executive leadership. Transitioning from a career auditor to chief executive requires building skills in public dealmaking, community messaging, and labor union negotiations.
- **Labor Bargaining Capability & Promotion Friction:** An auditor's strict focus on risk aversion, compliance, and spending

containment could create friction with commercial developers or slow down fast-paced economic growth initiatives.

- **Operational Shift Vulnerability:** His brief tenure as an elected official requires a rapid transition from technical auditing to high-visibility public leadership.

4.2 Brad Heglin

Executive Readiness & Policy Record

Brad Heglin, sworn in as an At-Large Councilor in March 2024, is a lifelong Gardner resident, graduate of Gardner High School, Chair of the Gardner Centennial Committee, and a former state legislative aide. His legislative record emphasizes financial oversight, fraud prevention, and charter-based administrative reform.

Fiscal Oversight & Administrative Impact

- **Municipal Fraud Investigation:** In September 2026, Heglin spearheaded an investigation into a municipal vendor fraud scheme, successfully aiding in the recovery of stolen city funds and establishing stringent verification protocols.
- **Fiscal Modernization Reform:** Advocated for municipal ordinances requiring the Mayor's office to produce annual five-year financial forecasts to manage the city's \$85 million operating budget.
- **State & Local Policy Integration:** Leveraged his background as a former state legislative aide to align local policy efforts with state-level municipal standards.

Potential Challenges & Operational Risks

- **Onboarding Risk & Short Tenure:** Having joined the council in March 2024, Heglin faces a steep learning curve regarding full-time daily city operations and personnel management.

- **Operational Shift Vulnerability & Career Transition:** Currently employed full-time as an English teacher at Gardner High School, stepping into the mayoralty would require a complete departure from his teaching career.
- **Administrative Friction:** His push for rigid charter documentation and independent verification protocols could encounter resistance from departmental staff accustomed to traditional workflows.

4.3 Alek Dernalowicz

Executive Readiness & Policy Record

Alek Dernalowicz has served on the City Council since January 2020. A practicing attorney with over a decade of legal experience specializing in veterans affairs and mass tort law, he represents the fourth generation of his family living in his ancestral Gardner home. He brings a formal legal framework to municipal oversight and policy drafting.

Fiscal Oversight & Administrative Impact

- **Finance Committee Leadership:** Serves as Chair of the City Council's Finance Committee, exercising oversight over Gardner's \$85 million municipal budget and expenditure requests.
- **Early Capital Project Communication:** Active advocate for governance transparency, insisting that the City Council and School Committee receive comprehensive briefings during capital project development rather than after administrative decisions are finalized.
- **Legal & Contractual Mastery:** Applies legal training to analyze city contracts, municipal ordinances, and regulatory compliance mandates.

Potential Challenges & Operational Risks

- **Operational Shift Vulnerability & Professional Practice:** Managing the chief executive office requires full-time operational command. Dernalowicz would need to reduce, delegate, or step away from his active legal practice.
- **Labor Bargaining Capability & High-Stakes Management:** Shifting to Mayor places him directly in charge of complex labor negotiations, contentious infrastructure investments, and regional commercial development debates that attract heavy public scrutiny.

4.4 Judy Mack

Executive Readiness & Policy Record

Judy Mack's tenure on the City Council is defined by focused fiscal oversight and acute attention to practical municipal infrastructure issues, utilizing council proceedings to enforce financial accountability.

Fiscal Oversight & Administrative Impact

- **Correction of Unauthorized Expenditures:** In February 2026, Councilor Mack identified that leftover funds from a municipal salt shed project were utilized to purchase alternative equipment without mandatory City Council approval. Her intervention forced the unauthorized funds back into the city's stabilization fund.
- **Infrastructure & Zoning Analysis:** At a September 21, 2026 meeting, Mack highlighted structural urban planning flaws, demonstrating that reduced parking requirements for new developments failed to account for vehicle growth, creating severe off-street parking shortages.

Potential Challenges & Operational Risks

- **Executive Visibility Gap & Onboarding Risk:** Available records reveal a complete absence of a public platform or recorded policy stances regarding district-wide executive duties, such as school

system governance, economic development strategies, and overall municipal budgeting. This creates an executive visibility gap for civic stakeholders seeking a chief administrator with a clear platform.

- **Operational Shift Vulnerability:** Her narrow legislative focus creates uncertainty regarding her capacity to transition into full-time multi-departmental administrative command and lead collective bargaining negotiations across municipal unions.

Having evaluated the technical fiscal experts, the focus turns to ward councilors who base their executive readiness on neighborhood advocacy, constituent representation, and community reform.

5. Individual Profile Evaluations: Ward Advocates & Community Reformers

Context & Strategic Importance

Ward councilors work directly with localized constituent concerns, utility rates, neighborhood infrastructure, and small-scale commercial developments. Evaluating these councilors for executive office requires assessing how well localized constituent advocacy translates into broader strategic vision for citywide administration.

5.1 Dana Heath (Ward 2)

Executive Readiness & Policy Record

Dana Heath serves as the Ward 2 City Councilor, Chair of the Appointments Committee, and member of the Economic and Community Development Committee. Professionally a real estate agent and founder/CEO of the Central Mass Flag football league, his legislative focus centers on equitable neighborhood investment and infrastructure cost containment.

Fiscal Oversight & Administrative Impact

- **Equitable Economic Investment:** Advocated for expanding business facade grants and beautification funds equally across all Gardner neighborhoods rather than concentrating resources exclusively in the downtown core.
- **Infrastructure Cost Relief:** Pushed for transparent reviews and lower-cost alternatives to the multi-million dollar municipal sludge landfill expansion, while challenging rising residential water costs.
- **Vulnerable Demographics Focus:** Campaigned for expanded support networks, transportation options, and outreach check-ins for vulnerable and elderly residents.

Potential Challenges & Operational Risks

- **Policy Vetting Vulnerability:** In 2023, Heath introduced a proposal to rezone two Route 140 parcels for commercial use, but was forced to withdraw it after the City Solicitor determined the land was strictly protected under state conservation law (Article 97).
- **Local Political Friction:** Heath has been involved in public disputes, including an ongoing feud with local activist Kimberly Blake that required police presence to maintain decorum at a 2024 council meeting.
- **Disruption to Administration Trajectory:** Heath has publicly questioned current administrative practices, expressing a willingness to "ruffle feathers." Critics worry his confrontational approach could disrupt the political stability and municipal momentum built under Mayor Michael Nicholson—specifically threatening recent municipal investments in education and local music programs.

5.2 David Thibeault-Munoz (Ward Councilor)

Executive Readiness & Policy Record

David Thibeault-Munoz serves as a Ward Councilor and member of the Public Service Committee. His platform is centered on working-class families, renters, municipal employees, and elderly residents, advocating for equitable municipal service delivery.

Fiscal Oversight & Administrative Impact

- **Public Works Staffing Investment:** In January 2024, advocated for increasing Department of Public Works (DPW) employee wages to resolve chronic staffing shortages, address road potholes, maintain street trees, and repair public fields.
- **Affordable Housing & Tenant Advocacy:** Prioritized regional affordable housing initiatives as a core legislative policy.
- **Constituent-Centric Policy Defense:** On September 21, 2026, led opposition against a proposed year-long calendar-based parking ban, demonstrating that it unfairly penalized residents without private driveways by forcing them to walk long distances in unsafe winter conditions.

Potential Challenges & Operational Risks

- **Fiscal Friction & Labor Bargaining Capability:** Proposals to increase DPW wages and expand public spending on housing and infrastructure could face pushback from fiscally conservative residents concerned about tax impacts, complicating collective bargaining balance.
- **Developer Resistance:** His focus on developer accountability—such as demanding adequate parking infrastructure for new projects—could draw resistance from commercial real estate developers seeking rapid expansion.
- **Operational Shift Vulnerability:** Moving from legislative constituent advocacy to Mayor requires managing collective bargaining processes and balancing competing departmental budget demands.

5.3 Paul Tassone (Ward 3)

Executive Readiness & Policy Record

Paul Tassone brings over 30 years of local civic and business leadership experience to his role as Ward 3 City Councilor. His background includes prior service on the Gardner School Committee and the Gardner Redevelopment Authority. Known for his "No Boloney Tassone" governance style, he advocates for direct communication and pragmatic decision-making.

Civic Leadership Profile: Paul Tassone

- ***Experience:*** 30+ years of local business, school governance (School Committee), and redevelopment authority experience.
- ***Key Infrastructure Focus:*** Modernization of city roads, sidewalks, and utility corridors.
- ***Governance Philosophy:*** Pragmatic, direct communication ("No Boloney Tassone").

Fiscal Oversight & Administrative Impact

- **Capital Infrastructure Focus:** Driven local capital improvements, specifically prioritizing the modernization of city roads, sidewalks, and utility corridors.
- **Pro-Business Development:** Championed economic policies aimed at retaining Gardner's industrial character while attracting commercial enterprises.
- **Cross-Departmental Knowledge:** Leveraged decades of experience across school governance and redevelopment authorities to address municipal planning issues.

Potential Challenges & Operational Risks

- **Managing Socioeconomic Reality:** A Tassone administration would immediately confront complex socioeconomic pressures, including managing Gardner's 13.73% poverty rate and overseeing the regional allocation of Opioid Settlement funds.

- **Operational Shift Vulnerability:** Shifting from ward-level constituent advocacy to full-time multi-million dollar administrative command, department head supervision, and union negotiations represents a major operational leap.
- **Navigating Contentious Controversies:** Executive leadership requires taking decisive stances on contentious local issues, such as environmental regulations and proposed commercial projects like race track developments.

The final evaluation group examines multi-term councilors who represent long-term institutional continuity within City Hall.

6. Individual Profile Evaluations: Institutional Continuity & Sustained Service

Context & Strategic Importance

Multi-term councilors offer deep institutional memory, established relationships with municipal department heads, and detailed knowledge of the city charter. Assessing these candidates requires evaluating whether their long service provides operational stability or presents challenges to implementing administrative reforms.

6.1 Craig Cormier (At-Large)

Executive Readiness & Policy Record

Craig Cormier is a multi-term At-Large City Councilor with deep experience in local legislative operations. His campaigns rely primarily on grassroots donor backing rather than political action committees, positioning him as an independent voice with established municipal ties.

Fiscal Oversight & Administrative Impact

- **Budgetary & Ordinance Expertise:** Possesses long-term familiarity with Gardner's annual budget structure, local municipal codes, and zoning ordinances.
- **Departmental Collaboration:** Maintained working relationships with municipal department heads, committee members, and community organizations across multiple terms.
- **Grassroots Accountability:** Focuses on transparent municipal operations driven by direct constituent input without PAC involvement.

Potential Challenges & Operational Risks

- **PAC-Free Positioning & Labor Bargaining Capability:** While relying strictly on grassroots donors provides political independence, his distance from PACs and major political action groups could limit his regional coalition ties when negotiating complex public union contracts or building multi-jurisdictional economic development coalitions.
- **Perception of Political Continuity:** Voters seeking significant administrative overhauls at City Hall may view a long-tenured incumbent as an establishment candidate tied to existing operations.
- **Operational Shift Vulnerability:** While experienced in legislative voting and policy debate, Cormier lacks direct executive experience managing city departments, leading union contract negotiations, or serving as chief administrative officer while confronting Gardner's 13.73% poverty rate.

6.2 Karen Hardern (Ward 4)

Executive Readiness & Policy Record

Karen Hardern has served for 14 years as the Ward 4 City Councilor. Her tenure provides her with deep familiarity with the city charter,

municipal regulatory processes, and neighborhood-level administration.

Fiscal Oversight & Administrative Impact

- **Granular Ward Oversight:** Maintains detailed oversight of Ward 4 infrastructure needs, localized traffic management, and public safety concerns.
- **Charter Knowledge:** Applies 14 years of legislative practice to navigate city charter provisions, local ordinances, and parliamentary motions.
- **Inter-Departmental Networks:** Utilizes long-standing professional relationships across municipal departments to resolve constituent service issues.

Potential Challenges & Operational Risks

- **Operational Shift Vulnerability:** Shifting from a legislative voting role to direct executive authority—including hiring department heads, negotiating union contracts, and managing city budgets—requires a distinct management skill set.
- **Inherited Institutional Responsibility:** As a 14-year incumbent, Hardern shares legislative responsibility for past municipal decisions, making her vulnerable to criticism during periods of municipal budget strain or persistent economic challenges, such as the city's 13.73% poverty rate.

Having completed individual candidate evaluations, the final section synthesizes cross-cutting municipal challenges that any prospective mayor must navigate.

7. Cross-Cutting Municipal Challenges & Strategic Synthesis

Context & Strategic Importance

Regardless of which councilor might step into the Mayor's office, the incoming chief executive will immediately confront structural, fiscal, and operational challenges facing Gardner. A successful transition requires moving past legislative debate to execute solutions across three main operational areas.

Systemic Municipal Challenges Facing the Incoming Executive

- 1. Fiscal Oversight & Audit Systems:*** Resolving vendor fraud vulnerabilities and unauthorized spending (e.g., salt shed funds); institutionalizing mandatory five-year financial forecasts and monthly auditor expenditure reports to the Finance Committee.
- 2. Infrastructure, Housing, & Economic Development:*** Managing high-cost capital projects (sludge landfill expansion, Maki Park overruns); balancing downtown commercial investments with ward-level facade grant distribution; addressing off-street parking shortages.
- 3. Socioeconomic Realities & Administrative Command:*** Addressing Gardner's 13.73% poverty rate and DPW staffing shortages; executing the operational transition from part-time legislative voting to full-time executive command, collective bargaining, and multi-department management.

7.1 Fiscal Mismanagement & Oversight Systems

Recent municipal governance disputes highlight the need for strengthened executive financial controls. Candidates across the council have responded to financial friction in distinct ways:

- **Fraud & Unauthorized Spending:** Brad Heglin led the September 2026 vendor fraud investigation to recover stolen funds, while Judy Mack identified unauthorized salt shed

spending in February 2026, redirecting funds back to the stabilization account.

- **Administrative Friction:** George Tyros explicitly cited improper executive communications regarding unpaid city utility bills and budget submissions, echoing council concerns raised in early 2026 regarding administrative fiscal management under Mayor Nicholson.
- **Structural Oversight Proposals:** Proposed solutions include Calvin Brooks' and Brad Heglin's mandatory five-year financial forecasts, Brooks' and Heglin's required monthly auditor expenditure reports to the Finance Committee, and Tyros's pre-hearing budget amendment rules.

7.2 Infrastructure, Housing, and Economic Development

The incoming executive must balance rapid economic expansion with neighborhood impacts and infrastructure constraints:

- **Economic Strategy:** Debates persist between downtown-centric growth and Dana Heath's proposal for equal neighborhood facade grants and full city economic assessments, contrasted against the current administration's focus on education and local music programs.
- **Capital Cost Control:** Rising capital expenditures—such as the multi-million dollar sludge landfill expansion opposed by Heath and the \$500,000 Maki Park cost overrun challenged by Tyros—require strict cost containment strategies.
- **Housing & Parking Pressure:** David Thibeault-Munoz's focus on affordable housing and his opposition to calendar parking bans contrast with Judy Mack's analysis of off-street parking shortages resulting from reduced development parking minimums.

7.3 Managing Socioeconomic Reality & The Legislative-to-Executive Shift

The central challenge for any councilor assuming the mayoralty lies in adapting their legislative background to full-time executive command:

- **Socioeconomic Factors:** Addressing Gardner's 13.73% poverty rate, resolving DPW staffing shortages through wage adjustments (advocated by Thibeault-Munoz), and managing regional Opioid Settlement funds (highlighted by Tassone) require comprehensive executive planning.
- **Operational Command:** Every sitting councilor faces an operational shift vulnerability, moving from part-time legislative voting to managing daily city administration, directing department heads, overseeing public safety operations, and leading collective bargaining negotiations.

Strategic Takeaways for Civic Stakeholders

- **Presiding Officers (Kazinskas, Tyros):** Offer immediate familiarity with city hall procedures and administrative protocols, but face onboarding risks regarding external employment (Kazinskas) or managing inherited inter-branch friction (Tyros).
- **Technical Fiscal Experts (Brooks, Heglin, Dernalowicz, Mack):** Bring unmatched audit capabilities, fraud recovery experience, and legal knowledge, but must address onboarding risks stemming from short elected tenures and bridge the executive visibility gap (Mack).
- **Ward Advocates (Heath, Thibeault-Munoz, Tassone):** Provide strong community representation and a focus on working-class needs, but must demonstrate policy vetting diligence and overcome potential labor/fiscal friction with conservative stakeholders.
- **Institutional Continuity Leaders (Cormier, Hardern):** Offer deep charter knowledge and established departmental relationships, but must demonstrate labor bargaining depth despite PAC-free positioning (Cormier) and convince voters

seeking reform that long-tenured councilors can deliver new executive directions.