

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT STEERING COMMITTEE

Meeting Minutes

February 24, 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 of Community Development and Planning (non-voting, ex officio)

Members absent: None

Also present: None

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 (continued from January 20, 2026):

Director Stevens opened the public hearing stating that the Committee will be reviewing the applications received in response to an RFP for projects to include in the city's FY2026 Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Mini-Entitlement Program application to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC). Assistant Director Yuhasz referred to the summary of applications received included in the Committee's meeting packet and said that the City may request up to \$875,000 in CDBG funds through the FY2026 application.

Ms. Yuhasz updated the Committee on two things that happened between last month's public hearing and this meeting. The Montachusett Veterans Outreach Center withdrew their application because the project to purchase and install automatic door openers and replace windows would have required compliance with Davis-Bacon labor standards, and the agency was concerned about the increased cost associated with the requirement to pay prevailing wage rates. Additionally, since the last meeting, they conferred with EOHLC to determine whether the St. Paul's Community Garden Expansion project would better fall under the public social service or public facility improvement category, and they agreed that it was better suited for a public facility project. Since EOHLC places a five-project limit on public social services that may be included in the application, moving this project out of the public social service category would allow the Committee to fund all of the projects that requested public social service funds, if the Committee chose to do so.

Ms. Yuhasz referred to the memo included in the Committee's meeting packet that provided more information on the requirements that OHLIC has in place. She said something to consider when deciding what to include in the application is that there is \$140,000 in FY2025 funds and \$9,000 in FY2022-23 funds that need to be reallocated. Those funds need to stay within those grant years. She shared the attached proposal for reallocation of those funds and what could be included in the FY2026 application.

Mayor Nicholson informed the Chair and Committee members that the Ethics Commission advised that he recuse himself from this vote, as he is the Chair of the School Committee and the School Department has an application being considered for athletic fees and also because as the Mayor he appoints one of the members of the Gardener Community Action Committee's board of directors. He stated that he would recuse himself from this vote.

Ms. Yuhasz went on to present a scenario where the Committee could utilize the FY2022-23 and FY2025 funds to continue to fund all of the public social service projects that currently receive funds. Because EOHLC has an 18-month period of performance, with an option to request an extension, the projects could utilize the reallocated older funds and not need to be part of the FY2026 application. Additionally, she said they could separate the design and bidding services for the Downtown Improvements Phase 6 - City Hall Avenue and fund that portion of the project with FY2025 reallocated funds. That would leave enough money left over to fund the new Laundry Love public social service project from the remaining FY2025 funds and what's left of the FY2022-23 funds could be used to fund a portion of the Gardner Athletic Program User Fees project and

fund their remaining request with FY2025 funds. .

If the Committee chose to do that, the FY2026 application would only include the Downtown Improvements Phase 6 - City Hall Avenue implementation project and funds for program administration.

Director Stevens pointed out that there will most likely be other funds available for reallocation with current projects not needing budgeted contingency funds or with bids for planned projects coming in under budget. So even though they wouldn't be able to move forward with all the projects that requested funds as part of the FY2026 application, there is a high likelihood that there will be additional funds to reallocate.

Assistant Director Yuhasz said another option would be to fund a percentage of the requested amounts. Councilor Kazinskas said that she thinks it makes sense to fully fund projects because it might not be enough for them to carry out the project if it's partially funded. She gave the example of the St. Paul's Community Garden Expansion project, where giving them less than the requested amount might not be enough for them to complete the project. Additional discussion followed regarding the potential availability of additional funds for reallocation and the desire to use those funds for those projects that are not included in this reallocation or the FY2026 application. Ms. Yuhasz said she thinks it's a good thing to have projects in the pipeline and not have to scramble to find a project when funds are available for reallocation. Neil Erickson asked what the turnaround time is for knowing when additional funds will become available for reallocation and Director Stevens said it's after the final payment has been made on a project. The biggest project currently in the pipeline is the Greenwood Pool Pavilion which should be completed this summer. There may be funds available for reallocation once it's completed and closed out.

Chairperson Stevens asked for a motion to approve the proposed reallocation of FY2022-23 and FY2024 funds and the projects to be submitted in the FY2026 application. Council Kazinskas made a motion to approve, Rob Cormier seconded and motion passed 4:0:1 with Mayor Nicholson abstaining.

Meeting Minutes:

1. Vote to Approve Minutes of the January 20, 2026 Meeting

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

2. Old Business:

2.1 Review of FY2022-2025 Community Development Strategy

Assistant Director Yuhasz said this item was discussed briefly during the January meeting. She explained that the Community Development Strategy (CDS) is a document that is required to be submitted as part of EOHLIC's CDBG annual application process. The CDS covers a three-to-five-year period and is a summary of plans that a community has in place to address unmet needs. The CDS provides a framework to determine how CDBG and other funds will be used to address community needs. Ms. Yuhasz stated that changes that were made to the current CDS include adding a summary of plans that were used to develop the CDS and stating that infrastructure projects within the existing Urban Renewal Area boundaries will be prioritized for CDBG and other funds (the previous version limited projects to within the URA boundary). Ms. Yuhasz added that there will likely be more substantive changes to the document next year after the City's new master plan has been adopted.

Mayor Nicholson stated that he likes the change that was made to prioritize projects within the urban renewal districts rather than limiting projects to those areas. He has found that language to be very restrictive and gave the example of the South Gardener project that's currently underway and that CDBG funds wouldn't be able to be used for that project the way this document was previously worded. Mayor Nicholson added that on the City side they are looking to update some of the plans that are highlighted in this document, including the Complete Streets Prioritization Plan and the ADA Transition Plan, and have gone after different grants to try to update them because they are either expired or very close to expiring and need to be renewed at some point. Assistant Director Yuhasz added that barrier removal projects are eligible for CDBG funding through EOHLIC only if the project is listed in the ADA Transition Plan, so updating that plan to include current conditions and needs would be helpful.

Director Stevens said a motion to approve the changes to the CDS was not needed.

2.2 Status of FY2025 CDBG Mini Entitlement Grant

Assistant Director Yuhasz said City has a fully executed agreement for the FY2025 funds in place and has submitted a response to the Special Conditions EOHLC imposed on the grant. EOHLC reviewed the submission and issued a partial release. She explained that the City did not receive a full release because funds from the School Street School pathway design project and the Gardner Emergency Housing Mission project need to be reallocated, and EOHLC also had some questions about the Waterford Street Community Center project and wanted more information than what was included in the application.

2.3 Schedule for FY2026 CDBG Mini Entitlement Application

Assistant Director Yuhasz referred to the application schedule in the Committee's meeting packet. She said they are about halfway through the process of preparing to submit the CDBG application to EOHLC, and the next step is to submit a list of proposed projects to EOHLC for their review. Ms. Yuhasz said she would send it this evening after the meeting. Tomorrow morning, the proposed projects will be presented to Economic and Community Development Committee of the City Council, and then again on March 11th, with the presentation to the City Council tentatively scheduled for April 6th.

2.4 FY2022-23 Project Updates

2.4.1 Demolition of 205-213 Main Street

Director Stevens reported that the Gardner Redevelopment Authority (GRA) is still in the process of land disposition. The property is currently being advertised on the open market for sale to gauge interest in the site. That will last for a period of 90 days. So, it is active right now. He added that it bolsters the GRA's eventual application to EOHLC as the approving body for the land sale, as it proves that they did their due diligence to gauge the public for interest in the property rather than just move forward with one buyer.

2.4.2 Greenwood Pool Demolition

Assistant Director Yuhasz said there is no news on this project given the weather. Once the weather gets better, the demolition contractor will be able to complete the site work included in their contract.

2.4.3 Social Services

Assistant Director Yuhasz said there are only two FY2022-23 open social service projects – those that were recently awarded to the Gardner Community Action Committee (CAC) and the Montachusett Veterans Outreach Center (MVOC). MVOC has already submitted quite a few invoices for goods that they've purchased for the veterans they serve. Bot agencies are aware of the June 30th deadline to expend these funds.

2.5 FY2024 Project Updates

2.5.1 Social Services

Assistant Director Yuhasz said the only remaining FY2024 social service project that hasn't been completed is the Gartner Athletic Program User Fee project, 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 to EOHLC. She sent a reminder to him this morning and will continue to send reminders until the information is provided.

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

Assistant Director Yuhasz said the amendment is in the process of being approved. There was an issue with the national objective and whether the City could use old Census data to meet a Citywide low- and moderate income (LMI) national objective or not, and EOHLC eventually determined that the City could use the old data, thanks to Mayor Nicholson's intervention. Once it's approved in EOHLC's grant management system, Ms. Yuhasz will contact Tighe & Bond, the City's on-call engineering firm, and ask them for the scope of services needed to issue a notice to proceed for design and bid documents. Based on the current schedule, it will be bid in April with construction completed over the summer.

Mayor Nicholson further explained the situation, stating that the project was originally submitted and approved using the old Census data, and because prior to the 2020 Census, Gardener was an over 51% LMI community, the entire city could be considered LMI. After the 2020 Census data was released, the city dropped below 51% and the median income in the city increased which made it so that it's neighborhood by neighborhood based rather than citywide where you can consider those funds to be helping an LMI community. EOHLC took into consideration that this project was originally submitted back when we had this previous LMI Census data as well as the fact that the construction of the pavilion was originally combined with the demolition as one project when the city submitted the original application. Director Stevens added that he was glad to see EOHLC considered these extenuating circumstances and will approve the amendment, as the community expects the construction of the pavilion.

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.