

CITY OF GARDNER, MASSACHUSETTS
ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE
MINUTES OF MEETING OF FEBRUARY 13, 2026

The Economic Committee and Community Development meeting was called to order by Councillor Elizabeth Kazinskas at 8:30 AM in the City Council Chamber, Room 219, City Hall.

Economic and Development Committee Members, Councillor Karen Hardern and Dana Heath were also present.

Also present were Mayor Michael Nicholson, Director Jason Stevens, Economic Development, and City Clerk Titi Siriphan.

I. REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF MEETING MINUTES

On a motion made by Councillor Karen Hardern and seconded by Councilor Elizabeth Kazinskas, it was voted to waive the reading of the minutes and accept the minutes of October 3, 2025, and December 12, 2025.

II. FIRST TIME ON THE AGENDA

#11772 – An Ordinance to Amend the Code of the City of Gardner, Chapter 675, Thereof Entitled Zoning, to Remove Article IX, Thereof Entitled "Signs and Advertising Devices," and Move it to a New Non-Zoning Chapter to be Numbered Chapter 665.

Mayor Nicholson informed the committee that this was an ordinance proposed by himself and Councillor Judy Mack. He explained that the proposed ordinance differs from prior zoning amendments because it does not introduce any substantive changes to the language itself. Instead, the proposal would relocate an existing section of the zoning code into a different section of the City Code that is classified as non-zoning.

He clarified that Chapter 675 of the City Code contains the City's zoning regulations, which govern matters such as lot sizes, permitted uses, building locations, and similar land-use controls. Ordinances outside of Chapter 675 are still regulatory in nature but follow a different procedural path for amendment.

For non-zoning ordinances, amendments come directly before the City Council, where they proceed through the standard legislative process, including required reading before adoption. In contrast, zoning amendments require a more extensive process, including review by the Planning Board and a joint public hearing before the City Council can take action.

The Mayor emphasized that this proposal is procedural in nature, focused solely on moving the section from the zoning chapter to the general ordinance section, without altering its substantive content.

Mayor Michael Nicholson explained that the issue of signage has become a recurring concern during his tenure, noting nearly a dozen instances in recent years where prospective business owners encountered unexpected obstacles related to sign regulations after already completing the zoning and permitting process. He cited examples including the Timpany Crossroads development and Sawa Asian Cuisine on West Broadway. In these cases, applicants had satisfied all zoning and City Code requirements, only to face additional complications when seeking approval for signage. This often required restarting the process, hiring legal counsel,

CITY OF GARDNER, MASSACHUSETTS
ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE
MINUTES OF MEETING OF FEBRUARY 13, 2026

and appearing before boards again adding both time and expense to their projects.

The Mayor stated that while he believes revisions to the sign ordinance are necessary, he does not believe signage regulations should remain within the zoning code. Keeping signage under zoning, he argued, forces applicants back through the full zoning amendment process, including additional hearings and procedural steps, even for minor deviations. He referenced the Sawa example, where a sign was denied for being three and a half inches taller than permitted, requiring the business owner to reenter the approval process and retain an attorney over what he characterized as a minimal discrepancy.

Mayor Nicholson described the proposal as “phase one” of a two-phase effort. The immediate goal is to remove the sign ordinance from the zoning code to reduce procedural red tape and streamline approvals. Phase two would involve a more comprehensive review and potential revision of the sign ordinance itself. He emphasized that reducing unnecessary regulatory hurdles is essential to promoting development and signaling that the City is open for business, while still working toward a clearer, more business-friendly signage framework.

This item will remain on the agenda until the next meeting.

III. IN SUBCOMMITTEE

#11454 - A Report on the Investigation of the Maki Park Project.

Director Jason Stevens provided an update on the Maki Park improvement project, noting that weather conditions have delayed completion of the remaining work. He explained that with multiple feet of snow on the ground and consistently freezing temperatures, certain tasks cannot currently be performed. The outstanding work primarily involves welding the additional railing on the existing ramp constructed as part of the approved improvements, as well as welding installation for the handicap-accessible chair on the first level of the park.

Due to the winter conditions, this work must be postponed until temperatures allow for proper completion. Director Stevens requested that the committee keep the item on the agenda until the project is fully completed and the final costs for the additional approved work are tallied and properly invoiced.

This item will remain with the committee until project completion.

#11746 - Upcoming Community Development Projects.

Director Jason Stevens provided an update on upcoming Community Development Projects attached.

Councillor Elizabeth Kazinskas provided an update regarding how community development project reports will be handled moving forward. She noted that during the previous session, Director Stevens delivered monthly updates to the committee, which she then relayed during regular City Council meetings. For the current year, however, she has restructured the reporting schedule so that Director Stevens will provide quarterly updates instead of monthly reports. This will result in four comprehensive updates throughout the year.

Councillor Kazinskas explained that she will continue to report those quarterly updates to the

CITY OF GARDNER, MASSACHUSETTS
ECONOMIC AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE
MINUTES OF MEETING OF FEBRUARY 13, 2026

full Council. She expressed confidence in the department's organization and progress, stating that Director Stevens has demonstrated strong oversight and preparedness in managing the projects. She added that the reporting structure can be adjusted if necessary but stated she is comfortable with the quarterly format based on the department's performance over the past year.

This item will remain on the agenda.

ADJOURNMENT

On a motion by Councillor Dana Heath and seconded by Councillor Hardern, it was voted to adjourn at 9:35 p.m.

2026 Upcoming + Ongoing Projects

Department of Community Development & Planning

1

Upcoming Projects

- South Gardner Village Center Utility Upgrades
- Rear Main – South Side
- Downtown Phase V – CDBG Project
- Waterford Street Community Center (Fire System) – CDBG Project
- Greenwood Memorial Pavilion Construction – CDBG Project
- Social Service Provider Grants – CDBG Project

2

South Gardner Village Center Utility Upgrades

- **Project Status:** Grant Awarded, Contract Being Completed
- **Amount:** \$1,480,000 (FY26 MassWorks MWIP Grant)
- **Description:**
The City plans to utilize these funds to overhaul utility wires underground in the South Gardner Village Center. This initiative is a critical component of a broader community revitalization effort that is aimed at enhancing not only the area's visual appeal, but supporting residential development and fostering sustainable economic growth.
- **Current Work:**
Discussions over site assessments and mapping of existing utility infrastructure as well as coordination with utility providers.

3

Rear Main – South Side

- **Project Status:** Awarded and Contract Signed
- **Amount:** \$3,500,000.00 (FY25 HousingWorks Infrastructure Grant Program)
- **Description:**
The City had split the development of the Rear Main parcels into two separate projects. This half will include the remaining parking for the lot and include bringing underground utilities to the site of what will be a private development.
- **Current Work:**
Discussions with Realty Income have continued as the owner of a necessary parcel of the project site, additional information has been provided to them as required. Tighe & Bond have been given engineering oversight of the project and are preparing construction-ready and bid-ready plans to move forward with the project.

4

Downtown Phase V – CDBG Project

- **Project Status:** Awarded and Contract Signed
- **Amount:** \$340,000.00 (FY25 CDBG)
- **Description:**
Upgrades to the current pedestrian infrastructure on Willow Street between Main Street and Pleasant Street. Upgrades will include new crosswalks, sidewalks, curbing, street lighting upgrades, and accessibility improvements.
- **Current Work:**
The City has yet to receive its grant agreement to execute these funds from EOHL. The environmental review record for this project is complete and once the City executes a grant agreement with EOHL, the City will issue a Notice to Proceed to Tighe & Bond for bidding and construction services

5

Waterford Street Community Center (Fire System) – CDBG Project

- **Project Status:** Awarded and Contract Signed
- **Amount:** \$122,000.00 (FY25 CDBG)
- **Description:**
Project to upgrade the fire safety infrastructure at the Community Center to ensure it complies with current safety standards. The project scope includes the installation of fire alarms, electrical wiring enhancements, and emergency lighting systems.
- **Current Work:**
The City has yet to receive its grant agreement to execute these funds. We have satisfied the environmental review record which was a special condition for this project with the completion of radon testing at the Center which came back at levels between <0.4-0.7 pCi/L, well within acceptable range (2.0-4.0 pCi/L).

6

Greenwood Memorial Pavilion Construction – CDBG Project

- **Project Status:** Funds Awarded, Reclass Approved by EOHLIC
- **Amount:** \$719,342.51 (FY24 CDBG)
- **Description:**
 FY24 CDBG funds originally designated for the demolition of the School Street School will be used to construct a memorial pavilion on the site of the former Greenwood Pool facility.
- **Current Work:**
 Following this transfer being approved by the CDBG Steering Committee at their November 25, 2025 meeting, the request for an amendment was reviewed by EOHLIC and approved on February 12, 2026, allowing the city to use previous census track data from when the project was originally approved when it was originally combined with the Greenwood Memorial Pool Demolition project.

7

Social Service Providers – CDBG Project

- **FY2024 CDBG Social Service Grants**
 - Gardner Athletic Program – User Fee Scholarship – \$15,000.00
 - Voices of Truth – Domestic Violence Prevention – \$12,000.00
 - Gardner Community Action Committee – Food Program – \$16,000.00
- **FY2025 CDBG Social Service Grants**
 - Gardner Athletic Program – User Fee Scholarship – \$15,000.00
 - Voices of Truth – Domestic Violence Prevention – \$12,000.00
 - MVOC Veterans Assistance – \$20,000.00
 - Gardner Community Action Committee – Food Program – \$30,000.00
- **FY22/23 CDBG Social Service Grants**
 - Gardner Community Action Committee – Food Program - \$110,830.00
 - MVOC Veterans Assistance – \$38,215.00

8

Ongoing Projects

- Rear Main – North Side
- Master Plan Update
- Hazard Mitigation Plan (HMP)
- Housing Production Plan (HPP)
- Municipal Surplus Property Plan
- Downtown Mobility Plan
- Gardner Municipal Surplus Property Plan

9

Rear Main – North Side

- **Project Status:** Project Ongoing (Substantial Completion by May 31, 2026)
- **Amount:** \$4,100,000.00 (FY23 MassWorks Infrastructure Program)
- **Description:**
Improved available parking for the downtown area, water feature, green space, splash pad, and movement of the existing utilities for Main Street businesses currently present on their existing access road underground.
- **Current Work:**
Despite weather conditions, the contractors have confirmed that the remaining work will be completed on time for a May 31 substantial completion.

10

Master Plan Update

- **Project Status:** Project Ongoing (Substantial Completion by June 30, 2026)
 - **Amount:** \$122,000.00
\$90,000.00 (FY24 Community Planning Grant), \$32,000.00 (EEA Planning Assistance Grant) *see HPP Plan
 - **Description:**
The City is undergoing updating its Master Plan for the first time since 1975. This project will include reviewing past planning efforts, existing conditions, and gathering public input. The goal is to provide a vision of the community's future and a roadmap on how to get there. We'll be focusing on six key planning areas in the development of this master plan: housing, economic development, land use, transportation, open space & recreation, and historic & cultural resources.
- Current Work:**
The key issues & recommendations, goals, values, vision statement, and inventory & assessment have all been completed. The community engagement plan and implementation tracker is in process, with intent to have the full draft of the Master Plan for Planning Board and City Council by late March/early April.

11

Housing Production Plan (HPP)

- **Project Status:** Project Ongoing (Substantial Completion by June 30, 2026)
 - **Amount:** \$32,000 (EEA Planning Assistance Grant)
 - **Description:**
The City has expanded its Master Plan through this grant to create numerical goals to address affordability of housing, allow a wider variety of homes in the city, identify municipal property to be used for housing, how we can meet the region-wide needs for housing, among other components.
- Current Work:**
Relevant municipal properties have been identified for this plan and biweekly meeting continue to occur between myself and the planning group. The HPP team presented to the Planning Board at our December 9 meeting. Ongoing public engagement will occur prior to this being incorporated into the Master Plan and presented to relevant parties.

12

Hazard Mitigation Plan (HMP)

- **Project Status:** Project Ongoing (Substantial Completion by June 30, 2026)
- **Amount:** \$90,000.00 (FY25 Community Planning Grant Program)
- **Description:**
The City is undergoing updating its first individual HMP as we've previously relied on the regional Montachusett HMP for how to address hazards and extreme weather events.

Current Work:

Chapters 1-3, and 5 of this plan have been completed and reviewed, Chapter 4 (Vulnerability and Impacts) has just been reviewed and finalized, leaving Chapters 6, 7, and 8 before its full presentation to the Planning Board and City Council.

13

Downtown Mobility Plan

- **Project Status:** Awaiting Contract from State and FHWA
- **Amount:** \$1,253,000.00 (RAISE Grant)
- **Description:**

The project will address active transportation infrastructure, multimodal transit options, a neighborhood-scaled mobility hub, last-mile connectivity, and parking infrastructure. The project will also include the planning, engineering, and preparation for bid-ready documents for a 4-story parking garage on West Street located in the Downtown area.

Current Work:

The City has been in discussion with MassDOT on the grant agreement and they have had issues with FHWA (Federal Highway Administration) on the language in the agreement since September 2024, most recently confirming that the grant agreement is still being revised as of February 9, 2026.

14

Gardner Municipal Surplus Property Plan

- **Project Status:** Grant Awarded, Plan in Progress
- **Amount:** \$50,000 (FY26 Massachusetts One Stop for Growth)
- **Description:**
 Gardner seeks technical assistance to create a city-wide Surplus Property Plan that repositions vacant, underused public parcels as catalysts for housing, jobs, and equitable investment. The plan will inventory surplus sites, assess constraints and opportunities, engage stakeholders, and deliver a clear roadmap for strategic reuse aligned with Gardner's planning goals, market conditions, and commitment to sustainable, inclusive growth.
- **Current Work:**
 Inventory and categorization of parcels completed; list sent to MassDevelopment. Regular meetings between the planning group, MassDevelopment, and the city have begun, sharing necessary parcel and property cards, GIS information, etc. to begin the plan.

15

Projects in Discussion

- North Central Pathway Phase II
- Keyes Road Culvert Replacement
- Massachusetts One Stop for Growth

16

North Central Pathway Phase II

- **Project Status:** Grant Application Submitted
- **Amount:** \$250,000.00
\$200,000.00 (FY26 MassTrails Grant), \$50,000.00 (Required Match, Municipal Capital Funds)
- **Description:**
This phase of the project would oversee the planning for the remainder of the nature trail past Park Street through to Route 140.
Current Work:
We've completed the 25% design for the remainder of the project and submitted it to MassDOT for their review. The engineering team and I have completed our FY26 MassTrails grant application and submitted it. Conversations with National Grid on a use agreement for the path through their right of way. These conversations also involve their ongoing work on replacing the Perley Brook culvert which exists within their right of way and failed last summer.

17

Keyes Road Culvert Replacement

- **Project Status:** Community Culvert Grant Submitted, MVP Grant Application In Process
- **Amount:** \$2,014,230.00
\$900,000.00 (Community Culvert Grant), \$1,110,000.00 (MVP Grant)
- **Description:**
Construction for the replacement of the Keyes Road culvert into a full bridge that serves Wilder Brook and the 60+ household residential neighborhood that relies on the crossing as its only form of access to the rest of the City. The culvert is in critical condition and is at risk of failing and implementing a bridge in its place will improve the community's reliance on the infrastructure and the ecological health of the Brook and stream area.
Current Work:
The department has applied for and is looking to apply for various funding sources for this project. We have applied for the Community Culvert Grant Program and are in the process of applying for the Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness Grant Program to fund this project.

18