

City of Gardner  
2014 State of the City  
Mayor Mark Hawke

Hello and thank you for tuning into the State of the City Address. My name is Mark Hawke and I'm fortunate enough to be the Mayor of the City of Gardner.

This is the second year that we are taping this address for airing over Gardner Educational TV, our local cable access channel. Of course transcripts will be given to the Council, the media and placed on the City's website as has been done in the past. I truly want to try and reach as many people as possible and the feedback from airing this address on Gardner Educational TV last year was tremendous.

I looked back at my Inaugural address from the beginning of 2014 and in it I continually mentioned that a focus needs to be on our school system. I spoke of the need to continue to improve our financial practices and our bond rating. I reminded all of us that in order to reduce property taxes we need a revenue sharing plan with the Commonwealth. I spoke of the desperate need for Chapter 90 funds, also known as paving money, and I asked that we all try to be positive ambassadors of our great City.

Some of these things have come to fruition and some are still a work in process.

I'd like to take you on a brief tour of 2014 to recap some of the highlights and noteworthy events. In order to help define our course going forward, I believe we must be sure we know where we've been.

Early in 2014 the long-closed and warehoused Perry Auditorium experienced a burst pipe ruining the contents and a majority of the interior ceiling, walls and floors. We have been able to restore the majority of the structure, but fell short of completion when former Governor Patrick cut the funding for the heating system that was secured by Senators Brewer and Flanagan and Representative Zlotnik. While the building is useable, it is very cold and we will need to continue to look for funding to complete this project which is estimated to cost about \$325,000.

The City's bond rating was once again increased, showing that we are financially on the right track. As we've seen in 2014, at any given moment we could be subjected to mid-year funding cuts by the Commonwealth. It is imperative that we maintain our bond rating and increase our stabilization fund.

We announced a grant to build a Spray Park on the grounds of Greenwood Pool which will be completed in the spring of 2015. We've also invested in the outdoor pool by rehabilitating the buildings and resurfacing the entire outdoor pool and its mechanics.

We completed a multi-year project to rehabilitate all of the City's playgrounds culminating with a large community-wide volunteer effort to assist Alternatives Inc. in the rehabilitation of Ovila Case's Up Down All Around Fantasy Playground. The DPW also worked in conjunction with the School Department to raise the Stedman Ball field by almost 3 feet in order to make it level. The Gardner High School Softball team deserves a decent ball field and thanks to this collaborative effort, they will have one.

The School Department sold an original Norman Rockwell painting for \$1.9 million with the intent to establish an educational fund for the benefit of the Gardner Public Schools. The School Committee's intent was, and is, to utilize these funds to supplement, not supplant, funding for our school system and our educators.

In the summer of 2014 the City unveiled two solar parks generating more than 3.5 megawatts of power. The City is purchasing almost all of its electricity from one of these parks, is receiving a land lease payment from one and a Payment In Lieu of Taxes from both parks.

The City hosted, what may be one of the last, Fox 25 Zip Trips which cast us in an incredibly positive light and was a marketer's dream come true for the City.

We announced a major investment in some blighted properties next to our new police station. Cumberland Farms will be making a substantial investment in a new facility here. Numerous other re-capitalizations have occurred including the new and expanded Timpany Shell Station. Heywood Wakefield Phase IV is under construction and will amount to a more than \$10 million investment in the City. Planet Fitness opened and New England Peptide announced a major expansion which is currently under construction.

The City is also working on designing a new skate park and we are being assisted by numerous youths who are taking a very active role as collaborators. They are taking ownership of this project and have submitted multiple ideas for designs and have attended a public meeting to offer their input.

The City is making headway on our inventory of vacant buildings and has seen several successes through our cooperative agreement with the Attorney General's Receivership Program. We all want nice neighborhoods and an aesthetically pleasing City, and this program is helping us to achieve that goal.

We've accomplished much in 2014, but to paraphrase Robert Frost, we still have miles to go before we sleep.

Downtown Gardner is still straddled with two major eyesores, the Maki Building and the old Movie Theatre. It may require a major investment on the City's part to correct these issues as

there seems to be little interest from the private sector in either of these buildings. We will need to find partners to work with us on the development and/or demolition of both of these buildings. Our downtown has more stores, offices and offerings than the Mall at Whitney Field. However, these two monstrosities cast a shadow upon everything else in the downtown, and must go.

With the new Police Station soon to be completed and the Cumberland Farms development about to kick off, we will have one remaining section of the Rear Main Street area with which to deal. This has been a decade long project which will require a collaborative effort between the Redevelopment Authority and the City to complete. We will work to tie together the two ends of Derby Drive and finally give these now vacant parcels an actual street address. We will need to utilize Block Grant funding to assist us with the completion of this project. This will likely be a multi-year project and we need to begin the process now.

We are still enthusiastically working with the Town of Athol to realize a regional dispatch center. This will provide an economy of scale savings while setting us up for future regional projects in the not too distant future. It does not make sense that every community in Massachusetts act as if it is an island unto itself. We need to continue regional collaborations with our neighbors in order to create a more cost-efficient local government. Change is constant and we cannot rely on the way we've always done things.

We will also need to continue the conversation with the Baker-Polito Administration on how a program like Gateway Cities leaves communities, like Gardner, out in the cold despite a demonstrated and desperate need. I am positive we will see some changes in how that program is handled under this new administration.

Governor Baker and Lt. Governor Polito are no stranger to the City of Gardner. They have both visited our City on numerous occasions. As many of you know I was asked to serve on the Governor's Transition Team. This was a great honor and a great opportunity to showcase how Boston-centric decisions affect Gardner and what can be changed so that the effect will be a positive one. We have a seat at the table; now let's use that seat to discuss Gardner's points and issues.

The Gardner Public Schools have a tremendous opportunity in front of them. There is an opportunity to propel our school system to the next level. The schools have the opportunity to benefit from the establishment of a Fund that could be utilized for everyone in the school system from the teachers to the students. The School Committee and I want to make the Gardner Public Schools one of the best in the Commonwealth. However, we always run into funding problems. Wouldn't it be nice to be able to seek assistance from a Fund that is dedicated solely to the Gardner Public Schools? Wouldn't it be nice to have our school system be noted as one of the best in the area? We can do this. We just need to work together.

The School Committee unanimously endorsed a Home Rule Petition that would establish such a fund with the proceeds from the sale of the Rockwell painting. However, the City Council chose

to make significant changes that would restrict the use of the funds to the Arts, and nothing else. While I understand the rationale, this is not in the best interest of the Gardner Public Schools as a whole. About 60% of our students are eligible for reduced or free lunch. Our test scores are not the highest in the state or even in the area. Our school Administrators need these funds in order to help increase our test scores. Our teachers need these funds in order to better educate our school children for tomorrow's workforce and college. Our students need those funds in order to be successful in school and in life.

The City Charter, was written during Woodrow Wilson's administration and went into effect during Warren Harding's administration. To put this in better context, the document that governs the way the City of Gardner operates was written prior to the establishment of the USSR. A lot has changed since then and our governing document needs to be updated.

The review of the City Charter began January 5, 2012 with a communication to the Council regarding a meeting the then City Council President and I had with a consultant.

A pre-review committee was established by the City Council. That pre-review committee urged that a full review of the Charter be performed.

A Charter Review Committee was then formed. In March of 2014 the Charter Review Committee submitted their proposed document to the City Council.

After 6 months of delays, the City Council voted to send the Charter to the City Solicitor for, yet another, review.

The incessant delays must cease. The Charter is the governing document of our City which contains multiple sections that we ignore because it does not comply with Massachusetts General Laws. This journey has taken over three years. Let 2015 be the year we actually update our nearly century old governing document and send it to the citizens of Gardner for approval.

The Gardner Fire Department has worked with experts from the UMass Boston Collins Center for Performance Management to research the establishment of a Fire Department run ambulance service. Our Firefighters are on the scene of emergencies now, the establishment of an ambulance within the Fire Department would simply allow them to take a difference vehicle to the scene and receive remuneration from the insurance companies. This practice is done by nearly 90% of the communities in Worcester County. It is done because it allows for additional staffing of Fire Departments at no additional cost to the tax payer. In fact, the revenue received could offset certain expenses that are currently being borne by the City's taxpayers. The numbers from the analysis show conclusively that this will work in the City of Gardner and will have a positive effect on the City's bottom line. It would allow us to offer our citizens a better service while reducing our expenses. When the funding mechanism is developed and presented, I hope that our Firefighters will receive the backing and support they deserve.

A lot of my job is about developing relationships and raising the awareness of Gardner's concerns and issues to higher authorities. On the state and federal level I have been able to achieve this. I have been able to meet, discuss and work with Senator's Warren and Markey and Congresswoman Tsongas. Senator Flanagan and Representative Zlotnik have proven themselves valuable partners on multiple occasions. I don't always agree with all of these elected officials, however, we have always been able to put aside any partisan differences in order to come together to work for the City of Gardner and for that, I thank them. Working collaboratively, we have been able to move the City forward.

In closing, I have been fortunate enough to meet a lot of new friends during my tenure as Mayor and enhance relationships with some old friends. Two of the relationships I developed over the years were with Robert Hubbard and Cleo Monette. In 2014 the City of Gardner lost these two friends, supporters, advocates, believers and longtime workers. Rob helped shape and grow the City for decades as the City's Community Development and Planning Director and Executive Director of the Redevelopment Authority. Cleo was a longtime City Councilor, served on the Board, and was past President, of the Chamber of Commerce and Community Development Corporation as well as serving on the Boards of GAAHMA, GVNA and GRA. He also served on the Charter Review Committee. These two individuals were inspirations, mentors, friends and Rob was the guy that hired me back in 2001. We know Rob and Cleo are still watching over the City of Gardner and guiding us, because we still have miles to go before we sleep.

Thank you for tuning in and for your positive support of the City of Gardner.