

2022 INAUGURAL ADDRESS

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*Good Evening,*

*Reverend Clergy, Governor Baker, honored guests, elected officials, members of the City Council and School Committee, family, friends, and my fellow Gardnerites - thank you for being here with us today to celebrate all we have been able to accomplish together over the past few years, and launch our mission for the next two.*

*I would also like to give a special welcome to those who have stood at this podium before me who are with us this evening, Former Mayors Stephen Erickson, Alan Agnelli, Charles Manca, Daniel Kelley, and Mark Hawke.*

*To my family- I cannot thank you enough for always having my back. The gratitude I have for the love and support you have shown me is something I'll never be able to express in words alone.*

*To my sister Jackie, you continue to push me to be better each and every day. The commitment you have for this City, particularly with the amount of hours you put into making sure those who attended the City's vaccination clinic last year had as smooth an experience as possible, is something that still leaves me inspired.*

*Dad- I know you're counting down the days until your upcoming retirement, but no matter how exciting retirement may be, the example you've shown me of what it means to work for your community helped get me here today. And while there may still be 85 days left until you officially retire and get to spend time with our dog, Blue, at home, I want to thank you for your 35 years of service to this City.*

*Mom- you have been my biggest supporter since day one. The stories you've shared about your life growing up in your native Nicaragua, living through an earthquake where the house caved in around you all, two violent wars, moving to a new country, starting a new life, and everything else are stories I carry with me and remind myself of every day. As important as the oath I took here today is, it is not lost on me that the first oath I "witnessed" took place on May 26, 1994 at Faneuil Hall, when while pregnant with me, you officially became an American.*

*A mi familia nicaragüense, cada oportunidad que he tenido durante mi vida ha sido por las oportunidades que se sacrificaron ustedes para que la generación menor de la familia tuviera*

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*una vida mejor. Espero que se sientan orgullosos de mi y que sea digno de todo lo que se sacrificaron para que pueda estar en ésta posición hoy.*

*To my cousin Wanda, thank you for sharing your talents with us this evening. I have to wonder if when our relatives left the Herberdies Isles in Scotland if they ever would have thought that someone in the Nicholson family tartan would lead the colors of freedom into a ceremony such as this one day.*

*Governor Baker, thank you for joining us and for your continued commitment to helping to build a stronger commonwealth by giving cities and towns the resources they need to be successful. From helping us with different programs that have come up in the City, to attending the Chair Luge, you have always been a great friend to us in Gardner. This also means a lot to me as someone who interned in your office back in 2015. Sitting in that office in Springfield, answering calls about the massive amounts of snow that came shortly after you first took office, I never would have anticipated how often we'd work together between then and now.. I look forward to us continuing to work together during your last year as Governor. In particular, I would like to thank you for your leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic. No one had a playbook for how to handle this situation, and as difficult as it was for us on the local level, I can't even imagine everything you, Lt. Gov Polito, your cabinet, and everyone else went through on the state level. There is no other governor I would have rather have started my time in local government with.*

*Judge Goldstein- the pride this City had for you when you were first appointed for a judge was great, but immeasurable when it was announced that one of Gardner's own would be leading the Gardner/Winchendon district court as its First Presiding Justice. Since everything was shut down when you were appointed, please allow me now to publicly congratulate you and thank you for the work you have been doing for this region. From participating in the different substance abuse recovery efforts of the city, conversations regarding domestic violence, and more, you have truly brought a community lens to your role.*

*Justice Georges- Thank you for being a great mentor to me for the past five years. I still remember the evening in August 2017 in St. Paul's Cathedral in Boston when you administered the Oath of Professionalism to my class before our first day at Suffolk University Law School. I have truly appreciated the genuine care you have for those you meet and the compassion you have for those you work with. I'm honored to have been sworn in by you again this evening..*

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*Dr. Anderson and the members of the University of Massachusetts Minuteman Marching Band, welcome to Gardner! I am thrilled to be able to have you all with us this evening. Since 1990, eight Gardnerites have served as drum majors of the band, several dozen others as field staff, and currently all band staff in our school system are graduates of the UMMB- Doug Lepisto at the High School, Jon Schmitt at the Middle School, and Michelle Heffner at Elm Street..*

*Mr. Gardella, thank you for serving as the Master of Ceremonies this evening. They say at events like these you should talk about people who have influenced your life to help get you here. John- Half of the elected officials on this stage are your former students from when you were a history teacher at Gardner High School. Your assignment during senior year to either write a research paper or work on a local campaign or local government office was how I found my way into interning for Mayor Hawke, and as they say “the rest is history.”*

*Representative Zlotnik- thank you for being a friend and mentor to me. I really appreciate the care and attention you bring to our region, always checking in to see how things are going and how new partnerships or programs can be made.*

*Senator Cronin- thank you for all you have done for our city during your time in the Senate, and Senator Gobi, welcome to Gardner as our new state senator.*

*To our City Councilors, and School Committee Members, the working relationship we have in this City is something many other locations can only dream of having. The climate of collaboration we have here is exactly how the government should operate- working together for the best of those that put us into the seats we now hold.*

*Lastly, scattered throughout the hall this evening are our city department heads, employees, and first responders. Please join me in a round of applause for these individuals who tirelessly work every day to provide top quality services to all of our residents each and every day.*

*In a particular way I would like to thank my direct staff Rachel Roberts and Colin Smith for the help they provide me every day. My office would not run as smoothly and efficiently if it wasn't for them.*

*While I only mentioned a few people, as hard as the past few years have been, there have been people who have helped us become stronger than we ever thought possible and made*

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*us better for it. This celebration is a celebration of all of us- our city and everyone who helped us get her today- and we are forever grateful.*

*While we hold this inauguration ceremony every two years, this one is quite historic for the City of Gardner.*

*We have just sworn in the youngest and most diverse government in the City's History.*

*On this stage are the City's first Latin American and African American elected officials.*

*We have the most women elected to our City's government. The majority of us are under 50 years old, for the first time in the City's history, a woman has topped the Councillor-at-Large ticket in an election and two women were elected to the leading positions in the government- City Council President Elizabeth Kazinskas and the Vice Chair of the School Committee Jennifer Pelavin.*

*In the past 10 years, our city's population has grown by over five percent, and that trend is continuing. I think our City's government and the work we are doing are both reflective of that growth and the best interests of the people.*

*It is no secret that over the past two years, the largest issue facing our city, and our world, has been the COVID-19 Pandemic. I don't think anyone attending the City's last full inauguration ceremonies on January 3, 2020 would have expected that a virus would create a situation necessitating two acting mayors, four delayed elections, the closing of public buildings and businesses, masks, reopening plans, mass vaccine clinics, and everything else that COVID brought with it.*

*Since March of 2020, 4202 members of our community have tested positive for the virus, and we have lost 68 of our neighbors.*

*But yet we stood strong, faced the challenges of the world with renewed vigor, and worked toward a better, safer, and healthier tomorrow.*

*Working with our partners at the State and with our local healthcare community - Heywood Hospital and Community Health Connections, we were able to vaccinate thousands in our region. Our first responders delivered vaccines to people who were homebound. Mobile and school clinics were and continue to be set up. And our regional vaccination clinic done in*

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*partnership with the City, Heywood Hospital, and the Polish American Citizens Club vaccinated close to 35,000 people between February and June of last year.*

*We will forever be grateful to the countless individuals who dedicated their time and efforts into making those vaccination events possible. The staff in the Board of Health and Heywood Hospital, those who oversaw and worked at the registration call center, our IT staff for designing the registration system, the volunteers who helped at the clinic, and more.*

*Despite the impact of the Pandemic, we were also able to accomplish much to improve our students' experiences in Gardner Public Schools.*

*After almost a full year of remote learning, our students are back in the classroom. Our teachers are utilizing newfound tools to move our curriculum firmly into the future. With funds from the State, we were able to purchase enough chromebook laptops so that every student in Gardner Public Schools has their own device.*

*Over a decade since it fell victim to budget cuts due to the Great Recession, we have reinstated the elementary school beginner band program. Music education is so important to the experiences of our students, and I am proud to say that there are currently 158 students at Elm Street School participating in the new band program in its first year.*

*We have also launched new innovative pathway programs at Gardner High School in Healthcare, Business, Finance, Information Technology, and Manufacturing. These state sponsored programs are designed to give students coursework and experience in specific high-demand industries. Students in the Healthcare, Business, Finance, and IT pathways all leave with college credit. Students in the manufacturing programs graduate with industry credentials, OSHA certificates, and more. In doing so we give our students real world experiences as part of their every day education.*

*Large strides have been made in investing in our infrastructure as well. By investing in ourselves, we set the example for others to invest in us.*

*In the past year we have paved more miles of roadways than we have since 1990.*

*We've installed new sidewalks, crossing signals, lighting fixtures, banners, and flags in the downtown to breathe new life into the area.*

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*Working with different state programs, we have begun to expand our bike trails and lanes in the City to connect Winchendon to Hubbardston through the downtown.*

*Finally, there is the new bridge over Route 140 that will be constructed by the Commonwealth during the next two years to connect the bike trails of Gardner and Winchendon, similar to the bridge recently constructed over Route 2 in Leominster.*

*As a city, we are also doing more in terms of outreach.*

*Gardner is now running the Veterans Service operations for Gardner, Ashburnham, Westminster, and Princeton. In doing so, we are leading the region in making sure that those who have served our country receive the benefits that they have earned and deserve.*

*For the second year in a row, we offered free summer meals - breakfast, lunch, and dinner - to all students in the City, regardless of whether they were enrolled in Gardner Public Schools or not. We are also continuing to provide free meals to our students in our schools. With all the changes that our students have experienced, hunger is not and will not be an added burden for them.*

*We were recently awarded a grant from the Stanton Foundation to reinstate the police department's K9 Unit. This will help increase the department's efforts in drug trafficking prevention, lost people patrols, and more.*

*While we have accomplished a lot, there's still a lot left for us to look forward to.*

*We are updating and improving our school facilities to help provide our students with a modern learning environment that meets their needs. Renovations to the gym and auditorium at Gardner High School are already underway, new lockers are being installed at Gardner Middle School, and in the coming school year, our students will walk through the doors of our newly constructed Gardner Elementary School.*

*Within our schools, we are also working to improve our students' experiences. Working with the Gardner Middle School Equity and Engagement Committee, we have begun a diversity audit of the books in the school's library to make sure that all of our students can find their stories on the shelves. The demographics of our students have shifted in recent years. Approximately one third of our students speak Spanish at home, with Arabic being the third highest language spoken by students besides English. Our schools not only teach students*

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*traditional reading, writing, and arithmetic, but also how to find themselves and grow into the people they are destined to be. So it only makes sense that as we change so must the things we offer our students, so that they know they are home in our schools and in our City.*

*Our economic development opportunities in Gardner continue to grow. Gardner will look a lot different when the next inauguration is held because of the projects we are ready to undertake in the next two years.*

*Our healthcare opportunities are expanding. Heywood Hospital has begun constructing a new surgical pavilion at their facility on Green Street. This will update their operating rooms to a modern facility and expand what this hospital is able to offer to its patients.*

*On the other side of the City, Community Health Connections is constructing their second facility on Timpany Boulevard that will house family and medical practices, dental offices, urgent care, and behavioral health services.*

*Gardner received the largest awards from the State's MassWorks and Underutilized Properties Grant Programs to completely change the face of our downtown. This will allow us to construct a new event plaza and parking lot on Rear Main Street and work with EA Fish Construction and Mass Ave Realty to construct new housing units in the Downtown on Rear Main Street and the old Temptations and Ryan Block Buildings. This will help draw more people into the downtown to attract new businesses into the area. We have also begun discussions with bike share and scooter share companies about setting up locations near these new developments.*

*The Timpany Crossroads property continues to develop with Starbucks thriving here after their first few months and Edward Jones and other companies soon to be opening their doors.*

*In order to keep this momentum going, we need to increase the resources we have available to us and our business community. During the next term, proposals will be submitted to the City Council regarding outdoor eating and seating options for restaurants, financing improvements to the Downtown and Mill Street urban renewal districts, and revamping our nuisance, vacant, and abandoned building ordinances to make sure our City Departments have the tools they need to deal with issues that already exist and prevent new issues from arising.*

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*Everyone in the community, myself included, have grown tired of hearing a notification go out that a water main break has occurred in the City. On August 3rd of this past year, we lost close to 4 million gallons of water due to a water main break in a pipe with shut off valves that were installed well over 100 years ago, which failed causing an 18 hour issue in the City.*

*In the past year we invested \$11 million out of our water enterprise account to replace all water utility lines and shut off valves in the City that were installed between 1870 and 1935. We are hoping to continue that work with the different state and federal infrastructure funds that will soon become available.*

*Working with Representative Zlotnik and Congresswoman Trahan's offices, we have also been able to obtain funding to bring broadband internet access to the last few streets in the City that are without it. In 2022, every resident of Gardner will have access to high quality internet.*

*With all of the progress mentioned above, we cannot ignore the ways in which the City is also contributing to the same blight problem that we are working to fix. It makes no sense for someone to make statements about wanting to improve the look of our downtown, fight absentee landlords, and remove blight in our city, but then turn a blind eye to a city building at the entrance of our downtown where the roof is quite literally caving in on itself.*

*The issue of the Greenwood Pool is not a problem that anyone on this stage started, but it's ours to fix. The longer we wait to do something, the more the price tag goes up, and the bigger burden we place on our taxpayers. I plan to put forward a proposal in this next term for the demolition of the indoor pool building, and the revitalization of the area to a place that attracts people to the City, instead of causing embarrassment.*

*Our job as City officials is to build a place that people are proud to call their home. To make Gardner a destination for people. We are at a moment where we can have a greater impact on this City than we ever thought possible.*

*The COVID-19 Pandemic is still with us. Our Residents must continue to take this virus seriously and follow the precautions and best practices we have learned over the past two years. Testing rates are still high and many of our residents are dealing with the side effects of what is now being called "Long COVID." But even with all we have faced, we are stronger than ever.*



CITY OF GARDNER



MASSACHUSETTS

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*Next January, we will celebrate our 100th year as a City. You have to wonder whether those who drafted our charter 100 years ago would have expected any of what we have seen, developed, evolved, and adapted to over the past century.*

*It is now our time to move forward, carry the torch they lit for us into a new future, and bring about a new era for this place we call home.*

*God Bless you all, God Bless America, and God Bless this City.*