

REPORT ON THE STATE OF THE CITY

Given Wednesday, January 13, 2021 - 6:00 PM
Gardner City Hall, City Council Chambers

The Address was broadcasted live on Gardner Educational Television, WGAW 1340AM Radio Station, the City of Gardner Official YouTube Page, and the Gardner City Hall Official Facebook Page. The broadcast was also recorded for later playback on Gardner Educational Television.

In accordance with COVID-19 Executive Order No. 60, issued by His Excellency Governor Charles D. Baker IV, in-person attendance was limited to only those who were assisting in the broadcast or being recognized by the Mayor, the total number of which falling within the limits issued by regulation.

Good Evening,

I want to welcome all who are joining us today, either in person or by television, radio, social media, or other means. I want to thank you all for taking the time to learn about what is going on here in your community.

My name is Michael Nicholson, and I have the honor and the privilege of serving as the twentieth (20th) Mayor of the City of Gardner.

City Council President Elizabeth Kazinskas and School Committee Vice Chair Jennifer Pelavin, I wish to extend to you both my congratulations on your recent re-election to your roles in leading our City's two (2) elected bodies. The two (2) of you have been tremendous partners in leading and governing our City, and I am proud to call you both my colleagues, partners, teammates, and friends. Being able to collaborate so well with the two (2) of you, as Mayor and the Chair of our School Committee, has led to a level of efficiency in governing that many other communities can only wish to have.

President Kazinskas, I would like to especially thank you on behalf of all of the residents of this City for serving as our Acting Mayor at the beginning of this Pandemic. Your leadership and vision for our City proved vital to helping us during the period of transition when the scheduled elections had to be postponed and we first began to experience the effects of a Pandemic like the world has never seen before.

To our staff from the Building Department and Department of Public Works, thank you for your assistance in helping us prepare for this event.

To my staff, Rachel Stephano and Colin Smith, thank you for your continued service to our City. The work ethic and diligence that the two (2) of you bring to the office every day continues to make my job as Mayor easier. You are both assets to this City and I am very lucky to be working on the same team as you both.

To our Director of Technology, Robert O'Keefe, and our staff from Gardner Educational Television - Tim Josti, Matthew DeCiero, and Andrew King --thank you for your commitment to ensuring that the members of the public have access to the proceedings of our Government, not only with the broadcasting of this address, but also all of our public meetings throughout the course of the year.

To the members of our health care community - our Director of Public Health, Lauren Saunders, her staff, the members of the Board of Health, our first responders, representatives from Heywood Hospital and Community Health Connections, doctors, nurses, contact tracers- thank you for the countless hours of service you provided to our community over the past year and for the work you continue to do. You are all heroes for guiding us through these uncertain times and have impacted the lives of more people than you can imagine here in our small section of North Central Massachusetts - and we are forever grateful.

To the essential workers of the City, thank you for standing strong in the face of the dangers and challenges of the past year. Without your service, we would not be in as good a condition as we are today. You have embodied the mantra of our recovery- "We're all in this together" - and have given us an example to follow as we move forward.

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Lastly, to my family, thank you for your continued support and encouragement since I took office exactly 6 months ago today. Throughout my tenure in office, you have been a strong foundation for me and you have been my biggest supporters.

The State of the City Address has been a staple of our great City since 1923. As with most things, this year looks a little different, with a small group of ten (10) here in person, and a wider audience across WGAW Radio Station, Gardner Educational Television, YouTube, and Facebook. This is also the first year that a Spanish translation of this address has been uploaded to the City's website.

While the method for this address has changed, its importance still stands. This address, though directed toward the members of the City Council, provides our citizenry with the information of what we are doing here in City Hall on your behalf, to ensure that we continue to work to build a city we can be proud to call our home.

Yes, 2020 was a difficult year, and the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic still impacts all of us in countless ways. As we start this review of the past year we should also remember those who are no longer with us. Please join me in a brief moment of silence as we remember the twenty-nine (29) Gardnerites who lost their battle with COVID-19.

In the ten months since this Pandemic began, approximately ten percent (10%) of our residents have been diagnosed with COVID-19 and the number continues to grow. Some of our local businesses lost between fifty-five (55) to two hundred ninety-five (295) days of business due to the economic shutdowns that have been put in place to curb the spread of the virus. Our students and teachers have had one hundred forty-two (142) days of school on a remote platform rather than in the classroom between the last two school years. Many of our churches have had to close or limit their sanctuaries and move their services online. Holiday celebrations were limited in our homes. Parents of our student athletes have not been able to watch their children's games since spectators are no longer allowed. Travel plans were canceled. Wearing a mask became a new norm, many of us have not been closer than six (6) feet to friends we have had for years, and there were four (4) instances in which an entire shift of firefighters had to be quarantined due to exposure to the virus.

The COVID-19 Pandemic remains strong in our area. While we have already administered almost three thousand (3,000) vaccines in the City, all of us in our community - both residents and businesses- must continue to do all we can to follow the guidelines and regulations that have been put in place to ensure that we get out from under this Pandemic as soon as possible.

However, while this past year was difficult, we have managed to accomplish more than we ever thought possible, and that is thanks to the dedicated work of so many in our community.

I would like to especially thank our City department heads and employees, who during the past year not only led the City through a global Pandemic, but also helped keep the City on its feet in a year when four (4) different people held the Office of Mayor. Without the work of these dedicated employees, I would not be able to stand here today to speak about how the City has progressed as well as it has in the past year.

In order to support the City's response to the Pandemic, we partnered with the Commonwealth's Department of Public Health to host a mobile testing clinic in which four hundred twenty seven (427) patients were able to be tested for the Virus, in addition to the daily testing performed by Heywood Hospital and Community Health Connections ("CHC").

We utilized the City's \$1.8 million Federal CARES Act allotment to ensure that our response places as little a burden as possible on our taxpayers. This grant was able to cover the cost of personal protective equipment ("PPE"), overtime costs to cover the shifts of employees who had to quarantine, the hiring of a temporary contact tracing receptionist for City Hall, small technology upgrades to allow for remote meeting services, supplies needed to eventually host a mass vaccination event, and more.

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We also utilized these funds to cover the cost of reopening Prospect Street School to allow Community Health Connections to relocate their testing center when we heard that it was in danger of closing.

In order to prevent the situations we saw during the first surge of the pandemic, where medical staff were sewing shower curtains into medical gowns due to a shortage of PPE, we used our CARES funding, we also donated \$300,000.00 of PPE to Heywood Hospital and Community Health Connections, to ensure they had the resources they need to give our residents the best care possible.

If anything good has come from the Pandemic, it is that the City has increased its outreach into the community. We are more accessible now than we have ever been before. The creation of the City's YouTube page has brought the business of government into the comfort of our homes. This could not be more evident than in the COVID-19 Updates that Acting Mayor Kazinskas broadcasted during the start of the Pandemic, some of which received over two thousand (2,000) views.

This led to the creation of the "Mayor's Update" videos that help keep our residents informed as to what is going on in the City. These videos, inspired by the old "Fireside Chats," are posted weekly on the City's YouTube page and broadcasted on Gardner Educational Television to let people know what happened in the past week and what to expect in the near future. I am excited to see where this new resource will take us as we work to increase the engagement of the public in the decisions that are being made here in City Hall each day.

This increased outreach took place beyond the walls of City Hall. The Keep Gardner Beautiful initiative, founded by our own Dianne LeBlanc, has made its own investments into our City. In October, they held a community clean up day that removed almost fifty thousand (50,000) nip bottles, fifty six thousand (56,000) bottles and cans, and countless bags of trash off of our streets by people who took time out of their days just to be able to give back to their City.

We also stepped up to help those who were in need and struggling with food insecurity as a result of the Pandemic. When our students first transitioned to remote learning back in March, we launched a new program in which students could visit our drive up locations and receive a free breakfast, lunch, and dinner. In doing this we worked to ensure that no income barriers - Pandemic related or not- caused any of our students to go hungry. This program continued through the summer months and is still going strong today.

To compliment this, we also had the Farmers to Families Food Box Program. This initiative, done in partnership with the Federal Government, has helped feed thousands in our city with a weekly delivery of one thousand (1,000) – thirty (30) pound boxes of food being given out for free to those in need. I'd like to recognize our school food services coordinator, Katrina Bressani, for submitting the application to allow Gardner to be one of the first communities to participate in this program.

As our students went back into our school buildings in October, and the program moved to the Polish American Citizens Club ("PACC"), we once again saw how much we can accomplish by working together, from the countless volunteers who helped with distributions, to Andy Woodford of Woodford Electric volunteering his time as a forklift operator, and more. This program highlighted that we all stand together as a community and are there to help and support each other. In particular, I'd like to thank our State Representative, Jonathan Zlotnik, for his tireless efforts in partnering with us to keep this program going. Without his help and support, this program would not have continued into its second phase.

We have also worked to make our financial standing the strongest it has been in decades. This is thanks to the work the City has done over recent years to eliminate the structural deficit that we faced at the onset of the Great Recession and the work done to build up our stabilization fund to the highest it has been in our City's history.

Even with the financial difficulties that many communities around the country are facing, we are in an excellent spot. Our revenues are coming in higher than we had initially

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projected at the beginning of the fiscal year, our budget is balanced and meets the needs of the community, and we took in well over \$6.5 million in grant funding to help alleviate the burden placed on our tax payers.

Because of all of this, the outside auditors and bonding agencies who annually review the City's finances listed the City as "strong"- something that many municipalities will not be hearing this year.

We also have a positive outlook for our financial future. In the past year, Gardner homes have remained on the market just twenty- seven (27) days on average, and received one hundred three percent (103%) of their asking price.

While we are still cautious of what impact the Pandemic may have on our finances, we are optimistic in our outlook.

Thanks to the strength of our finances, we have been able to invest in ourselves to help market our City to developers and new economic opportunities. By investing in ourselves, we provide an example to others as to why it's worth investing their time, energy, and resources in our City.

Over the past four months, we paved more miles of roadways in the City than we have since 1999. We concluded Phase One (1) of our Downtown Improvement Project and saw new sidewalks, Victorian light posts, crosswalks, and signage installed to help breathe new life into Downtown. We partnered with our business association, Gardner Square Two, to install banners on our light posts to show who we are as a community. All of this will only be enhanced this year with the new outdoor seating opportunities that we will be installing throughout downtown in order to extend what our businesses can offer to our residents. By working to improve our infrastructure and visual appeal, we not only make our City better for our residents, we make it more marketable to new business ventures by showing them what we have to offer.

We are also doing our part to remove blighted and dangerous buildings from the City, particularly with the demolition of the old factory on Rock Street. This old wooden structure with no sprinkler system was located in a densely populated location and was a dangerous fire hazard to many in the surrounding area. It is now a location where we are working to install a new pocket park in order to replace danger with promise.

We did a lot to invest not only in our infrastructure, but also directly into our business community. Back in August, we launched a micro-enterprise assistance grant program, to provide funding to businesses who have been negatively impacted by the Pandemic. After assessing the needs of the community, the award amounts for these grants doubled from \$5,000.00 per business to \$10,000.00 to ensure that we are able to help our local businesses as best we can as we navigate through this Pandemic together.

Following a review of our revenue trends and seeing that we were in a comfortable spot, my office, along with the License Commission, waived the cost of all liquor license applications in the City for the coming year. We also waived the downtown parking meters fees for three times longer than normal before the Christmas season. These are examples of the small things that the City can do to make a big impact on our businesses.

And while we had to say goodbye to some of our businesses during the past year, we also welcomed a few downtown with Shutout Screen Printing, Straightaway Vinyl Records music store, and two (2) beauty salons -Color Bar and Vibe studio, along with Manzel Furniture and Rugs at the old Rome Furniture Building behind Price Chopper.

I would also like to thank the members of our business community who showed tremendous integrity this past year by adhering to all of the safety guidelines and regulations put in place by the Commonwealth and CDC. We understand that the restrictions that have been placed on businesses are hard, but they are necessary in order for us to come out from under this Pandemic.

While the Pandemic has dominated our discussions around public health in the past year, we have continued to work to combat the opioid epidemic that is still facing our nation.

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Working with the City Council, we were able to fund and create a Substance Abuse Prevention Coordinator. This new city employee works with the Gardner Community Action Team ("GCAT") and the different substance abuse prevention organizations in our community to make sure that we are doing all we can to combat the opioid crisis that has impacted too many in our community.

I would be remiss if I did not say a special thank you to our first responders for their continued dedication and commendable service to our City in the face of the Pandemic, always being there when people need them the most, no matter the risk.

I am proud to say that just this morning, our first responders in our Fire, Police, Emergency Medical Services, and Dispatchers received their first dose of the COVID-19 Vaccine. Our first responders have also played an integral part in planning for our eventual mass vaccination events that we expect to take place in April.

We replaced Engine-3 at the Gardner Fire Department with a new \$500,000 pumper truck with the capability of releasing one thousand five hundred (1,500) gallons of water per minute. The City invested almost \$100,000 into the cost of this truck and new tools to fully equip the vehicle and ensure our firefighters have everything they need to respond to calls in the safest manner.

Working with Congresswoman Lori Trahan's office, we purchased new breathing apparatus for all of our firefighters. This is the first time in over twenty (20) years that every firefighter employed by the City has the same model breathing apparatus. This allows our firefighters to handle emergency situations in the most efficient way possible.

At our Police Department, we purchased new handheld scanning devices that can detect and identify the presence of fentanyl and other harmful drugs, to ensure we do not expose our officers to any hazardous materials.

There was a national conversation this past year about the way in which police departments operate. We are doing all we can to ensure that our police department is meeting the needs of our community and protecting all members of the public to the best of their ability.

The men and women of the Gardner Police Department are dedicated employees who serve our community with skill and honor, but there is always more we can be doing to make sure we provide all of our residents with the service they deserve. Working together with our two (2) police unions, we were able to come up with solutions to meet this challenge.

We created a new translator specialty position for the department to ensure that language barriers do not hinder our officers' responses to incidents.

I will be sending a proposal to the City Council to submit a home rule petition to remove our police department from the Civil Service System. The city accepted the Civil Service system of hiring, disciplining, and removing public safety personnel in 1912, and the system has not changed much since. Under this system our ability to hire an officer was restricted largely to a person's score on a standardized test, rather than looking at the full picture of each applicant.

We have also created a graduated Quinn Bill, in which an officer's rate of pay is based on the amount of education and training they have received. This allows us to ensure that we have a fully trained and educated police force that knows how to meet the needs of all our residents.

While there is still more that can be done, these are great first steps for us to achieve in just six (6) months.

Even with COVID-19 restricting the public's safe access to the Levi Heywood Memorial Library, they adapted their lending model. Between June and December, they had over six thousand (6,000) curbside appointments, circulated over thirty thousand (30,000) items to their patrons, and added over five thousand (5,000) volumes to their shelves.

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During the past six (6) months, we have also made large strides to make sure students in Gardner have the resources they need to be successful even with the situations we are dealing with. Exactly six (6) months ago today, I stated in my inaugural address that we need to treat our school system for what it is- a way in which we make a permanent impact on the lives of our students each and every single day. We have held firm to this commitment, thanks in large part to the leadership of our Superintendent, the staff and administrators of the district, and the commitment of our teachers to our students.

While our schools have looked quite different this year, we are doing all we can to continue to provide the quality education that our students deserve. We were able to purchase enough laptop devices, so that for the first time, all two thousand five hundred (2,500) students in Gardner Public Schools have their own. This is something that our teachers will be able to utilize long after the Pandemic is over to help bring our curriculum fully into the 21st Century.

We partnered with Comcast to ensure that students who are on free or reduced lunch receive a special internet rate of just under \$10 per month. If any of our students were still having issues with internet access our staff visited their homes, during the height of the Pandemic, and made sure they had all of the internet connectivity equipment that they needed.

We waived the cost of preschool for all students in the district this year to remove any financial barriers that prevented kids from attending.

We installed new camera systems in the gymnasiums of the High School that have access to a software named "Huddle." This program allows us to live stream our high school sports games onto YouTube and record them for later playback. This not only gives parents the opportunities to watch their students play but can also be utilized by students looking to send footage to colleges for recruitment.

Gardner High School purchased new equipment with the help of the Commonwealth's Department of Education to develop an innovative pathway program. Beginning this semester, Gardner High School is offering a manufacturing trade to give our students the opportunity to have real world experiences as part of their curriculum to help prepare them for future success in whatever career path they choose.

Even with all of this, the largest accomplishment we had in our educational endeavors this year was breaking ground on our new elementary school. This is the first time in almost one hundred (100) years that the City has constructed an elementary school. This will provide our students with a modern learning environment for years to come, with students entering its classrooms in the Fall of 2022.

Therefore, I am proud to stand here today and say that due to the commitment, hard work, resilience, and dedication of so many in our community, the State of Our City is Strong!

As we stand now at the doorstep of a new year, we move forward at a steady pace ready to meet the challenges of the world with renewed vigor and build us up to a stronger tomorrow.

2021 will be a year of ambition and positive change for the City of Gardner.

Phase Two (2) of the Downtown Infrastructure Improvement Project will begin in the Spring on Parker Street with new water and sewer lines, sidewalks, crosswalks, and light posts.

Paving and utility line upgrades will be seen on areas of Parker, Connors, Central, Woodland, Pearl, Warrick, Wasa Streets, and others.

Our Downtown will also see upgrades utilizing Block Grant funding to renovate the old Maki Lot into an outdoor seating park.

Last month, my office was also able to work with the Massachusetts Office of Housing and Economic Development, along with the City Council to purchase the former Rome Block

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building at the corner of Main and Willow Streets, across from the Police Station. Our goal is to demolish the building in the Summer of this year. This will allow us to improve and widen the intersection and improve the entrance to our Downtown.

We have set aside \$230,000 to supplement the Chapter 90 funding that we receive from the Commonwealth in order to continue to invest in our infrastructure.

The Pleasant Street Bridge, recently renamed the Cpl. Lawrence Lukasevicius Memorial Bridge by the Commonwealth, is set to reopen this Spring after being closed to traffic for the past six (6) years.

Heywood Hospital will be breaking ground on their new surgical and outpatient wing expansion thanks to the work we were able to accomplish while partnering with the Hospital, the City Council, and our City Departments. This \$15 million investment in our City will allow the Hospital to construct new operating rooms for their facilities for the first time since the 1960s. This also allows Heywood to add additional jobs to their workforce, as the City's largest employer.

Timpany Crossroads will soon begin construction on their third building near the 99 Restaurant to house Starbucks, Bloc Cannabis Dispensary, Edward Jones, Perry Pools, and other new businesses still to be announced.

By the end of the year, all of our City Departments will be migrated onto our ViewPoint Online Permitting Software in order to ensure the full accessibility of City Hall 24-hours a day.

We continue to evaluate the construction of a new pavilion at the site of the current Greenwood Pool, as well as the expansion of the outdoor pool in order to allow us to host outdoor swim meets during the summer. However, we will evaluate the financial feasibility of accomplishing this goal with the financial needs of the City as a whole during the Pandemic.

The work at Greenwood Pool will also be done in conjunction with upgrades to the Monument Park area, the renovation of the old National Grid substation property into a waterfront park, and our complete streets project that will create new bike traffic lanes from Mount Wachusett Community College ("MWCC") through downtown all the way to Walmart on the Hubbardston border.

Working with the Gardner Redevelopment Authority, we have entered into talks with developers to revitalize the area of Rear Main Street by constructing a three (3) to five (5) story apartment building and event plaza to compliment the needs of our downtown.

To the members of the City Council and the School Committee-

I want to thank you for your cooperation over the course of the past 6 months since I have been in office. It is amazing what we have been able to accomplish together as a community over a short period of time. Our success is and will continue to be measured by what we are able to accomplish together.

Some have commented on how efficiently the Government of this City has operated over the course of the past year, and that to me is one of the best compliments we as public servants can receive. In an era where political office seems to be defined by character assassinations, deliberate misrepresentations, and one liners for cheap headlines, it is great to show that all of us are here for one reason- the good of the people of this Great City.

As we will soon enter a new election cycle for this City- the forty-eighth (48th) of our history- I look forward to us continuing to work together to move Gardner forward, rising above personal attacks, political bickering, and opposition for the sake of opposition, and do what is best for the people who have entrusted us with the offices we now hold.

To those who say that addressing our larger challenges is too ambitious and that we should put things on hold for a while, my response is that the citizens of this City deserve more than to simply wait and settle for less. We are seeing a large shift in people and businesses

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moving to our region, particularly with the increase in those who will continue working remotely after the Pandemic is over. Cities and towns in Central Massachusetts and across the Commonwealth are taking full advantage of this and are doing everything they can to attract these potential new residents and enterprises. They are not standing still, and neither will we. They are rebuilding their infrastructure, investing in their school systems, and rebranding themselves into vibrant communities. I cannot settle for, nor accept second place for the City of Gardner. It is my commitment and promise to this City that we will continue to do all we can to help market ourselves and revitalize our economy.

Yes, 2020 was a hard year, but it has shown us how resilient we are as a community. The further we stood from each other, the closer we came as a City. We looked adversity in the face, and we showed it exactly what we are made of. The strength that this community showed in the past year has set the stage for us, not only for the next year, but the next decade.

It is my firm belief that fueled by this strength, and guided by God's grace, that we will continue to do things beyond our wildest imagination.

God Bless you all, God Bless this great City of Gardner, and God Bless America.

Si desea leer la traducción de este discurso al español, se encuentra en la página web de la ciudad a la conclusión de esta transmisión. Gracias a mi madre, Martha, por su ayuda en traduciendo esta discurso.



Following the Address, Mayor Michael J. Nicholson recognized the following individuals:

PRESENTATIONS:

Over the course of a normal year, there are many opportunities in which we can recognize and celebrate the accomplishments of those in our community. However, as was the case for several other occasions this past year that simply was unable to happen.

While we do plan to have a small ceremony in March to recognize those who have played key roles in the City's Pandemic response, there are some employees and individuals that we are going to be recognizing this evening briefly before our award presentations.

PUBLIC RECOGNITIONS

Dr. James and Mrs. Mary Lou Faust celebrated their sixty-fifth (65th) Wedding Anniversary this past summer, both of whom have been tremendous community partners for the City for decades.

Jamie Floyd of the Blue Moon Diner and Patricia Bergstrom of the Velvet Goose for working together to provide over two hundred (200) free meals on Christmas Day to those who were in need and financially struggling.

Monty Tech opened their Veterinary Clinic to the public after seven (7) years of preparations and was recognized by Becker College that qualifying students who graduate from this program will be eligible for up to thirteen (13) college credits.

Just the morning, the Williams Rockwell Trustees voted to disburse 130,000 of grant funding to improve what our schools have to offer in the coming years.

The pandemic may be all we have been hearing about lately, and rightfully so, but there is still much to celebrate in our community.

EMPLOYEE RECOGNITIONS

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Several of our employees have gone above and beyond the call of duty during the past year. Before we begin our award presentations.

I would like to first recognize Officer John Lawrance of the Gardner Police Department who was recently awarded Officer of the Year by Chief Richard Braks and Chaplain David Cote who received the Meritorious Service Award from the Gardner Fire Department in recognition of his thirty (30) years of service as the Chaplain for the City's Fire and Police Departments.

I would also like to recognize the following employees who recently retired after serving the citizens of this community for many years.

- Denise Merriam, Administrative Assistant, Department of Public Works, 45 Years
- Susan Prentis, Financial Administrator, Treasurer/Tax Collector's Office, 27 Years
- Laurie Lyons, Emergency Communications Director, Police Department, 20 Years
- Richard Ares, Fire Chief, Fire Department, 48 Years
- Maryann Desmaris, Assistant City Auditor, Auditing Department, 18 Years
- Alan Agnelli, City Clerk, City Clerk's Office, 11 Years

AWARD PRESENTATIONS

Now onto the awards. Madam President would you please join me up here to present these.

When thinking of these awards that are being presented this evening, there are certain things that come to mind.

Did the person do something above and beyond the usual? What kind of an impact did they have on the community? The list goes on.

There are many people who over the past year have fit the definition that was just mentioned. The amount of people who stepped up in the face of a global pandemic like the world has never seen before and made a difference in this community is unbelievable.

However, today, we recognize individuals who the phrase "above and beyond" does little to describe the work that they have done for our great City in the past year.

These awards are not things we give out lightly and only give out to those individuals who are truly deserving of such an honor- and these individuals are truly deserving of recognition.

I think the best part of this is that none of these individuals know that they are receiving these recognitions this evening yet.

Citizens of the Year

The Citizen of the Year award is given out to individuals who, over the course of the past year, has made a difference in their community through their dedicated service to the place we call home and is the highest award the City gives out to those who live here.

Dianne LeBlanc

It is my honor this evening to present the Citizen of the Year award to an individual who over the course of the past year, has helped to brighten up this community- both through her work cleaning up our neighborhoods and through the colors of the clothing she wears while doing it.

Known by her nickname, "Neon," Dianne LeBlanc has donated thousands of hours of her own time to help pick up litter in our City to set an example for others to follow. Her initial group, The Gardner Pride Litter Angels, has transformed into Keep Gardner Beautiful. A chapter of the Keep Massachusetts Beautiful organization, whose sole



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purpose is to help keep our communities clean and care for the earth that we all share as our home.

Those who have worked with Dianne have all agreed that her passion and dedication are unmatched.

James Kraskouskas, owner of Anthony's Liquor Mart described his interactions with Dianne as follows:

I first met Diane via her Facebook Site Keep Gardner Beautiful. We agreed to meet and discuss the problem of litter in Gardner, specifically the problem with the large number of miniature liquor bottles discarded in the City.

She impressed me with her sincere passion for keeping Gardner beautiful. I knew she would be a wonderful partner with whom to work. Those of us in the liquor industry understand the litter problem surrounding miniature bottles, yet no one had a solution.

I offered Diane the challenge to organize a nip hunt in Gardner with a bounty of five cents for each nip collected. She was so overwhelmed by my offer she cried in my office. This was the first time she would get some serious recognition for her hard work, as well as to be able to fund her efforts.

Diane met the challenge and in one day her team collected almost 50,000 nips in Gardner. We plan to make this an annual event and will do it again this spring.

A most interesting story she related to me was how one day she was determined to clean the entire Rotary at Exit 23 off of Rte 2. Starting in the morning she cleaned the inside circle and then went up and down each exit clearing both sides. When darkness fell she was working on the final exit when her husband made her quit. She told me she was discouraged that she could not finish the job in one day...amazing.

From Lauren Saunders, our Director of Public Health stated:

It has been a pleasure of ours to be able to work with Dianne on various clean up days and community events. We love chatting with Dianne about her ideas. She has a drive to beautify the community and we have tried to do whatever we can to assist her in all her amazing work. Just by talking with Dianne for minutes you can see her love for this community and her commitment to keep the city clean and beautiful. She has so much pride in the City and her enthusiasm is contagious. Not only has the office partnered with her on events but she has even motivated me to spend a Saturday joining her in picking up litter. And it felt great! I would encourage anyone interested in beautifying this community to meet Dianne and get involved with Keep Gardner Beautiful!

Lastly, from Mr. Neil Rhein, Founder and Executive Director of Keep Massachusetts Beautiful had the following to say about Dianne:

Dianne Leblanc is a true environmental and community improvement hero. Her tireless efforts to clean up and green up the City of Gardner deserve to be recognized. Over the past several years, Dianne has personally cleaned up and removed tons of litter from the greater Gardner landscape. But she has also pushed past her own comfort zone and organized numerous community cleanups. She has rallied others in the community to her cause. Most recently, she spearheaded the Great Gardner Litter Cleanup and Nip Hunt, during which Keep Gardner Beautiful collected and removed more than 50,000 littered nip bottles, along with tons of other types of litter. Through it all, Dianne keeps a positive attitude and a smile on her face, inspiring others along the way. I am so proud to learn that Dianne has been named Gardner Citizen of the Year—I can't think of a more deserving person!



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These statements are just from a few people that have interacted with Dianne. I am proud to call her my friend but I am even more proud to be able to thank her in this special way.

Please join me in congratulating the first of our Citizen of the Year Award recipients for 2020- Mrs. Dianne "Neon" LeBlanc.

Neon can you please join Lizzy and I up here?

Then Mayor Michael J. Nicholson and Council President Elizabeth Kazinskas presented official citation to Mrs. Dianne LeBlanc which stated:

The Citizen of the Year Award Is Hereby Presented to Dianne "Neon" LeBlanc In Recognition of her dedicated service to the residents of the City of Gardner during the 2020 Calendar Year.

WHEREAS, Mrs. Dianne LeBlanc and her husband Donald have been dedicated residents of the City of Gardner, and;

WHEREAS, Mrs. Dianne LeBlanc founded the Gardner Pride Litter Angels in 2016 as a means to help show others how beautifying your community and picking up trash one step at a time helps build hometown pride for the place you live, and;

WHEREAS, The Gardner Pride Litter Angels transformed into the Keep Gardner Beautiful Chapter of the Keep America Beautiful organization in order to increase the resources available to help in Mrs. Dianne LeBlanc's efforts to keep the City clean, and;

WHEREAS, Mrs. Dianne LeBlanc has organized multiple City-wide clean up days in order to help spread awareness for the importance of caring for this one earth that we all share, and;

WHEREAS, Mrs. Dianne LeBlanc organized a City-wide Clean Up that resulted in the collection of almost 50,000 nip bottles, 56,000 bottles and cans, and countless bags of trash being removed from our streets in October of 2020, and;

WHEREAS, Mrs. Dianne LeBlanc has donated thousands of hours of her own time and energy to helping make our city a better and cleaner place to live, and;

WHEREAS, While earning her nickname, "Neon," from the bright clothing she wears while cleaning the City, she has become a friend to all and an inspiration to many, now;

THEREFORE, I, Michael J. Nicholson, serving as the 20 th Mayor of the City of Gardner, and I, Elizabeth J. Kazinskas, serving as the 26 th President of the City Council, by the authority granted to us as part of our duly elected offices, do hereby award Mrs. Dianne "Neon" LeBlanc with the 2020 Citizen of the Year Award.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, We have hereunto set our hand this Thirteenth day of January, in the year of our Lord two thousand twenty-one, of the Independence of the United States two hundred and forty-fifth, of the foundation of the Town of Gardner two hundred thirty fifth, our ninety-seventh as a City.

*/s/ Michael J. Nicholson
Mayor, City of Gardner*

*/s/ Elizabeth J. Kazinskas
President, Gardner City Council*

Congratulations Diannel!

Rachel Stephano

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The next recipient of the Citizen of the Year Award has been deserving of recognition for quite some time. She is one of the most dedicated, loyal, and hard working individuals that this City is lucky to have.

She has truly personified what it means to give back to the community you've grown up in and to make a difference. And while we tried to keep all of the awards that are being given out this evening a secret, this one has been the hardest to keep.

Rachel Stephano has served as the Executive Assistant in the Mayor's Office since December of 2015. During her tenure with the City, she has played an integral role in ensuring that the day to day operations of the Office are done in an efficient and effective manner.

Over the course of the past year, Rachel played a vital role in the transitions that took place between the four (4) individuals who held the position of Mayor. She also played an integral part in ensuring the members of the public remained informed as new information regarding the COVID-19 Pandemic was being released.

She did all this while also dealing with the loss of her mother in May of 2020 and struggling with the effects of Parkinson's Disease.

When speaking of Rachel, Former Mayor Mark Hawke stated:

"Rachel is the first one to lend a hand to all of the other offices in City Hall and possesses the skills and grace to deal with the visitors of City Hall. She has always been a strength to the Mayor's Office and the City is lucky to have her."

Councilor James Walsh, Acting Mayor from January to March of 2020 stated:

"Rachel is a unique blend of intelligence, personality, dedication, charm, skill, resilience and loyalty. There are certain people in City Government without whose services the entire operation would come to a screeching halt. Rachel is one of them. Congratulations!"

And From Council President Kazinskas who served as Acting Mayor from March to July 2020:

"Rachel is genuinely devoted to continuously raising the level of service excellence provided by the Mayor's Office. She is smart, strong and supportive. Her attention to detail, willingness to go above and beyond and solid work ethic is outstanding and exceptional. Congratulations, Rachel!"

As the fourth person to sit in the corner office and work with Rachel, as a former co-worker, and as a former classmate of her youngest son Adam while at Holy Rosary School, I can say first hand that Rachel Stephano is one of a kind. The difficulties that came with the past year have not hindered her ability to service this City, and I could not be prouder to honor her in this way.

Please join me in congratulating Rachel Jane Stephano on receiving the Citizen of the Year Award for 2020.

Rachel would you please join us up here?

Congratulations Rachel!

Then Mayor Michael J. Nicholson and Council President Elizabeth Kazinskas presented official citation to Ms. Rachel Jane Stephano which stated:



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The Citizen of the Year Award Is Hereby Presented to Rachel Jane Stephano In Recognition of her dedicated service to the residents of the City of Gardner during the 2020 Calendar Year.

WHEREAS, Ms. Rachel Jane Stephano, daughter of the late Raymond J. and Aline A. (Arsenault) Rafalski, has been a lifelong resident of the City of Gardner, and;

WHEREAS, Ms. Rachel Jane Stephano has served as the Executive Assistant to the Mayor's Office in the City of Gardner since December 22, 2014, and;

WHEREAS, Throughout 2020, Ms. Rachel Jane Stephano provided a valuable foundation during the transitions that took place in the City's Executive Department for the four individuals who held the position of Mayor, and;

WHEREAS, Mayor Mark P. Hawke, Acting Mayor James M. Walsh, Acting Mayor Elizabeth J. Kazinskas, and Mayor Michael J. Nicholson have all lauded Ms. Stephano's work in her position as being invaluable to the proper operations of the City's Executive Department, and;

WHEREAS, Ms. Rachel Jane Stephano has been a valiant warrior against the effects of Parkinson's disease since her diagnosis in July of 2019, and;

WHEREAS, During 2020, Ms. Rachel Jane Stephano celebrated the highest of highs and the lowest of lows with the birth of her granddaughter, Makenzie, and the loss of her mother, Aline, and;

WHEREAS, 2021 will be a year of great personal fulfillment and happiness for Ms. Rachel Jane Stephano with the upcoming wedding to her beloved fiancé, Tom Roberts, and;

WHEREAS, Ms. Rachel Jane Stephano has provided a strong example of perseverance, strength, and the important of giving back to your community to her children, Hope, Joshua, and Adam, and her grandchildren Grant and Makenzie, now;

THEREFORE, I, Michael J. Nicholson, serving as the 20 th Mayor of the City of Gardner, and I, Elizabeth J. Kazinskas, serving as the 26 th President of the City Council, by the authority granted to us as part of our duly elected offices, do hereby award Ms. Rachel Jane Stephano with the 2020 Citizen of the Year Award.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, We have hereunto set our hand this Thirteenth day of January, in the year of our Lord two thousand twenty-one, of the Independence of the United States two hundred and forty-fifth, of the foundation of the Town of Gardner two hundred thirty fifth, our ninety-seventh as a City.

*/s/ Michael J. Nicholson
Mayor, City of Gardner*

*/s/ Elizabeth J. Kazinskas
President, Gardner City Council*

Now unlike the other recipients this evening, who we are asking to please stick around here and join us out in the hallway afterward for pictures, we're going to ask you to go down to the Zoning Room in the Annex. Your family is all down there waiting to celebrate with you.

Honorary Citizenship

The highest award that nations, states, and municipalities can give out to those who are not residents of their specific locations is honorary citizenship. This is an award that the City of Gardner has never given out before in our history.

The United States Congress has awarded honorary citizenship to seven (7) individuals over the course of our history, including the Marqui de Lafayette, Winston Churchill, Casimir Pulaski, and Mother Teresa. Singer James Brown was given honorary

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citizenship in the State of Alabama, and closer to home, The Town of Rutland granted honorary citizenship to Red Sox player David Ortiz in 2003.

The two individuals who are receiving this award this evening have made an impact on this community that will be experienced for generations to come- and they are Dr. Keshav Parthasarathy and Dr. Vinod Mohan of Heywood Hospital.

Dr. Keshav Parthasarathy

Dr. Keshav Parthasarathy (commonly referred to as Dr. KP) has been employed by Heywood Hospital since 2017 as the hospital's only Intensivist. Dr. KP's job is to care for a patient when they reach the most critical stage in order to determine the best course of action to take medically in order to find a way to restore the patient to health. His role with Heywood Hospital has grown exponentially since the COVID-19 pandemic began as the main doctor overseeing operations in the Hospital's ICU for COVID-19 Patients. It was his job to come up with all medical treatments and detection measures when the information regarding treatment and testing was still being developed. Due to his work, 77 patients who were admitted to the ICU at Heywood due to complications from COVID-19 have been able to be released and continue with their lives.

Dr. Vinod Mohan

Dr. Vinod Mohan, Infectious Disease Specialist – Honorary Citizenship of The City of Gardner

Dr. Vinod Mohan serves as the Infectious Disease Specialist for Heywood Hospital. It has been his job to oversee the planning of Heywood's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This led to everything from working to create negative air pressure rooms in the ICU, obtaining PPE for staff, including sewing shower curtains into medical gowns at one point when supplies ran low, and deciding what medications to provide those who have tested positive for COVID-19.

Those who have worked with these individuals also agree that these doctors are truly a class of their own. Let's hear what some of them have to say:

My name is Jeannie Sanborn and I am a nurse. I have worked at Heywood going into my 45th year. I have had the pleasure of working with KP and Vinod in my role as an Infection Preventionist.

KP is Heywood's first ICU intensivist caring for our sickest patients in our Intensive Care Unit. Vinod is Heywood's first dedicated Infectious Disease physician working three days a week at Heywood seeing our inpatients and outpatients each Tuesday in the Infectious Disease Clinic.

This past year was like no other with the challenges that COVID-19 brought. I worked alongside these two brilliant immigrant physicians as they put their lives on the line daily, caring for our patients and our community. I have watched in awe their display of clinical expertise, knowledge and heartfelt compassionate care given to our patients and their families. Their dedication, commitment and motivation to make a difference is unparalleled. It has been such a gift to work with them. The admiration and respect for these two physicians is felt by the entire healthcare team. They have inspired all of us to work harder and together in concert to achieve a common goal.

KP and Vinod's leadership continues to guide us through this public health crisis. Heywood Healthcare and our community are blessed to have them on the Medical Staff. I am grateful for the privilege of working with these two colleagues and being a part of this great Heywood team that has made and continues to make a difference in our community.

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I cannot think of anyone more fitting to garner as "Honorary Citizens" than Dr. Keshav Parthasarathy and Dr. Vinod Mohan. It is well-deserved. Congratulations to them both!!

And these next two (2) letters, I think speak for themselves.

Thanks Doctor for doing your best to save our son. May our God keep you and your family safe and all of your family and your Heywood family!! Thanks from the bottom of our Hearts. – Stanley and Maggie Baczewski

And to read a little bit from a letter written by their son Phillip that I have here as well:

As scary as it was, I knew I was in good hands. I had total faith in this stranger that was going to save my life. Thanks to you. I was able to watch Gabriel graduate high school and go to college. I was able to watch Manny play baseball. I've been able to teach Savannah how to drive. I've been able to explore new things with Robbie. And Tara and I were able to get married this year.

These Doctors are heroes in every sense of the word and these two (2) individuals deserve the thanks and recognition of this community more than words can describe in caring for our most vulnerable in their most concerning moments.

It gives me great pride to name Dr. Keshav Parthasarathy and Dr. Vinod Mohan honorary citizens of the City of Gardner.

Doctors can you please join us at the podium?

That concludes the events of this evening. I want to thank you all again for your participation in this year's broadcast.

Then Mayor Michael J. Nicholson and Council President Elizabeth J. Kazinskas presented official proclamations to Doctor Keshav Parthasarathy which stated:

Honorary Citizenship of the City of Gardner Is Hereby Bestowed Upon Doctor Keshav Parthasarathy and Doctor Vinod Mohan, In Recognition of his dedicated service to the residents of the City of Gardner during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

WHEREAS, The residents of the City of Gardner, are grateful to Doctor Parthasarathy for his service to the community during the COVID-19 Pandemic, where he faced continual danger without hesitation for the betterment, health, and safety of his patients and the community, and;

WHEREAS, Doctor Kashav Parthasarthy joined the staff at Henry Heywood Memorial Hospital in 2017, and and Doctor Vinod Mohan joined the Heywood Hospital team as an Infectious Disease Specialist in 2019, and;

WHEREAS, Thanks to the work of Doctor Keshav Parthasarthy and Doctor Vinod Mohan, over 75 COVID-19 patients have been able to be released from Heywood Hospital, and;

WHEREAS, The COVID-19 Pandemic is still strong in our region and the work of Doctor Keshav Parthasarthy continues to provide lifesaving care to those who contract this virus, and;

WHEREAS, The work of Doctor Keshav Parthasarthy will be felt by this community for generations to come by the memories and experiences that the patients of Doctor Keshav Parthasarthy will experience thanks to his work in saving their lives and giving them a new chance to be with their families, now;

THEREFORE, I, Michael J. Nicholson, serving as the 20 th Mayor of the City of Gardner, and I, Elizabeth J. Kazinskas, serving as the 26 th President of the City Council, by the authority granted to us as part of our duly elected offices, do hereby confer Honorary Citizenship of the City of Gardner upon Dr. Keshav Parthasarthy in recognition of the permanent impact he has made on this community.



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BE IT HEREBY KNOWN, that Doctor Keshav Parthasarthy and Doctor Vinod Mohan receive this designation in an honorary and ceremonial manner and while all rights and privileges of full citizenship are conferred only by the Federal Government, this City will forever see Doctor Keshav Parthasarthy and Doctor Vinod Mohan as one of its most dedicated, lauded, and honorable sons.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, We have hereunto set our hand this Thirteenth day of January, in the year of our Lord two thousand twenty-one, of the Independence of the United States two hundred and forty-fifth, of the foundation of the Town of Gardner two hundred thirty fifth, our ninety-seventh as a City.

*/s/ Michael J. Nicholson
Mayor, City of Gardner*

*/s/ Elizabeth J. Kazinskas
President, Gardner City Council*

Then Mayor Michael J. Nicholson presented official proclamations to Doctor Vinod Mohan which stated:

Honorary Citizenship of the City of Gardner Is Hereby Bestowed Upon Doctor Keshav Parthasarthy and Doctor Vinod Mohan, In Recognition of his dedicated service to the residents of the City of Gardner during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

WHEREAS, The residents of the City of Gardner, are grateful to Doctor Parthasarthy for his service to the community during the COVID-19 Pandemic, where he faced continual danger without hesitation for the betterment, health, and safety of his patients and the community, and;

WHEREAS, Doctor Kashav Parthasarthy joined the staff at Henry Heywood Memorial Hospital in 2017, and and Doctor Vinod Mohan joined the Heywood Hospital team as an Infectious Disease Specialist in 2019, and;

WHEREAS, Thanks to the work of Doctor Keshav Parthasarthy and Doctor Vinod Mohan, over 75 COVID-19 patients have been able to be released from Heywood Hospital, and;

WHEREAS, The COVID-19 Pandemic is still strong in our region and the work of Doctor Keshav Parthasarthy continues to provide lifesaving care to those who contract this virus, and;

WHEREAS, The work of Doctor Keshav Parthasarthy will be felt by this community for generations to come by the memories and experiences that the patients of Doctor Keshav Parthasarthy will experience thanks to his work in saving their lives and giving them a new chance to be with their families, now;

THEREFORE, I, Michael J. Nicholson, serving as the 20 th Mayor of the City of Gardner, and I, Elizabeth J. Kazinskas, serving as the 26 th President of the City Council, by the authority granted to us as part of our duly elected offices, do hereby confer Honorary Citizenship of the City of Gardner upon Dr. Keshav Parthasarthy in recognition of the permanent impact he has made on this community.

BE IT HEREBY KNOWN, that Doctor Keshav Parthasarthy and Doctor Vinod Mohan receive this designation in an honorary and ceremonial manner and while all rights and privileges of full citizenship are conferred only by the Federal Government, this City will forever see Doctor Keshav Parthasarthy and Doctor Vinod Mohan as one of its most dedicated, lauded, and honorable sons.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, We have hereunto set our hand this Thirteenth day of January, in the year of our Lord two thousand twenty-one, of the Independence of the United States two hundred and forty-fifth, of the foundation of the Town of Gardner two hundred thirty fifth, our ninety-seventh as a City.

*/s/ Michael J. Nicholson
Mayor, City of Gardner*



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*/s/ Elizabeth J. Kazinskas
President, Gardner City Council*

As I end all of our weekly Mayor's Update videos,

Please continue to look out for yourselves and others, keep track of your own mental and physical health during these trying times by finding new ways to relax and get your mind off of the craziness of the world. I look forward to speaking with you all soon, but until then, have a good evening. Thank you.

Then concluded the events of the Official Report on the State of the City by Mayor Michael J. Nicholson.

Official Report on the State of the City:


The Honorable Michael J. Nicholson
20th Mayor of the City of Gardner

Submitted through the City Clerk's Office to the Honorable Members of the City Council:
Wednesday, January 13, 2021