

# COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT STEERING COMMITTEE

## Meeting Minutes

January 20, 2026, at 4:30 p.m.

Members present: Chairperson Jason Stevens, Director of Community Development and Planning; Michael Nicholson, Mayor; Elizabeth Kazinskas, Councilor; Robert Cormier; Neil Erickson and Amy Yuhasz, Assistant Director for Community Development and Planning (non-voting, ex officio)

Members absent: None

Also present: Stephanie Marchetti, Gardner Community Action Committee and Montachusett Veterans Outreach Center; Daniel Forte, Gardner Public Schools; Shauna Neidigh, North Star Family Services; Jon Hogue, North Star Family Services; Susan Hubbard, St. Paul's Church; and Father Tim Crellin, St. Paul's Church

ANNOUNCEMENT - Any person may make a video or audio recording of an open session of a meeting, or may transmit the meeting through any medium, subject to reasonable requirements of the Chair as to the number, placement and operation of equipment used so as not to interfere with the conduct of the meeting. Any person intending to make such recording shall notify the Chair forthwith. All Documents referenced or used during the meeting must be submitted in duplicate to the Director of Community Development & Planning pursuant to the Open Meeting and Public Records Law. All documents shall become part of the official record of the meeting.

Director Stevens called the meeting to order at 4:30 p.m. and read the above announcement regarding recording of the meeting.

### **1. Public Hearing: Review of Applications for FFY2026 CDBG Funds:**

Director Stevens called the meeting to order and asked for a motion to enter the public hearing on the review of applications for FFY2026 Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds. Rob Cormier motioned to start the public hearing and Councilor Kazinskas seconded the motion. Referring to the summary of applications received, Director Stevens said he would read the summary of each application received and give each applicant the opportunity to speak about their request. Stephanie Marchetti, Board member of the Gardner CAC, spoke on behalf of their proposal for a full-time coordinator position in the CAC's office. She stated that they currently have under five staff members, the majority of which are part-time, and they really need somebody to help with immediate triage of emergency walk-ins versus the veteran staff there who are more set up to help people who have longer-term needs. The position would be partially funded with CDBG funds, knowing that some of the clients who come in are outside the city of Garner, they did a percentage of the salary based on the amount of Gardner residents served annually by the CAC.

Director Stevens asked if anyone on the Committee had any questions, and hearing none, summarized the \$15,000 proposal from the Gardner School Department's Athletic Program for athletic scholarships to cover full athletic user fees for low- and moderate-income students. Dan Forte, Athletic Director at Gardner High School, introduced himself and said that he thought this was the fifth year that they have applied for this grant, and it's used to eliminate all user fees across the board for all the athletic programs at the middle school and high school. The Athletic Program did this in an attempt to grow participation and accessibility of these programs, as they feel it ties directly to better engagement and retention of students and stronger bonds with them. as well as just making their programs more sustainable. Before the help provided by the CDBG program, more than two-thirds of their student athletes would pay a reduced fee or no fee at all, so the goal was to eliminate the fees entirely to lift that burden and encourage multi-sport athletes. The program has seen significant growth year after year and had over 500 unduplicated student-athlete last year that were, in some way, supported in this program with the removal of user fees. Most of the CDBG funds are used to pay for updated equipment, supplies, uniforms, and officials.

Director Stevens asked about participation rates and the percentage of low-income families. Mr. Forte stated that their growth has been largely from low-income families, but he did not have the exact number available.

Director Steven's asked if there were any other questions from the Committee. Hearing none, he summarized North Star Family Service's request for \$25,000 for assistance with staff and operating costs for Bonnie's Place Emergency Family Shelter in Leominster. The requested funds would be used for a portion of the case management salary and heating oil for the shelter. Shauna Neidigh, Director of Development, thanked the Committee for considering their application and explained that even though their shelter is located in Leominster, they are the only community-based shelter for families with children

experiencing homelessness in all of North Central Massachusetts. Their organization deliberately chooses to remain independent of the state's Emergency Assistance programs to allow the agency to prioritize local families in the Tri-City area of Fitchburg, Leominster, and Gardner. That also means that they do not receive a bed rate for families receiving shelter, so they have to raise every dollar themselves. Their case management services work with the families to provide financial literacy, job training, job search, affordable housing search, and assistance with medical needs that may be interfering with them getting a job or maintaining a job. Last year they served 23 families (66 people), and 12 of those families were able to be successfully housed. She added that with the closing of the Gardner Emergency Housing Mission, they anticipate more referrals to their agency. They currently have six Gardner families on their wait list.

Director Stevens explained that the Committee has to consider the percentage of residents that live in Gardner that are assisted by CDBG-funded social service providers when determining the amount of CDBG funds to provide. He asked if they are currently serving any Gardner families in addition to the six they would potentially serve from the waitlist. Ms. Neidigh responded that they can certainly make families from Gardner a priority, and that over the past year, they served three Gardner families and two the prior year.

Director Stevens asked if there were any other questions, and Councilor Kazinskas asked about their average cost of assistance per family. Ms. Neidigh said that she didn't have the amount per family, but the shelter budget is approximately \$375,000 per year and they assisted 23 families last year. Because of the varying lengths of stay, the amount is different for each family. They've had families that were there 12 months, so the cost was much more than for a family that was able to leave after a month or two. While families are in their facility, they do not have to pay for rent, heat, utilities, food, etc., so that gives them an opportunity and time to save 75% of their expendable income. North Star's expectation is that assisted families meet with their case manager on a weekly basis and save 75% of their expendable income towards first and last month's rent and security deposits for a new home. That can take a while. She said the average length of stay is six to eight months.

Director Stevens moved on to the next request from St. Paul's Episcopal Church for the Laundry Love program. CDBG funds of \$4,500 are requested to pay for the cost to use washers and dryers at a local laundromat to assist 20 to 30 low-income individuals per month with doing their laundry. Susan Hubbard thanked the Committee for considering their requests. She said they have been conducting the Laundry Love program for about five years in Gardner, either at the Southside Garden and Laundromat or at the one across from Taco Bell. They picked those locations based on those that had the most people who had a need. She explained that the basis of the program is dignity, as it's hard for working poor families to be able to put food on the table and if they are in an apartment that doesn't have a washer-dryer hookup, to be able to do laundry for their family is very expensive when large washers cost \$9.50 for a load of laundry. St. Paul's provides assistance one Saturday a month from 11 to 1. They post it on our website and allow anyone to participate. They let people know that there's no sermon or anything religious, just assistance with their laundry. It's St. Paul's way to be a blessing to people who need help. Ms. Hubbard asked if there were any question, and Assistant Director Yuhasz said that for a program to be eligible for CDBG money, the program would need to document that it at least 51% of the people who receive assistance are low- and moderate-income Gardner residents. Ms. Yuhasz added that there is a self-certification form that agencies can use to collect this information. Ms. Hubbard said they would be able to collect this information.

Director Stevens summarized a second request from St. Paul's Episcopal Church for \$50,150 for community garden improvements, including masonry wall repair, drainage improvements, tree trimming, soil improvements, and new beds, soil, and compost, plants and fertilizer. Father Tim Crellin introduced himself as the priest for St. Paul's Episcopal Church and introduced Susan Hubbard, Chair of the St. Paul's Episcopal Church Board. He said that five years ago they started a community garden at the church with nine raised beds that they got a grant to build, and now they are up to 30 three by six-foot raised beds. Everything that we grow in the garden goes to the Gardner CAC for the food pantry and is distributed to the community. Approximately 91% of folks that receive aid through the food pantry are Gardner residents. He explained that they had three different grants that paid for the garden and now that it's built and running, they are mainly able to sustain it through volunteer labor and their own budget. CDBG funds are being sought to expand the garden. The wall along School St. is falling down, the trees are overgrown and it's hard to get anything to grow on that hillside. They had idea of planting fruit trees and growing fruit as well as vegetables to give to the CAC and to turn that hillside into a little orchard. They worked with George LoCasio, who runs the agricultural program at Mount Wachusett Community College, and Mr. LoCasio thinks it's a great site for growing dwarf fruit trees. They could really have a productive orchard there, and it would also help address this

blight issue in the neighborhood by fixing that masonry wall and keeping it from collapsing onto the sidewalk. He thanked the Committee for considering their proposal.

Director Stevens commented that CDBG funds could pay 91% of the project cost, and the church would have to contribute about \$4,514, based on the number of Gardner residents currently assisted by the CAC. Mayor Nicholson asked if repairing the wall and planting the plants falls under the category of an improvement project or if it is a social service project. Assistant Director Yuhasz said that initially, when they talked to Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC) they classified it as a public social service project because of the people that would be served, but Ms. Yuhasz will revisit that determination, as the City can only apply for up to five public social services in its FY2026 application, though some additional money is available from prior years that could use to fund a sixth public social service project if the Committee chooses to do so.

Director Stevens summarized the last public social service request from Voices of Truth Corporation for \$15,000 for domestic violence prevention and survivor support, including planning and coordination, task force meetings, workshops, supplies and printing, community awareness and one-time utility payments. Assistant Director Yuhasz said that Bernice Richards, Executive Director, could not make it because something came up at the last minute, but she sent her apologies and thanked the Committee for their consideration.

Director Stevens asked if anyone from the Committee had any questions, and hearing none, said he was going to take things slightly out of order to move on to the items that people in attendance were there to present. The Montachusett Veterans Outreach Center's requested \$31,900 for the purchase and installation of four automatic door openers at 268 Central Street and new CT board, siding on dormers and new windows at their transitional shelter at the same address. Stephanie Marchetti, Executive Director, said the request is for improvements at their 268 Central Street headquarters downtown, and added that the agency is working hard to increase accessibility for people with disabilities, as they see an older population of veterans with walkers, canes, and general mobility issues. Ms. Marchetti's plan is to speak with the Gardner Public Library about the automatic door openers that the library just installed and go with the same company the library used and install them themselves. In terms of the windows, their request is an upgrade for their 12-bed transitional shelter on the third floor of that same building. Last summer, they procured funding to replace four of those windows. There are eight left and it would probably take them another three years of spreading out costs if they had to do this themselves. The windows do need to be upgraded to make sure they open and close safely. They are over 25 years old at this point. The estimate provided is based on what it cost to replace the four that they did last summer. They would go to the same company again, which is Red Dog Roofing, and because they are a regular recurring client, they will be able to get them right in. Assistant Director Yuhasz said they may need to get a couple more quotes.

With no questions for MVOC, Director Stevens moved on to North Star Family Services' request for pre-housing development and fundraising assistance to build a new 25-unit affordable housing complex on agency-owned land in Leominster. Jon Hogue, Executive Director, stated that North Star started as a homeless family shelter and for many years that's all they did. When they started having trouble finding apartments that people could truly afford, they knew that they had to do something outside of the box, so over a seven-year period they built some affordable housing themselves. It took them seven years to raise \$9 million and build a 15-apartment house project in Leominster. The CDBG funds they've requested are to build a second permanent supportive housing project on the same land that they own in Leominster. Their goal is to keep building this type of affordable housing, and the CDBG funds would be used to increase their capacity for doing this type of work. Assistant Director Yuhasz told the Committee that she consulted with EOHLC about the use of CDBG funds for this type of project and they do not think that pre-development and fundraising costs are CDBG eligible. They recommended that the City connect North Star with someone in their office that handles the HOME program and supportive housing program funds.

Director Stevens moved on to the application from the City of Gardner Department of Community Development and Planning for the Downtown Improvement Phase 6 City Hall Avenue project which includes new sidewalks, crosswalks, curbing, street lighting, and accessibility improvements between Connors and Pleasant Streets. Assistant Director Yuhasz said that they had this project in the pipeline from last year, so they already have the initial cost estimate and conceptual plan that were included in the Committee's packet. The existing crosswalks and sidewalks are in poor condition and new curb cuts are needed to improve accessibility. Ms. Yuhasz explained that this project would meet the CDBG National Objective of eliminating or

preventing slum blight, and as part of the application process, the City would need to update the 2016 inventory sheet for the street and submit it to EOHLC for review. The existing lighting was listed in good condition in 2016, so if it's still in good condition, replacement of the lighting with historic lighting may not be eligible as part of this project unless the City can make the case that the existing lighting is contributing to the deterioration of the area.

The Committee discussed whether to continue the public hearing to allow more time to review this information. Assistant Director Yuhasz referred to FY2026 application schedule included in the Committee's meeting packet. A continuation of the public hearing is tentatively scheduled for next week, but the Committee could wait until their regularly scheduled meeting on February 24th to continue the public hearing. The application deadline has been pushed back to mid-April, so there is more time to complete this process. Mayor Nicholson stated, to be clear for the benefit of the public watching, that according to the summary sheet, based on the requests before the Committee and the funding that's available, the request are \$203,000 over the available funding, so there's \$203,000 of projects that have been requested that won't be funded because there is not enough money available. He added that the Committee will have to weigh these applications in terms of those dollar amounts and what is available between now and when a vote is taken. Ms. Yuhasz said that if the Committee wants to wait until their February meeting, she will try to get information to revise the City Hall Avenue slum and inventory sheet and submit it to EOHLC for review so the Committee will have more information on whether the lighting would be eligible. Also, with the elimination of the ineligible housing development project, the difference between funds requested and what is available is about \$149,000. Councilor Kazinskas stated that she appreciates the application schedule and timeline and the work to move forward and not do all the work the Committee and staff did the last couple months to catch up, and expressed approval of waiting until the February 24th meeting to allow for additional time to review the requests. Assistant Director Yuhasz added that EOHLC is scheduled to release the application for funds on February 17th, so waiting until the 24th will allow time to see if the application requirements have changed.

Chairperson Stevens asked for a motion to continue the public hearing until February 24th. Councilor Kazinskas motioned to approve, and Rob Cormier seconded the motion. Motion passed 5:0. As a point of clarification for this process, Mayor Nicholson confirmed that this information is for the City's application that will be submitted to EOHLC and they can then make amend and make revisions prior to making a funding announcement in the fall of 2026. Assistant Director Yuhasz added that EOHLC does have a step in the process where within a week of the application being available, the City must submit a list of projects for them for review to make sure there are not any issues.

## **Regular Meeting**

### **Meeting Minutes:**

**1.** Vote to Approve minutes of Regular Meeting, January 20, 2026.

Mayor Nicholson motioned to approve the minutes as presented, Councilor Kazinskas seconded. Motion passed 5:0.

### **2. New Business:**

#### **2.1** Review of FY2022-2025 Community Development Strategy

Assistant Director Yuhasz explained that the Community Development Strategy (CDS) is a three-to-five-year planning document that Mini-Entitlement communities are required to submit to the state. The CDS summarizes unmet need in the community and how CDBG and other funding sources might be used to meet those needs. Director Stevens and Assistant Director Yuhasz updated the City's CDS to reflect current information, including planning documents that were used to develop the CDS. The revised CDS was reviewed and approved by EOHLC. Assistant Director Yuhasz walked the Committee through the CDS and said that, as part of the application process, it is required that it be presented during a public forum. Director Steven and Assistant Director Yuhasz said they plan to make bigger changes next year when the City's new master plan is in place based the priorities in that plan.

Mayor Nicholson commented that the City received its slum and blight area designation ten years ago and asked if this is something that the City needs to look at renewing. Assistant Director Yuhasz stated the City does need to renew the designation and that the City's program representative at EOHLC is looking into whether, because awards may be announced before the designation expires, whether it would have any impact on the City's FFY2026 application.

Mayor Nicholson added that the City's two urban renewal plans are also over ten years old, and while they have a twenty-year life span, the administration is looking into updating those plans and beginning the conversation of what the process will look like when it's time to renew those.

Director Stevens asked if there were any questions and recommended that this item be kept on the agenda for the next meeting to allow more time for review and for the Committee to propose any edits or updates.

### **3. Old Business:**

#### **3.1 Status of FY2025 CDBG Mini Entitlement Grant**

Assistant Director Yuhasz said the City just received the fully signed agreement with EOHL for the FY2025 funds a few days ago. She explained that the next step in the process for accessing the funds is to satisfy a list of special conditions that EOHL provided related to issues in the City's application. The response has been drafted, and it will be reviewed by Director Stevens and given to Mayor Nicholson to review and sign. The City also needs to complete the environmental review record for the Waterford Street Community Center improvements and submit it and the review for other FY2025 projects to EOHL. The Waterford St. review is still underway because radon testing was required. Once testing is completed, if no mitigation is required, EOHL should provide a release.

#### **3.2 Schedule for FY2026 CDBG Mini Entitlement Application**

Assistant Director Yuhasz reviewed the proposed schedule and said the FY2026 CDBG Mini-Entitlement Application is scheduled to be available on February 17<sup>th</sup>. The City will have a week from that date to submit a list of proposed projects for review. She will check with EOHL to make sure that they are okay with that list be submitted after the Committee's meeting on February 24<sup>th</sup>. After that, the next important deadline is February 27<sup>th</sup> when submission of a timely expenditure waiver request is due. A waiver request must be submitted if the City will not have drawn 90% of its FY2022-23 grant and 40% of its FY2024 grant in EOHL grants management system by the time of application submission. Ms. Yuhasz said that the City is looking pretty good for FY2022-23, but the City will have to submit a waiver request for FY2024 because EOHL has yet to approve the City's amendment request to transfer funds from the School St. School demolition project to the Greenwood Pool memorial pavilion project. One the waiver request is submitted, Ms. Yuhasz said the next important date is March 6<sup>th</sup>, when the Mayor will present proposed projects to the City Council for the passage of a resolution to submit the application. After that, staff will input required application information in EOHL's online application, Mayor Nicholson will sign required forms and certifications and the application will be submitted in advance of the April 21<sup>st</sup> deadline.

Mayor Nicholson added that Assistant Director Yuhasz should be sure to work with the Clerk's office to make sure everything is filed the right way, including committees that have to review things before they get to the Council. Ms. Yuhasz asked which committee this would go to, and Council Kazinskas said it would go to the Economic and Community Development Committee, of which she is the chair, and suggested they talk about the schedule offline.

#### **3.3 FY2022-23 Project Updates**

##### **3.3.1 Demolition of 205-213 Main Street**

Director Stevens said that the Gardner Redevelopment Authority is still in land disposition process. Once the GRA enter closes on the property, he will be able to have the executive sessions related to the sale made public and go over the details of the proposed development. Mayor Nicholson asked if for all intents and purposes the CDBG-related actions had been completed and Director Stevens said that the CDBG project has been fully closed out.

##### **3.3.2 Greenwood Pool Demolition**

Assistant Director Yuhasz said there is not much new for this item. She did check in with Tighe & Bond on whether it made sense to keep the electrical service installation and the loading and seating in the demolition contract or whether that should be part of the pavilion phase two contract, and she recommends waiting to hear from EOHL regarding the amendment request before any kind of decision is made.

##### **3.3.3 Social Services**

Assistant Director Yuhasz said the only reason this is still on the agenda is because of the two new projects that were approved a couple of meetings ago – the Montachusett Veterans Outreach Center Veterans Assistance Expansion project

and the Gardner Community Action Committee Food and Utility Assistance Expansion project. Both agencies are working to spend that money, so it is not anticipated that there will be any issues expending the funds by the June 30th deadline.

### 3.4 FY2024 Project Updates

#### 3.4.1 Social Services

Assistant Director Yuhasz said the only remaining project FY2024 public social service project that hasn't been completed is the Gartner Athletic Program, but she has been working with Mr. Forte to get us the information needed to process payment and submit required income and race/ethnicity data. She will continue to send reminders until the information is provided.

#### 3.4.2 Amendment Request – Cancellation of School St. School demolition and addition of new Greenwood Pavilion and Park

Assistant Director Yuhasz reiterated that the City is still waiting for approval.

Director Stevens asked if there were any other comments or questions from the Committee on any of the items discussed. Neil Erickson, newly appointed to the Committee, asked if what the Committee needs to do is cut this budget by \$148,000 and whether they have the flexibility to do it if the applicants asked for a certain amount. Assistant Director Yuhasz said that was correct, the Committee does not necessarily have to cut a full project. They could reduce the amount recommended for funding. For example, the Committee could decide to reduce all public social service requests by a set percentage, or the Committee could look at the requested budget and reduce it by a certain line item.

Assistance Director Yuhasz added that, though limited to five public social service projects for the FY2026 application, they could decide to fund one of the six requests using the \$90,000 that's available from FY2024. Only four public social service projects were funded in FY2024, and the City is still well under the 20 percent cap. Councilor Kazinskas stated that for the public who are watching, the Committee was provided with a lot of information ahead of time, and some of these are repeat projects as well, so Committee members are familiar with them. Director Stevens pointed out that all the information provided to the Committee is scanned and posted on the City's website as part of the packet for the meeting. Assistant Director Yuhasz added that there is also an opportunity to provide written comments on public hearing agenda items. Information on how to submit written comments is included in the notice published in the paper and the posted agenda. One of the applicants that Fitchburg and Leinster have set aside housing development funds for a portion of the project that was mentioned here today. Gardner does not qualify for housing development incentive fund projects.

Mayor Nicholson added a point of clarification regarding the request for housing development funds that was discussed earlier, stating that because the City is not considered a Gateway City because the population is under 35,000, the City doesn't get housing development funds from the state. The City receives CDBG funds that are more restrictive.

Director Stevens asked if there were any other questions or comments, and hearing none, called for a motion to adjourn. Motion to adjourn was made by Rob Cormier and seconded by Councilor Kazinskas. Motion passed 5:0. Meeting adjourned at 5:25 p.m.

*All documents referenced or used during the meeting are part of the official record and are available in the Department of Community Development and Planning pursuant to the Open Meeting and Public Records Law.*