

364 days ago, I stood before you and gave my inaugural address. In it, I outlined thoughts, ideas and goals for the coming year. Although we did not know it then, we are now told that at that time we were 4 months into a recession.

This past year has had its share of challenges:

We've tolerated the closing of Pine Street during a partial collapse of the Heywood Wakefield III building;

We've struggled to maintain services as we faced a \$1.2 Million budget shortfall;

We've watched as H&R 1871, the worlds largest manufacturer of single-shot shotguns, closed its Gardner doors and was relocated to New York;

We've anguished at the closing of the iconic Nichols & Stone Company, the longest continually operated furniture manufacturer in the country, effectively closing a long and storied chapter in Gardner's history;

We've witnessed the City's first Amber Alert and the superior work of the police department in bringing that crisis to a successful resolution;

We've suffered through an ice storm the likes of which no one has seen in decades;

and we've lost beloved members of our City family.

These were a few of the challenging situations we faced during the past year.

However, our accomplishments, I feel, outshine our hardships.

In order to win the battle over vacant and abandoned buildings we've enacted an ordinance creating a registration system and setting up fines and penalties for owners of abandoned and vacant buildings.

With regard to our most infamous vacant and abandoned building, the Maki Block, I directed the City Treasurer to start the tax title process on the property almost one year ago. Along with the back taxes piling up, so are the fines and penalties for not registering this blighted property. For too long the owner of this building has neglected his duties.

In light of the economic turndown and foreclosure crisis, we are organizing a Buy Gardner Now program. This program will be modeled after the Buy Worcester Now program which partners Banks, Real Estate agents, Lawyers and other realty related professionals in order to offer discounts for purchasing foreclosed properties. This type of program will work to reduce the number of vacant and foreclosed properties within our City.

We've also seen a new owner take over the Goodnow building. The City has worked with this developer to ensure we do everything within our power to have this building put back to use as quickly as possible.

Phase I of the Senior Center transition is completed with the addition of a new elevator. Phase II will begin shortly. By the end of the year the transition from a former social club to an appropriately laid out Senior Center will be complete.

We've established the position of Economic Development Coordinator whose salary is being financed through grants from the Gardner Redevelopment Authority and the Greater Gardner Industrial Foundation. This position has made key contacts and positioned Gardner well so we may move forward rapidly when the economic recession ebbs.

We've moved Gardner forward by having a Financial Management Review completed. This review has given us the opinion of an independent authority on changes we may consider to improve our structure and supply better services to the residents of Gardner.

We've updated the City's website to include information from Meeting Minutes and Agendas to various reports and plans as well as a City Calendar with public meetings and events listed.

We've had Governor Patrick and Lt. Governor Murray visit Gardner several times. We've also had high ranking officials such as Secretary O'Connell of the Executive Office of Housing & Economic Development, Commissioner Sullivan of the Department of Conservation & Recreation, Dr. Windham-Bannister of the Massachusetts Life Sciences Center, Undersecretary Bialecki of the Department of Business Development, and Commissioner Burt of the Department of Environmental Protection, among many others, visit Gardner and take note of what we have and what we need.

We worked with a local manufacturer to offer a tax incentive financing plan which helped them undertake a \$2 million expansion project and employ more Gardnerites.

We obtained State approval for 3 priority development sites along with Technical Assistance funding to implement expedited permitting within the City.

We were finally able to turn over a portion of the L&Z Kamaan land to the Gardner Little League. I expect to see construction during the summer and I'm hoping for a game next summer.

We've seen a new restaurant open in the downtown complimenting an already fine establishment and offering another choice for dining within Gardner.

We were able to work with elected and appointed officials at all levels of government to get H&R employees trade certified by the Federal Government. This certification allows the displaced workers access to extended benefits, re-training and educational opportunities of which they would otherwise not have been able to take advantage.

My wife gave birth to our first child, and

We've also been able to repair and re-open Sullivan's Stairs. Hallelujah.

Gardner, as I have always said and I think all of you will agree, is a fantastic community. We have the amenities of a large City, but the feel of a small town. Gardnerites young and old have a strong sense of pride and community spirit.

This community spirit certainly showed through with the recent events of the ice storm. Local business owners were traveling from house to house to install generators, if only for a few hours, in order to heat up the home and prevent pipes from freezing and then moving on to the next home.

Firemen worked for days straight responding to continuous alarm calls.

Policemen patrolled neighborhoods diligently keeping an eye on evacuated homes and keeping the peace in a difficult situation.

Community Emergency Response Team members worked voluntarily for days with little to no sleep.

School Administrators worked around the clock shifts at the Middle School shelter and tended to the needs of our citizenry.

Neighbors checked on neighbors and invited friends and strangers in to their homes to stay warm if they had heat.

National Guardsmen and women from across the state were deployed to Gardner and assisted with the cleanup of debris and the staffing, maintaining and security for our shelters.

There are literally hundreds of people to thank and I would be remiss if I tried to name them all now. Instead, on behalf of the City of Gardner, Thank You to all who assisted during the ice storm and its aftermath.

Moving forward into 2009 we are faced with more known challenges, and no doubt, a bevy of unknown challenges. We will once again be confronted with a smaller budget due to sizable reductions in local aid from the State. We will know in the next few weeks if we will also face 9C, or mid-year, cuts.

Our challenges will not only be economic, but they will be structural as well. Last year I requested we consider various consolidations within our structure. I will ask again that we revisit these consolidations in order to streamline the delivery of services.

We must work together through the art of compromise, which is essential in a democracy. To quote my father “I don’t know it all, you don’t know it all. But together, through public discussion, we can have a better idea of what is best for all of us.” Through compromise, through discussions, I am positive we will come to a solution that is best for all of us.

Among our list of to-do’s is the continued revitalization of neighborhoods through the use of Community Development Block Grant funding, the expansion of our commercial and industrial tax base particularly in the S. Bent & Nichols & Stone complexes, the creation of jobs within our City, the increase of the City’s fiscal stability and the continued deliverance of core City Services.

While this past year was filled with difficulties, our progress was greater than our setbacks. Some of our educational scores went up, our crime and accident rates went down. Our library has and will remain open, forlorn factory sites are being remediated, and a new downtown restaurant opened.

We know we have a long way to go, but I can report to you tonight that while our problems endure, our path is correct, our work goes on, and the State of our city is stronger tonight than it ever has been.

Thank you and God Bless.