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From the desk of Mayor Hawke

Welcome to another edition of the "Mayor's Newsletter". I hope you will find the stories below informative and interesting. Please forward this newsletter to anyone you think might be interested in receiving it. [Click here](#) to sign up to receive this newsletter. As always, if you have any questions, comments or concerns, please feel free to call or e-mail me.

E-Government with Distinction Award

You are among the first to hear. The City of Gardner's website will be awarded an E-Government with Distinction honor at a ceremony at the State House on Thursday, March 19. According to Common Cause, the awarding authority (www.CommonCause.org), Gardner's website has gone from "not even on the map" to being awarded the prestigious E-Government with Distinction award.

71 communities in the State will receive an E-Government award and only 46 of those 71 communities will be receiving the E-Government with distinction award. In order to qualify for an E-Government Award, the town or city must post their governing body's agenda and minutes, budget information, general by-laws, and, if applicable, their town meeting warrant and results. In order to achieve the Distinction recognition, the above criteria must be achieved as well as providing archived governing body agenda and minutes, zoning by-laws, school committee agendas and minutes, agendas and minutes for an additional board or committee, and a calendar with all public meetings.

Many thanks must go to Jennifer Griest in my office for her hours of gathering and posting information on the website. My goal of getting this award became her mission over the past year. Stay tuned for more changes and information being available on the City's website at www.Gardner-Ma.Gov.

Ice Storm Cleanup



December 11, 2008 Ice Storm Damage

We are still working with F.E.M.A. on how to get reimbursement for picking up the debris throughout the City. This is not as easy as paying a company to pick up the debris and charging F.E.M.A. the expense. There are many hoops we must jump through in order to make sure we receive full and proper reimbursement. The F.E.M.A. reimbursement only accounts for 75% of the cost and we hope the State will step up with their 25% share. However, until we are certain we will be 100% reimbursed, we will continue to exercise as much caution as possible and act in a most conservative manner.

I hope to have more information on a pickup date and process in the very near future. This information will be widely publicized and, of course, e-mailed to newsletter subscribers.

I would also like to thank the dozens of residents that sent us their photos of storm damage. This was crucial in showing F.E.M.A. representatives the extent of the damage in Gardner.

S.M.O.C.



The South Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC) has purchased the building at 214 Pleasant Street, formerly Wayno's Dugout. While I am not sure where all of SMOC's funding comes from, I can tell you the money they are using to rehabilitate the building is from a fund called the Housing Innovation Fund (HIF). HIF funding is federal money that comes from the office of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and passes through the state office of the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD); however, as you know it originally comes from our pockets via taxes.

The problem I have with this program is that I feel SMOC has not been forthcoming with the City in their plans for this facility. On September 6, 2007, Mayor St. Hilaire wrote a letter of support for the SMOC project. In his letter the Mayor speaks of the homeless in the City of Gardner and how this project will assist them. He further states "The proposal to create a group residence for economically disadvantaged individuals at 214 Pleasant Street will help to begin to address the homelessness challenge in our area". Then, the announcement from DHCD and Representative Rice told us that the building would be developed into affordable rental units. Now, according to the SMOC, they will be developing this building into "supportive sober housing".

It is important to note that this should not be construed as a vote against "sober housing" or any other supportive facility. Gardner has a long and proud history of working with local non-profits and their supportive facilities. Currently, Gardner is home to three (3) Gardner Athol Area Mental Health Association (GAAMHA) supportive homes assisting over thirty-five (35) individuals. The Unity House in South Gardner assists fifteen (15) individuals while the Montachusett Veterans Outreach Center (MVOC) houses nineteen (19) along with the Nichols Street Veterans Housing supporting twelve (12) individuals. North Central Human Services (NCHS) maintains units in the City that accommodate more than seventy (70) individuals. This commitment to local organizations will not be jeopardized by taking a stance against this particular project offered by SMOC.

Based upon my discussions with several communities, SMOC facilities have generated a lot of problems and have not always been the best neighbor. The Town of Palmer has had numerous problems at their SMOC housing facility. The Town of Framingham is embroiled in a long and tenuous lawsuit with SMOC. For years the City of Worcester has been struggling with the SMOC facility in that City. This is a track record that I do not want to be continued in our City.

Again, the problem is not with sober housing or any assistive programs of the like, but rather the problem is with the agency itself and the way, as I understand it, they tend to operate their facilities. Gardner has many supportive sober houses that require their residents to be clean, sober, do not accept sex offenders and maintain that their residents are employed. These are the facilities I believe we all support.

I would encourage you to contact Representative Rice - Robert.Rice@state.ma.us or 978-632-3255 and Senator Jennifer Flanagan - Jen@JenFlanagan.com or 978-534-3388 and express your concern regarding this project.

Citizen & Employee of the Year

For some reason, unbeknownst to me, or several others, the practice of awarding a Citizen & Employee of the Year Award ceased several years ago. Particularly in tough economic times, I feel it is important to notice the good examples and practices set by some. Back in October I put out the call for applications for nominating a Citizen and an Employee of the Year.

I am glad to announce Michael Richard as Citizen of the Year and Richard Diran as Employee of the Year.

Michael "Mike" Richard is known to many Gardnerites. Mike may be best known for his "The Gardner Scene" column in The Gardner News. But did you also know that Mike was one of the Founders of the Senior Prom (for Senior Citizens), statistician for all Gardner High School athletics, worked on the Remembering our Hero's Veterans Project, emcee's almost all Gardner

High athletic banquets, is the Vice-President of the Gardner Museum, author of "Glory to Gardner", the wrestling coach at Gardner High, the Wal-Mart Good Works Teacher of the Year for 2004 and holds many other titles and volunteer statuses throughout the City.

Richard "Dick" Diran is a building maintenance craftsman at Gardner High School. Dick was lauded by his fellow employees as being dependable, having an excellent attitude, maintaining good communication with other professionals, taking the initiative to solve problems, is a team player, is always willing to help and is always smiling. Dick has prepared and repaired the electronic equipment for basketball games, repaired the heat in the library at Gardner High, renovated the Special Needs Director's office at Helen Mae Sauter School, rewired the storage/food shack at Stone Field and has repaired the Stone Field score board.

Both of these gentleman were nominated by their peers and citizens of Gardner and will receive their awards during the Monday, March 16, 2009 City Council meeting. Congratulations to Mike and Dick.

Fiscal Year 2009 & 2010

By now you've heard the grim news and untold stories of budget woes from around the state and country. Gardner is not immune to the budget misery; in fact, we have suffered a draconian cut to our current budget. The Governor's 9C, or midyear, cut equated to \$513,927. This cut to our budget equated to a 10% reduction of funds from the state 60% of the way through the year.

Through various conservative fiscal practices and changes implemented in our financial processes that I've been able to initiate, we were able to come up with \$430,000 to make up the shortfall. This is not necessarily good news, as these are needed funds which may have funded positions and projects within the City. Some of these positions are in the City Hall, while others are in the Public Safety sector. We are still working to come up with the remaining \$84,000 to close this year's state imposed budget deficit.

Next year is not a rosy picture either. The Governor's budget, House 1, indicates a \$1,505,647 reduction in local aid to Gardner. This cut amounts to a 28.5% reduction in local aid from this year to next.

However, the Governor has included tax hikes on meals and lodging which he anticipates would bring in \$599,238 to help offset the 28.5% reduction. This may sound good to some, but I am opposed to raising a state wide tax in a recession, however, local officials are put in an awkward position of almost cheering for this state wide tax increase in order to offset such a large cut to local aid. It's also an awkward position in that as local officials we are continually forced to increase the property tax rates just to keep the doors of City Hall open and Firemen and Police on the streets.

More information and news will be coming in the next few months.

Quarterly Tax Billing

As you may have heard, the City Council, in a split decision, has backed my proposal of shifting to a quarterly tax billing system. During my campaign, I spoke at length about quarterly tax billing. In fact, way back during the campaign (about a year and a half ago) 64% of the communities in Massachusetts billed taxes quarterly. Now, 71% (249 communities) of the communities bill quarterly and Gardner will make it 72%.

Quarterly tax payments allow the first two quarters of a fiscal year's taxation to be based upon the prior year's net tax on the property with an adjusted 2.5 percent increase, which reflects the maximum allowable increase under Proposition 2 1/2. Once the tax rate is set, the last two quarters of the fiscal year's tax bills are adjusted to represent the actual tax commitment and the bills are mailed.

The cost of mailing the bills do not need to double with the acceptance of quarterly tax billing. Most communities that accept quarterly tax billings mail two payment stubs with each billing. The homeowner is free to pay the total amount or in two installments.

The advantages to the City are:

1. Enhancement of interest income (approximately 1/2 of the City's taxes would be received 3 months earlier)
2. Stabilization of cash flow
3. Elimination or reduction of short term borrowing (not a current issue for Gardner)

The advantages to the citizens of Gardner are:

1. Greater certainty about payment due dates
 - a. Preliminary bills would be mailed prior to July 1 and would be due August 1 and November 1.
 - b. Actual bills would be mailed prior to December 31 and would be due February 1 and May 1.
2. Smaller, more manageable amount of bill

Cost Saving Initiatives

We're not looking to cut expenses in order to deal with the budget crisis, I've initiated several cost saving initiatives to help us out too. Some of the smaller, less newsworthy items going on at City Hall include the installation of new windows in City Hall. The former windows were drafty, conducted the cold through the aluminum frames on the windows, seals were broken on most of the windows and there were sections of the windows that were single paned glass.

The new windows are manufactured locally by Specialty Wholesale (a division of Maki, Inc on Betty Spring Road). They come

with a very high UV rating as well as a high energy efficiency rating. The installation of the new windows is projected to have a payback period (the time it takes to recoup the investment through savings generated) of approximately two (2) years. When I first took office I reviewed every bill that came across my desk and questioned everything. I was blown away by the amount of money we were spending on our telephone bills. I questioned every line charge and we disconnected several services that were no longer being used. We were able to save about \$5,000 through this effort, but I felt we could do better.

This is where a company called Chambers Advisory comes in to play. This is a company that is an expert in telecommunications and telecommunications billing. They go through every single city account and find savings. They get paid 50% of the total yearly savings they find for the City. For instance, if they find a yearly savings worth \$10,000, they will receive \$5,000 and the City will realize the other \$5,000 in savings. After the first year is passed the City will realize the entire \$10,000 in savings. There is no out of cost expense to the city.

After Chambers initial examination of our records, they anticipate finding approximately \$20,000 in savings. To date they have already discovered \$10,000 in rebates due to the City.

You may have noticed a "stuffer" in your water/sewer/trash bills recently. This "stuffer" defrays 85% of the cost to mail these bills. After speaking with a local bank executive, they offered the idea. I researched the possibility and found out we could insert "stuffers" into non-tax bills (water/sewer/trash bills are considered fees). This savings equates to almost \$10,000 per year.

These are just a few of the cost savings that have been put into place in order to save every penny we can.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Mark P. Hawke'.

- ☐ Mark P. Hawke
- ☐ Mayor
- ☐ email: mayor@gardner-ma.gov
- ☐ web: <http://www.gardner-ma.gov>

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