



# City of Gardner Master Plan DRAFT

Prepared by:  
Barrett Planning Group LLC  
BSC Group

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## Acronyms

ACS – American Community Survey  
ADA – American with Disabilities Act  
AUL – Activity & Use Limitation  
CDBG – Community Development Block Grants  
DPW – Department of Public Works  
EEA – Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs  
EJ – Environmental Justice  
EOHLC – Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing & Livable Communities  
FEMA – Federal Emergency Management Agency  
FIRM – Flood Insurance Rate Map  
GAAMHA – Gardner Athol Area Mental Health Association  
G.L. – Massachusetts General Laws  
HUD – US Department of Housing & Urban Development  
MACRIS – Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System  
MART – Montachusett Regional Transit Authority  
MassDEP – Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection  
MassDOT – Massachusetts Department of Transportation  
MBTA – Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority  
MEPA – Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act  
MHC – Massachusetts Historical Commission  
MRPC – Montachusett Regional Planning Commission  
MWCC – Mount Wachusett Community College  
NHESP – Massachusetts Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program  
TIP – Transportation Improvement Program

## I. Executive Summary

*This chapter is blank for now but is included to show the overall layout of the plan.*

## **II. Introduction**

### III. Values and Vision Statement

Early in the development of this Master Plan, the project team worked with the Master Plan Steering Committee and gathered public input to develop a list of values important to Gardner, and a vision statement of what the community desires Gardner to be in twenty years. These values and vision statement were used to inform the rest of the plan, to ensure any recommendations were centered on the community's values and would help the City reach its future goals.

#### Values

Values are central to a community's identity; they are community features most residents agree define the community. Gardner community members value:

- A vibrant community fostering creativity, cultivating connections, and embracing inclusivity
- High-quality affordable housing options for all ages and family sizes
- Stewardship and protection of natural resources
- Respecting heritage while embracing innovation
- Services and support for all community members

#### Vision Statement

By 2045, Gardner will be a vibrant, close-knit community that blends small-town charm with diverse opportunities for all residents.

The city will continue to serve as a regional hub, with a strong education system and partnerships supporting workforce development and youth opportunity.

The city will offer affordable housing and a wide range of activities that bring families and neighbors together.

A revitalized, pedestrian-friendly downtown will serve as the heart of community life, featuring local shops, restaurants, and upper-story housing that together create a lively atmosphere supporting businesses of all sizes.

Resilience and sustainability – embracing social equity, economic vitality, and environmental stewardship – will shape planning and development decisions, building on past progress on solar energy, green development, and environmental stewardship.

Gardner's abundant natural resources will be protected and made accessible through expanded recreational amenities, while historic buildings will be thoughtfully rehabilitated to enrich the city's character.

Robust transportation options, including sidewalks, bike lanes, and bus and passenger rail connections, will link residents to regional destinations and ensure everyone can participate fully in community life.

Gardner will retain its charm and serve as a model for how small cities can grow thoughtfully, equitably, and vibrantly.

## IV. Gardner Today

With around 21,000 residents in 2025, Gardner is one of the three largest cities in north-central Massachusetts, along with Fitchburg (42,145) and Leominster (44,209), albeit about half the population of those cities.<sup>1</sup> Gardner is a regional hub for surrounding smaller communities, sharing municipal services such as a veteran’s agent and animal control officer and providing community services including a hospital and community college.

The city’s population has held steady since about 1930, hovering right around 20,000 residents. However, the Donahue Institute at the University of Massachusetts estimates that in the coming decades, Gardner will lose population, falling to 18,020 residents by 2050.<sup>2</sup> Updated in 2024, this data accounts for any potential post-pandemic growth that outlying areas such as Gardner may have seen as workers with more flexibility moved away from major urban centers such as Boston and Worcester. While the city experienced a modest 4.1 percent increase in population between 2013 and 2023, this reflects slower growth than both Worcester County (7.3 percent) and the state as a whole (5.9 percent).<sup>3</sup>

Gardner’s population is older and less diverse than both the county and the state. Over a third (36.6 percent) of the City’s residents are over 55 compared to 31.0 percent for Worcester County and 31.2 percent for Massachusetts.<sup>4</sup> An estimated 79.8 percent of Gardner residents are white, compared to 71.8 percent of Worcester County residents and 67.8 percent of all residents in the Commonwealth. The city does have a notable Hispanic or Latino population, at 9.4 percent of residents.

Incomes of Gardner households have not kept pace with that of Worcester County and Massachusetts; at \$62,948, Gardner’s median household income is notably lower than that of Worcester County (\$93,561) and Massachusetts (\$101,341).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Gardner city, Massachusetts,” QuickFacts, US Census Bureau, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/gardnercitymassachusetts/SBO050222>; “Fitchburg city, Massachusetts,” <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/fitchburgcitymassachusetts/PST045224>; “Leominster city, Massachusetts,” <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/leominstercitymassachusetts/PST045224>.

<sup>2</sup> UMass Donahue Institute, Population Estimates Program, *V2024 Population Projections*, May 2024.

<sup>3</sup> US Census Bureau, American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates, 2013-2023, Table B01003.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, Table B01001.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, Table B03002.

## Environmental Justice Areas

The Commonwealth’s Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs (EEA) identifies environmental justice (EJ) neighborhoods across the state.<sup>6</sup> These are areas that, due to income, minority status, or language limitations, have historically experienced disproportionate effects from harmful public and private developments. When undertaking planning efforts, EEA encourages more thoughtful outreach and consideration in these areas.

Gardner includes several census block groups that meet EJ criteria (**Map 4.1**).<sup>7</sup> Much of east Gardner is part of a block group that meets the minority EJ criterion – where minorities make up 40 percent or more of the population. However, the City’s 2023 *Open Space and Recreation Plan* noted that if the population housed at the North Central Correctional Institution were removed, the area would no longer meet the minority EJ criteria.<sup>8</sup> Through the middle of the city several block groups meet EJ criteria based on income – where the annual median household income is 65 percent or less of the statewide annual median household income. One block group in the southwest section of the city meets the EJ criteria for both minority and income – minorities make up 25 percent or more of the population *and* the annual median household income of the municipality in which the neighborhood is located does not exceed 150 percent of the statewide annual median household income.

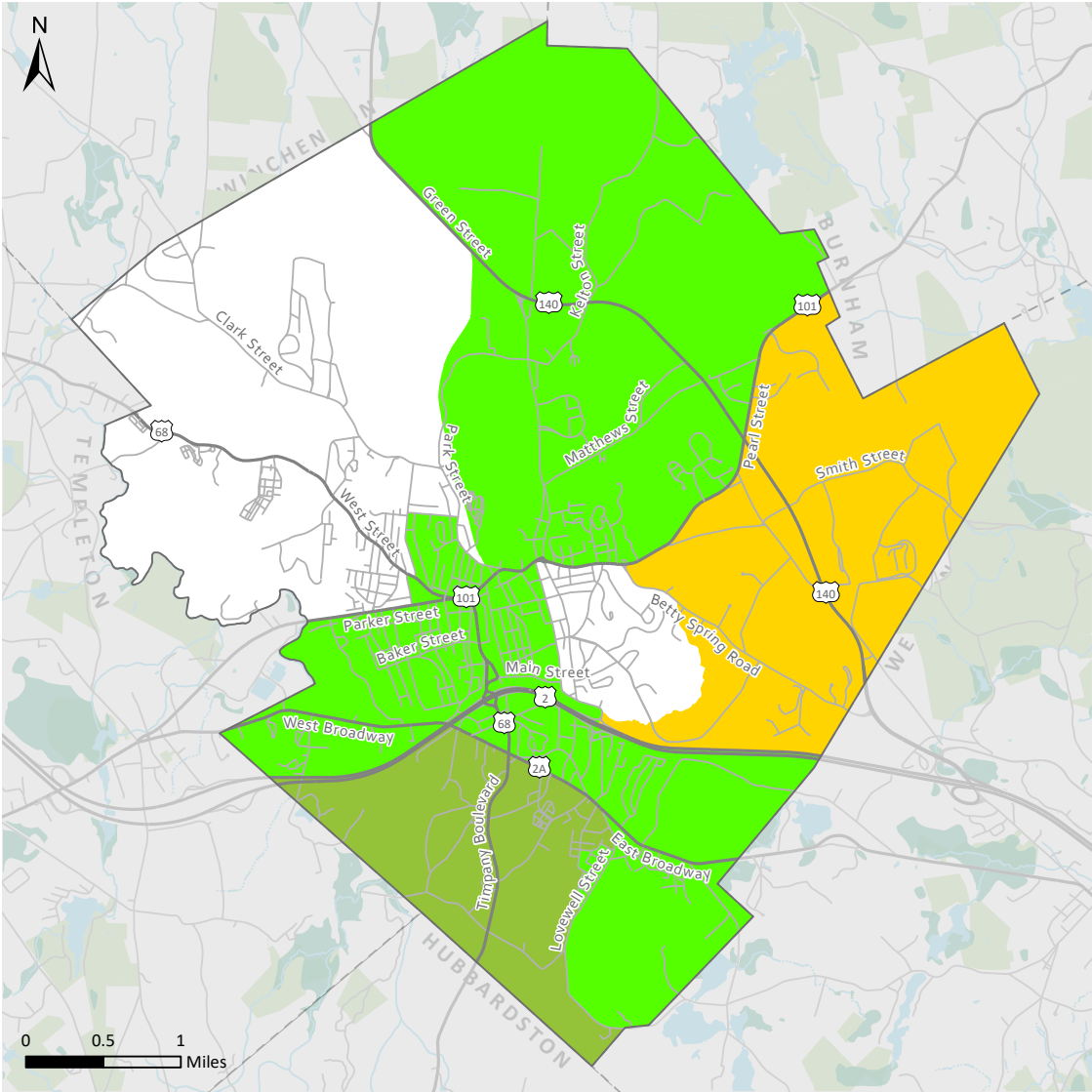
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<sup>6</sup> “Environmental Justice Populations in Massachusetts,” Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, accessed April 16, 2025. <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/environmental-justice-populations-in-massachusetts>.

<sup>7</sup> MassGIS, “Census 2020 Environmental Justice Populations,” June 6, 2024, prepared by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/massgis-data-2020-environmental-justice-populations>.

<sup>8</sup> Leedy, Gordon, Arica McCarthy, and Jonathan Fiore, *Open Space and Recreation Plan, City of Gardner, Massachusetts*, 2023, <https://www.gardner-ma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/9897/Gardner-2023-Open-Space-and-Recreation-Plan-Updated-Draft?bidId=, 2-3>.

Map 4.1, Environmental Justice Communities



Map X. Environmental Justice Communities

- EJ Criteria**
- Minority
  - Income
  - English isolation
  - Minority and Income
  - Minority and English isolation
  - Income and English isolation
  - Minority, Income and English isolation
- MassDOT Roads**
- Interstate
  - U.S. Highway
  - State Route
  - Non-numbered Road
  - Surrounding Towns



Date: May 2025  
 Source: Mass GIS and City of Gardner  
*The information depicted on this map is for general planning purposes only. It is not adequate for legal boundary definition, regulatory interpretation, or parcel level analysis. Use caution when interpreting the information on this map.*

## V. City Administration

Gardner’s City Charter, adopted in 1921 and last amended in 2025, establishes a mayor-city council form of government with several departments, boards, and commissions providing operational support for the City. Many City departments have a corresponding appointed or elected board of citizens that directs policy and the day-to-day work of the City’s professional staff.

Those departments, boards, and commissions relevant to sections of the Master Plan are highlighted here. It is hoped that all City departments, boards, and commissions will take up the Master Plan’s vision and goals, with some more directly involved in implementing the recommendations presented in this plan. Each topic section that follows further details the work of the various departments, boards, and commissions in support of this Master Plan.

### Municipal Leadership

<b>Mayor</b>	Gardner’s Mayor functions as the City’s executive branch, managing the day-to-day operations of the City, setting policy and the City’s budget, and overall providing direction for the City. The Mayor appoints all department heads and board and commission members, unless as otherwise provided for in the City Charter or by state law. The Mayor is popularly elected every two years. First elected in a special election in 2020, Mayor Michael Nicholson most recently won re-election in November of 2025.
<b>City Council</b>	<p>Gardner’s elected City Council serves as the legislative counterpart to the Mayor. The City Council votes on all proposed ordinances, both general and zoning, and approves the budget prepared by the Mayor as well as the Mayor’s appointments for department heads and board and commission members. There are eleven City Councilors, elected every two years, five serving the City’s wards and six elected at large. The City Council meets twice a month, once a month over the summer.</p> <p>The City Council has several subcommittees that review specific topics before they are presented to the full commission:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Appointments Committee</li> <li>● Economic &amp; Community Development Committee</li> <li>● Finance Committee</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Public Safety Committee</li> <li>● Public Service Committee</li> <li>● Public Welfare Committee</li> </ul>
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## City Departments

<b>Assessor</b>	The City’s Assessor determines the value of all real and personal property in the city, manages tax abatements and exemptions, and maintains basic records on all real property in the city. The Assessor is appointed by the Mayor and is supported by professional staff.
<b>Building Department</b>	The City’s Building Commissioner oversees the professional staff and inspectors of the Building Department, which enforces the state building code and the City’s general and zoning ordinances. Property owners must apply to the Building Department for various permits to perform work on their property, such as building and electrical permits.
<b>Community Development &amp; Planning</b>	Planning, growth, and development functions are managed within Community Development & Planning, overseen by the Director and assisted by several professional staff including the Conservation Agent. Community Development & Planning supports land use boards such as the Planning Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, Conservation Commission, and Gardner Redevelopment Authority.
<b>Engineering/Survey Department</b>	The Engineering/Survey Department, with the City Engineer, manages the survey records of the City’s infrastructure – roads, sidewalks, waterworks, bridges, dams, and more. Engineering also maintains the City’s streetlights.
<b>Geographic Information Systems</b>	The City’s GIS Coordinator maps the public realm within the Geographic Information Systems (GIS) department. The City’s public digital map gallery includes an Assessor’s parcel viewer, zoning, and maps of public projects and open space amenities.
<b>Health Department</b>	Professional staff in the City’s Health Department enforces various state and local building and health codes. They manage a variety of public safety, inspection, and licensing operations, for everything from housing, to liquor licenses, to the Gardner Transfer Station.

<b>Housing Authority</b>	The Gardner Housing Authority operates public housing for low-income, veteran, and senior residents in several locations throughout the city. The Housing Authority has professional and maintenance staff overseen by an Executive Director.
<b>Public Works</b>	The City’s infrastructure and public spaces, such as roads, cemeteries, and wastewater systems, are managed by the Department of Public Works (DPW) and split among five divisions – Cemeteries, Forestry, Highway, Parks & Recreation, and Water/Sewer.
<b>School Department</b>	Gardner maintains its own public school district for pre-K through 12 <sup>th</sup> grade students, overseen by the School Department. The School Department’s Superintendent manages the professional and maintenance staff and teachers. Classes are offered in four buildings: an elementary school, middle school, high school, and the alternative high school Gardner Academy for Learning and Technology.
<b>Senior Center</b>	With a building downtown, the Gardner Senior Center provides a meeting space and place of support for the community’s elderly residents. The Senior Center offers regular programming alongside connections to community organizations that support housing, food, and social needs. The Senior Center Director oversees several professional staff.
<b>Veterans’ Agent</b>	Shared with surrounding communities, the City’s Veterans’ Agent provides support for veterans in their efforts to obtain benefits, housing, and other needs.

### Boards and Commissions

<b>Airport Commission</b>	The seven appointed members of the Airport Commission are supported in their work by the part-time Airport Manager. Together they direct operations and maintenance at the Gardner Municipal Airport (KGDM), which is wholly located in neighboring Templeton.
<b>Board of Assessors</b>	Three Board of Assessors’ appointed members oversee municipal tax policy direction, exemptions, and abatements.

<b>Board of Health</b>	The appointed members of the Board of Health direct the regulatory work of the professional Health Department staff, approving policies, fine rates, and overseeing projects such as the current work to expand the City’s sludge landfill.
<b>CDBG Steering Committee</b>	Gardner receives Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding from the Commonwealth. The CDBG Steering Committee comprises City Councilors, City staff, and members of community organizations. The Committee reviews requests for CDBG funding, making recommendations to the Mayor and City Council for spending.
<b>Conservation Commission</b>	Under G.L. c. 40, §8C, the appointed members of the Conservation Commission enforce the state Wetlands Protection Act and Gardner’s own local wetlands protection ordinance. They direct the work of the Conservation Agent and manage some of the City’s open space lands.
<b>Council on Aging</b>	To raise awareness of the needs of Gardner’s seniors, the City has seven members appointed to the Council on Aging. The Council also supports the work of the Senior Center, planning events and services hosted by the Senior Center.
<b>Cultural Council</b>	Like most Massachusetts communities, Gardner receives funding from the Massachusetts Cultural Council. The seven appointed members of the Gardner Cultural Council grant the funds locally to individuals and organizations around the city.
<b>Disability Commission</b>	The appointed members of the City’s Disability Commission promote accessibility and enforce disability-related local regulations.
<b>Gardner Redevelopment Authority</b>	To support local economic development efforts, in 1965 the City established the Gardner Redevelopment Authority under G.L. c. 121B. The Redevelopment Authority oversees the City’s two industrial parks and the City’s urban renewal efforts downtown and along Mill Street.
<b>Golf Commission</b>	Operations at the City’s publicly-owned Gardner Golf Course are overseen by the five appointed members of the Golf Commission.
<b>Historical Commission</b>	Gardner’s appointed Historical Commission members promote the preservation of the community’s historic resources, largely through

	advocacy efforts and by advising the Mayor and City Council. Their duties are outline in G.L. c. 40, §8d.
<b>Housing Authority</b>	Established under the provisions of G.L. c. 121B, the Housing Authority’s five-member Board directs funding, policies, and operations related to the Housing Authority’s properties and oversees its professional staff. Members are appointed by the Mayor.
<b>Industrial Development Financing Authority</b>	Established under G.L. c. 40D, the City’s Industrial Development Financing Authority allows the City to issue bonds to support industrial development within the city.
<b>Planning Board</b>	The Planning Board, established under G.L. c. 41 §81A, regulates the subdivision of land, makes zoning recommendations to the City Council, undertakes site plan review for most new construction projects, and issues special permits for some land uses. The Board’s five members are appointed.
<b>School Committee</b>	The City’s Mayor serves as the chair of the School Committee, which is composed of six additional at large, elected members. The School Committee oversees operations of the City’s public school system, including the superintendent and management of the City’s school buildings and facilities.
<b>Traffic Commission</b>	Charged with making traffic safety recommendations to the City Council, the Traffic Commission is composed of several professional staff members rather than appointed residents. They include the Deputy Chief of Police, DPW Director, City Engineer, and the Community Development Director.
<b>Zoning Board of Appeals</b>	The Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) acts as the special permit granting authority for most special permits within the City’s zoning ordinance, decides on comprehensive permits under Chapter 40B, and hears appeals from permit and enforcement decisions. The ZBA’s five members are appointed.

## Gardner's Recent Planning Efforts

Gardner last completed a master plan in 1974, fifty years before this plan. It presented a community transitioning into the later twentieth century: although still industrial, more residents were commuting out of Gardner, especially to the new Digital complex in Westminster; the City was seeing increasing apartment construction; and changing demographics and aging facilities required decisions to be made about school facilities.

In some ways, the Gardner of 1974 mirrors the Gardner of today. Then as now, Gardner served as a slower-growing hub for a sub-region of the Montachusett area, with surrounding rural communities growing faster than Gardner. Pieces of the 1974 *City of Gardner Comprehensive Planning and Management Plan* will be familiar to Gardner residents today: protecting the City's water supply around Crystal Lake, seeking the development of the power line easement on the west side of the lake for recreational use, concerns about a high percentage of vacant land especially in the north part of the city, and encouraging the careful development of housing responsive to the needs of Gardner's residents, that is, elderly residents and affordable units.

Even though it has been fifty years since Gardner's last master plan, that does not mean the City has not been planning for its needs. Especially in the past twenty years, the City developed several plans that targeted specific areas or projects. Often these were completed in conjunction with federal or state grant requirements, enabling the City to bring in outside funding to support needed projects. Some of the more recent and relevant plans are described here and will be mentioned in more detail in the following chapters.

### Priority Development Sites (2008)

In 2008, the City designated three areas – eleven parcels total – as "priority development sites" under G.L. c. 43D (**Figure 5.1**). This allows for expedited permitting at these sites for projects that are in line with community goals and character. The three areas that still retain the priority development site designation are:

- Three parcels in the Summit Industrial Park
- Six parcels in the Rear Main Street corridor area
- Two parcels on either side of Mill Street

The three parcels in the industrial park are currently for sale. A solar array was developed on a portion of one of the Mill Street parcels in 2014.<sup>9</sup> Work is underway on the Rear Main project, with a groundbreaking held in the fall of 2024.<sup>10</sup>

### **Land Development Guidebook (2009/2016)**

To support the permitting of projects in the city, in 2009 the City developed the *Land Development Guidebook*. This guidebook lays out the major boards, commissions, and City departments involved in permitting, covers major processes such as site plan review and the subdivision of land, and generally provides clear guidance on how to move through the permitting process in Gardner. It was last updated in 2016.

### **Green Communities Action Plan (2010)**

The Commonwealth's Green Communities Division within the Department of Energy Resources supports municipalities in their effort to reduce energy use and costs in their municipal buildings and facilities. Designation as a Green Community by the Green Communities Division allows a municipality to apply for grants and technical assistance from the Commonwealth.

In 2010, the City worked with VHB, Inc. and the Demand Management Institute to prepare a *Green Communities Action Plan*. This *Action Plan* reviewed past work the City had undertaken towards the Green Communities designation and pulled together the final pieces needed for the application. Following the completion of the *Action Plan*, the City was designated a Green Community, and has received four grants through the program, the last in 2020.

### **City of Gardner Wind Turbine Feasibility Study (2011)**

Tighe & Bond completed a feasibility study for the installation of a wind turbine in the Summit Industrial Park in 2011. The proposed location was the lots at the end of Suffolk Lane, the main road in the Industrial Park. The study recommended moving forward with the construction of a turbine but the City has not pursued the project.

### **Urban Renewal Plan (2011)**

The City and the Gardner Redevelopment Authority worked with BSC Group in 2011 to develop an urban renewal plan for a portion of the city's downtown (**Figure 5.2**). The Division of Community Services within the Commonwealth's Executive Office of Housing & Livable

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<sup>9</sup> "Brownfields Clean Up Paves Way for Mill Street Solar Success," Environmental Business Council of New England, Inc., August 13, 2014, <https://ebcne.org/news/brownfields-clean-up-paves-way-for-mill-street-solar-success/>.

<sup>10</sup> "Gardner Breaks Ground on Rear Main Street Revitalization Project," North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce, <https://www.northcentralmass.com/gardner-breaks-ground-on-rear-main-street-revitalization-project/>.

Communities oversees urban renewal plans under G.L. c. 121B. The plans have specific, proscribed requirements that allow for additional government actions in areas where traditional private redevelopment and revitalization has not been successful. Gardner’s plan defined the urban renewal area, reviewed the existing conditions, and then made a series of targeted recommendations to support revitalization, including funding, policy, and physical development projects. The City has recently focused redevelopment efforts on the Rear Main area within the urban renewal plan boundaries.

### **Westminster-Gardner-Winchendon Route 140 North Corridor Profile (2012)**

In 2012, Gardner’s regional planning agency, the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC), completed a regional study of Route 140 through the towns of Westminster, Gardner, and Winchendon. The study reviewed the safety conditions of the roadway through the three communities and made recommendations for traffic and pedestrian improvements. The project also included a build-out analysis to consider the traffic impacts if all the land along the route were built out to its full potential as allowed by the underlying zoning.

The plan makes some general recommendations for the roadway, such as increased signage and speed enforcement, and also includes some specific safety recommendations at key intersections, such as Green and Stone streets, and Matthews Street.

### **Complete Streets (2016)**

The City adopted a Complete Streets policy in 2016, the first step in the process to receive funding through the Commonwealth’s Department of Transportation Complete Streets program. Complete Streets provide safe modes of transportation for all users – pedestrians, bicyclists, public transit vehicles, and drivers. Following the adoption of a Complete Streets policy statement, the City produced a prioritized list of Complete Streets projects and received funding in FY18 (city-wide bicycle and pedestrian improvements) and FY23 (multi-use path along Crystal Lake).

### **FY22-FY25 Community Development Strategy**

Gardner receives state Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds to support community development projects. The City’s FY22-FY25 Community Development Strategy outlines eligible project types and areas the City will target for CDBG funding. Several of the goals target the urban renewal area; other projects include supporting recreational facilities and rehabilitating or demolishing blighted buildings.

### **Open Space and Recreation Plan (2023)**

The Commonwealth's Division of Conservation Services provides funding for open space acquisition and trails work if a community has a current open space and recreation plan that meets the Division's requirements. Gardner completed the required *Open Space and Recreation Plan* in 2023 as an update to the City's previous 2015 plan. Two consultants, Gordon Leedy and Arica McCarthy, assisted in the completion of the plan, which expires in 2030. It reviews open space preservation efforts and recreational facilities and spaces around the city and provides targeted recommendations for how to increase open space and improve recreation spaces.

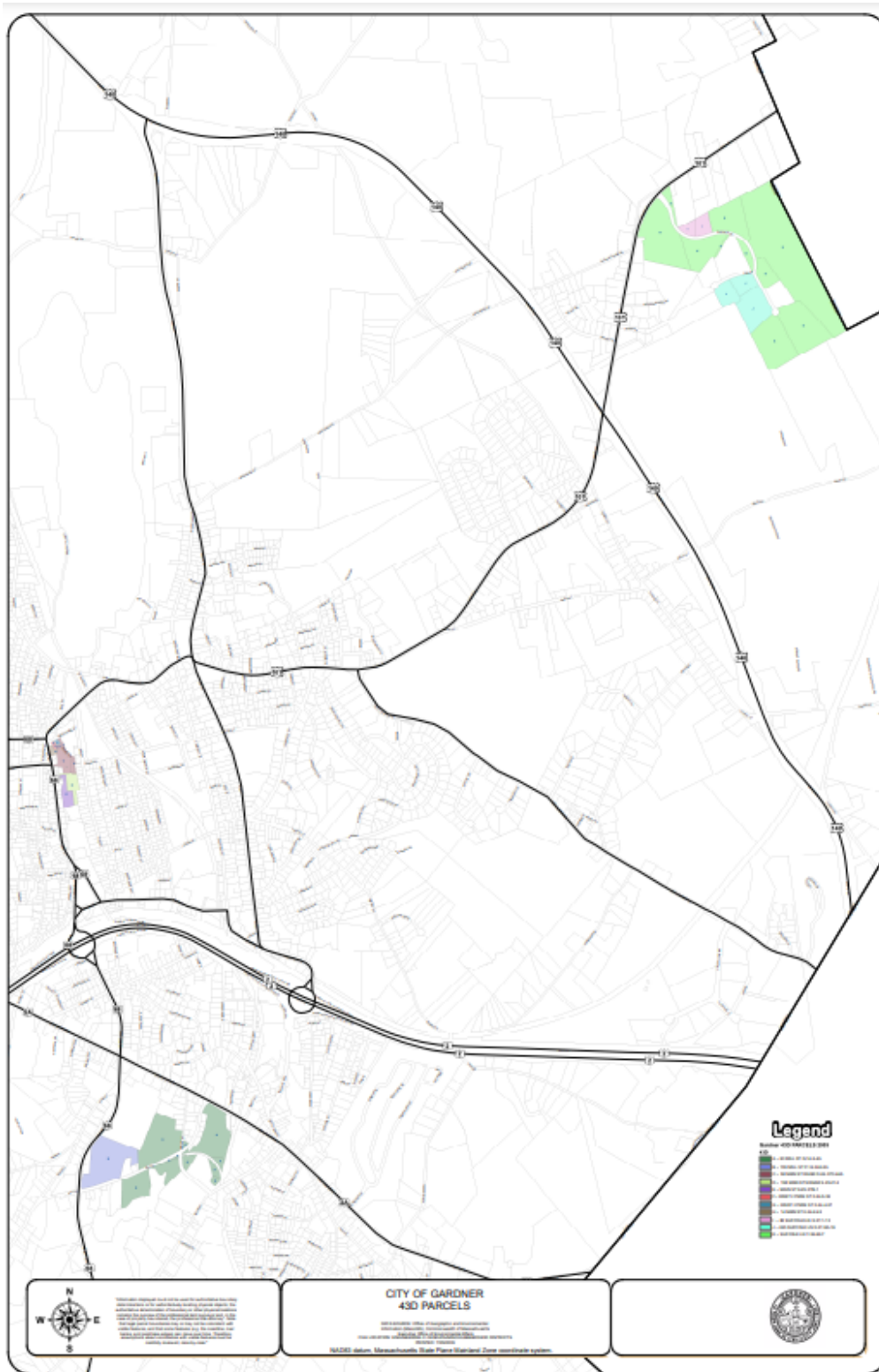
Gardner's *Open Space and Recreation Plan* developed six overarching goals for the City's future open space and recreation efforts:

1. Protect and improve the quality of existing open spaces, parks, and recreational opportunities.
2. Selective expansion of open spaces, parks, and recreational opportunities.
3. Protect water resources and improve water quality.
4. Accommodate new growth where the environment can best support it.
5. Increase public awareness, use, and stewardship of the City's water resources, forests, parks, conservation areas, and recreational opportunities.
6. Expand multimodal connectivity by improving bicycle and pedestrian paths, trails and sidewalks.

### **Airport Master Plan Update (2025)**

The City's most recently-completed plan is the *Airport Master Plan Update*, finalized in February of 2025 and undertaken by Gale Associates, Inc. The plan updates the airport's last master plan, completed in 2008. It reviews the existing conditions at the airport, including usage both in terms of number of flights and types of aircraft, and concludes with recommendations. Much of the plan is based on Federal Aviation Administration and Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) regulations and requirements. As improvements since the 2008 plan primarily focused on upgrading critical safety features, many of the recommendations of the 2025 plan focus on improving the overall quality, experience, and facilities at the airport.

Figure 5.1, Priority Development Sites



Source: "Priority Development Sites," City of Gardner, 2009.

Figure 5.2, Urban Renewal Plan Boundary



Source: BSC Group, Urban Renewal Plan, Gardner, MA, Worcester, MA, 2011.

## **VI. Cross-Cutting Issues**

In the chapters that follow, this master plan will highlight Gardner’s current conditions and future needs in six main topic areas. However, several topics frequently came up in conversations with community members, data, and other research that cut across several of the topics. These cross-cutting issues will be important focus areas for the City in the years to come, as they have a significant impact on quality of life within the community.

### **Community and Support**

Throughout this master plan process, the project team has continuously heard how much Gardner residents value the sense of community within the city. Residents describe Gardner as a place where people can raise a family and receive the support they need to grow and thrive. The affordability of the city’s housing, numerous events throughout the year, education system, and supportive community service organizations that operate within the city – all are touted as strengths of the city.

Continuing to support residents in the coming years will require bringing in higher-paying jobs that can raise household income to be more in line with Worcester County and the state. While housing is seen as affordable, data shows that it is not affordable for all Gardner residents. And while a number of community service organizations operate in the city, there are gaps in the services they provide, such as the need for a shelter. Gardner’s sense of community is strong, but must be supported and maintained to ensure it will continue to be a major asset for residents.

### **Balancing Growth with Preservation**

When viewing an aerial image of Gardner, the city presents as a dense cluster of settlement downtown surrounded by trees and open space, with Crystal Lake at the center of the city. To protect this critical drinking water source, the City has permanently conserved the lands around it to limit pollutants entering the lake. Outside of the water supply lands, the Commonwealth and non-profit organizations have protected other critical open space parcels in the city. Combined, all of these efforts have made open space and protected lands a significant part of the city’s landscape outside of downtown.

Gardner’s long-term development strategy must strike a careful balance between preserving its rural and natural landscapes and meeting the evolving needs of a small urban center. Protecting open space and sensitive environmental resources is essential not only for ecological health and climate resilience, but also for maintaining the community’s distinctive character and quality of life. Gardner must remain responsive to housing demand, economic opportunity, and shifts in

demographics by encouraging thoughtful infill development, adaptive reuse of underutilized properties and brownfield sites, and policies that promote equitable access to housing. Achieving this balance will require a coordinated and data-driven approach that leverages the City's regulatory tools, regional partnerships, and infrastructure investments.

This balanced approach presents a significant opportunity for Gardner to position itself as a model for small cities that integrate growth and preservation. By directing new development toward areas with existing infrastructure, the City can protect rural landscapes while fostering compact, walkable, and economically vibrant neighborhoods. Strategic infill development, the repurposing of historic and vacant buildings, and context-sensitive design can deliver new housing, commercial, and mixed-use projects that fit the community's character while strengthening its economic base, enhancing livability, and ensuring its distinctive cultural identity is preserved for future generations.

## **Downtown Revitalization and Redevelopment**

Downtown Gardner, often cited by residents as a point of pride and hub of the community, presents both challenges and opportunities. Challenges stem from the downtown's aging urban fabric, fragmented land ownership, and lingering industrial legacy. The last Urban Renewal Plan (URP) for downtown found over 88 percent of the structures in the downtown renewal area predate World War II and approximately 38 percent of properties were in moderate or severe disrepair. Small, irregularly-shaped parcels and multiple land owners make it difficult to assemble land for redevelopment. Brownfields and residual contamination from historic industrial uses further complicate site readiness. These conditions have contributed to persistently high vacancy rates, estimated at 20 to 30 percent at the time of the URP, and have slowed private reinvestment despite the City's efforts to create more flexible zoning, façade improvement programs, and economic incentives. The downtown also lacks cohesive pedestrian connections and suffers from perceptions of safety issues in underutilized areas, limiting its attractiveness for new businesses and residents.

At the same time, many of these liabilities can be transformed into strengths. The City has already launched several initiatives under the URP that have begun to catalyze private investment: the redevelopment of the Goodnow-Pearson building into mixed-use space, rehabilitation of the Heywood-Wakefield complex for housing, and upgrades to public spaces and streetscapes as part of the Rear Main project. Longer-term plans include further reinvestment in upper-story housing, mixed-use redevelopment along Main and Parker streets, and encouraging transit-oriented development with the extension of multimodal connections such as the North Central Pathway and improved Montachusett Regional Transit Authority (MART) bus facilities. Turning

downtown’s challenges into opportunities will allow Gardner to capitalize on its historic character, walkable scale, and civic assets to create a vibrant twenty-first century downtown. In doing so, the City can reestablish the core as a regional hub for commerce, culture, and housing while reinforcing community pride and quality of life.

## An Aging Population

A review of Gardner’s demographic data shows the city’s population is aging. Over the next twenty-five years, the city’s younger age cohorts are expected to lose population, while the oldest ones – those over seventy years old – are expected to grow. This has implications for many different areas of municipal planning, as older residents have different needs than younger residents. Older residents require different kinds of housing: adapted to mobility concerns, fewer bedrooms, and near supportive services. Those supportive services, especially medical needs, are often more intensive than the needs of younger residents. Older residents may not be able to drive or walk as far as younger residents, requiring different kinds of transportation. And while older adults still need activities and events for socialization, their interests are likely different from those that younger residents might look for, especially families. If the population projections are accurate, the City will need to tailor its planning efforts towards an older population. The City could also make efforts to counterbalance the aging population by attracting younger residents and families.

## Sustainability and Resilience

Over the past twenty years, the City has undertaken several sustainability-related projects. The establishment of solar overlay zoning districts has resulted in the construction of several solar fields, including one on a City-owned parcel.<sup>11</sup> The new Gardner Elementary School, opened in 2022, was designed as a “school in the woods” to take advantage of its natural setting. The building features an abundance of natural light to bring the outdoors in, and natural landscaping features such as rain gardens to enhance the sustainability of the site. The City has also installed electric vehicle (EV) charging stations in some public parking areas.

The City should build on this strong record of sustainable improvements as it looks to increase its resilience to future climate change impacts. The 2022 *Massachusetts Climate Change Assessment* can guide planning efforts to combat the impacts of climate change Gardner and surrounding communities may experience in the coming years (**Figure 6.1**). The assessment places Gardner at the eastern edge of the Greater Connecticut River Valley Region. Several of the region’s impacts presented in the assessment may be strongly felt in Gardner, such as changes in native and

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<sup>11</sup> Andrew Mansfield, “Gardner authorizes solar agreements,” *The Gardner News*, October 2, 2018, <https://www.thegardnernews.com/story/news/2018/10/03/gardner-authorizes-solar-agreements/9719264007/>

invasive species in open spaces, a reduction in the availability of affordable housing, and impacts to freshwater ecosystems that could harm the City’s drinking water sources.

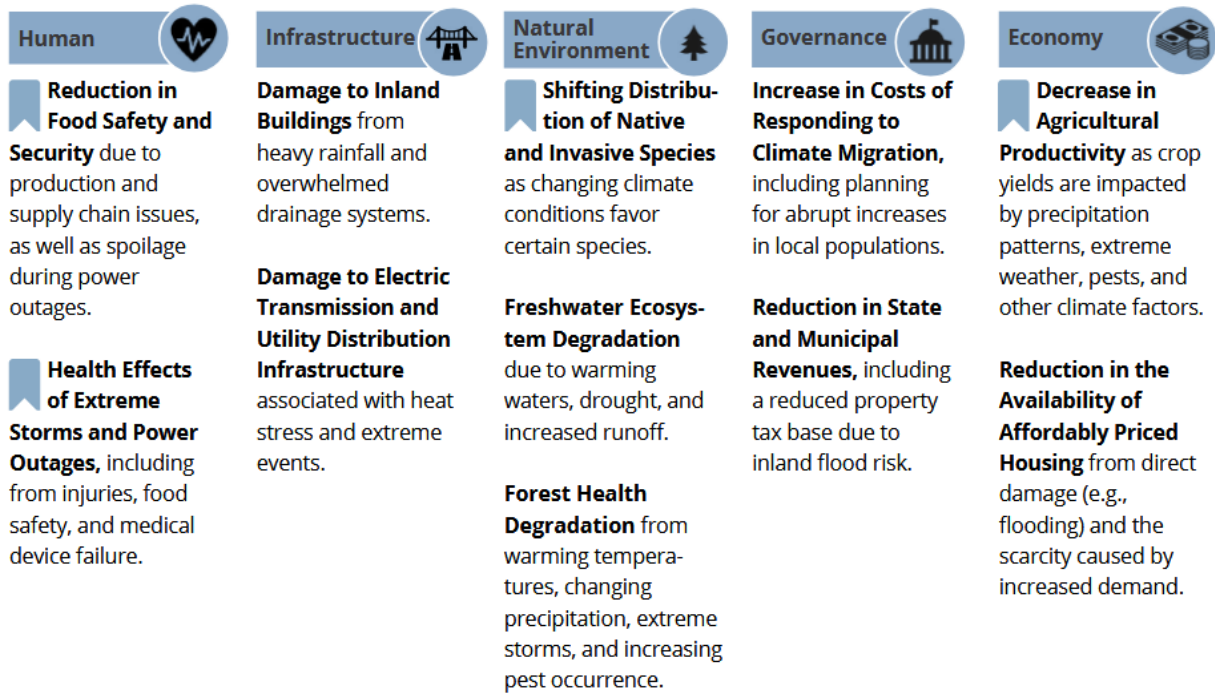


Figure 6.1 displays the climate change impacts anticipated for the Greater Connecticut River Valley Region from the 2022 Massachusetts Climate Change Assessment. Impacts with a bookmark flag next to them indicate impacts that differ from the top three impacts in each category for the state as a whole.

## Funding Resources

Across several topic areas of the master plan, funding and capacity issues are frequently mentioned. Around a quarter of the City’s land area is tax exempt; this includes numerous parcels owned by the City and state, conservation lands, and other features such as water and public rights-of-way. This means the City is only collecting property taxes from three-quarters of its land area. Beyond these parcels, 35 percent of the land is vacant, meaning it generates less tax revenue than if it were developed. This lowers the available tax base, requiring a smaller number of residents and businesses to support municipal services across the city’s full geography.

To date, the City has not adopted, nor attempted to adopt, the Community Preservation Act. This source of funding, unique to Massachusetts, supports local affordable housing, historic preservation, and open space and recreation projects – three categories the project team heard frequently were important to Gardner residents. The City has also not established an affordable housing trust, which can receive and use funds to develop affordable housing in the city. Many

communities adopt the Community Preservation Act and an affordable housing trust hand-in-hand, as the two can work together to support affordable housing development.

The City does receive Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds from the state, which have provided support for a variety of projects over the years, particularly in the downtown area. However, while in the past CDBG funding was used to rehabilitate private housing units, the City has not used the funding in that way for a number of years. This has removed a potentially significant source of local funding to support housing development and maintenance in the city.

The condition of roads and sidewalks was also frequently mentioned as a concern by residents during the public engagement process. DPW staff noted this issue is directly tied to the state's Chapter 90 roadwork funding, which has not kept pace with the City's growing infrastructure needs. As a result, maintenance and improvement efforts are often delayed or scaled back, highlighting the importance of securing additional funding sources to ensure safe and accessible streets and sidewalks for all residents

The City has, however, been successful in receiving grant funding for a variety of different projects: community planning, brownfields remediation, Complete Streets transportation work, and other infrastructure improvements. This track record of supporting municipal efforts through a variety of sources will serve the City well in the future as it looks to expand its capacity and funding sources.

## VII. Topic-Specific Issues

### Natural Resources and Open Space

Gardner’s natural environment – its forests, wetlands, hills, rivers, ponds, and open spaces – is one of the city’s greatest assets. The city’s topography includes distinctive features such as the Gardner Esker and a network of streams that flow into the Otter River. These landscapes support clean drinking water, protect against flooding, provide habitat for wildlife, and offer residents and visitors places to hike, fish, bike, and enjoy nature. Nearly 60 percent of Gardner’s land remains undeveloped, and more than 4,000 acres are permanently protected as conservation land. These spaces help maintain the city’s beauty, improve quality of life, and build resilience to climate change.

As Gardner grows and changes, its natural resources face new challenges. Invasive plants and insects harm native trees and wildlife, while climate change increases the risk of flooding, wildfire, and habitat loss. Sediment buildup and invasive growth have degraded some ponds and wetlands. In the face of these concerns, the City has worked to restore habitats, manage forests, protect drinking water, and improve trail and conservation areas for public use.

### Aging Surface Water Infrastructure

As a community criss-crossed by ponds and streams, Gardner contains a significant amount of infrastructure that handles the movement of water. However, in recent years, as infrastructure ages and the volume of rain and storm events increases, vulnerabilities have appeared in the City’s infrastructure.

To support local ecosystems and ensure public safety, the City will need to modernize aging stream crossings and increase the size of culverts to proactively manage stormflows and reduce flooding. Updating this infrastructure can help reconnect fragmented aquatic habitats, promoting healthier fish and wildlife populations both within Gardner and throughout the surrounding region, as well as maintain roadway safety. To support this work in the past, Gardner received a grant through the Commonwealth’s Culvert Replacement Municipal Assistance (CRMA) program to support work on both Keyes Brook and Wilder Road.

Aging dams also present ecological and safety risks. Several man-made dams, including Hilchey Pond Dam and Ramsdall Dam, lack Emergency Action Plans (EAPs). EAPs, required for all High Hazard Potential and Significant Hazard Potential dams, include information such as notification flowcharts, maps displaying impacted areas if dam failure occurs, and procedures for warning downstream residents if dam failure is imminent. Crystal Lake Dike, located in the downtown

area, remains unrated and lacks a spillway, making it a significant concern due to its size and potential impacts if failure occurs.

Beaver dams can alter the flow of water and impact adjacent land. In recent years, the Conservation and Planning Agent has issued a few Emergency Certifications (ECs) in order to breach a few beaver dams due to concerns regarding water levels near infrastructure. The City's Conservation and Planning Agent is working with other City departments to explore long-term solutions such as using beaver deceivers or other alternative measures to reduce the need for breaches when dealing with conflicts between humans and wildlife.

### Water and Wetlands Quality

With Crystal Lake, the main drinking water source for Gardner, at the center of the city, water quality is at the forefront of mind for the community. Stormwater runoff and erosion continue to degrade surface waters and increase the risk of localized flooding. Excess sediment in ponds and wetlands reduces their water-holding capacity and diminishes habitat quality. At Dunn Pond, high bacteria levels have resulted in repeated closures, limiting public swimming and recreation. Parker Pond, heavily impacted by sediment and invasive species, may require dredging to restore warm water fishing and recreational access. Sensitive ecosystems such as acidic bogs and peatlands remain vulnerable to disturbance, especially in areas where development has removed natural buffers. Aside from supporting the city's drinking water supply, these surface waters and wetlands provide recreation spaces that are highly valued by community members.

### Invasive Threats

Gardner's extensive forested landscape makes the City particularly vulnerable to the spread of invasive plant species and forest pests. Insects, plant diseases, and the accelerating effects of climate change have collectively weakened many native tree species, reducing overall forest resilience. Several destructive insects, most notably the emerald ash borer, Asian longhorned beetle, and hemlock woolly adelgid, are already established in parts of the region and continue to threaten the health and long-term viability of Gardner's forests. Their impacts include widespread decline or loss of native species, shifting habitat conditions, and increased safety concerns associated with dead or weakened trees.

Invasive plants further compound these pressures. Species such as Japanese knotweed, Oriental bittersweet, Japanese barberry, and tree-of-heaven are prevalent along roadways, rail corridors, disturbed sites, and even within natural areas. These plants spread quickly, are difficult and costly to eradicate, and can outcompete native vegetation, reducing biodiversity and degrading wildlife habitat. As climate conditions continue to change, the presence and spread of invasive species

are expected to intensify, highlighting the need for coordinated management, public education, and long-term investment in ecological stewardships.

### Improving Habitats

Roads and development, particularly along Route 2, have fragmented key wildlife corridors. These disruptions reduce habitat connectivity and limit the ability of species to move and adapt to environmental changes. Mapping and restoring critical habitat linkages could reconnect these pathways. Existing forest cart paths may provide a low-impact foundation for this effort and should be assessed for restoration or maintenance. Improving habitat connectivity will not only protect biodiversity but will also enhance Gardner's resilience to climate change.

### Increasing Access and Improving Connectivity

Gardner protects nearly thirty percent of its land as open space and maintains a well-distributed system of parks and playgrounds. All five of the City's primary playgrounds meet full ADA compliance and are located within EJ areas. The City can build on this success by enhancing accessibility, expanding ADA improvements, and preventing the loss of unprotected open space to development. In addition, identifying and pursuing new funding sources, such as the Land and Water Conservation Fund, MassTrails, and Complete Streets, can help finance land protection, improve connectivity, and ensure equitable access to outdoor spaces. Gardner should also explore innovative strategies, including land acquisition funds and public-private partnerships, to protect high-value properties and maintain long-term stewardship of its open space network.

## Historic and Cultural Resources

In addition to the open spaces around the city described in the previous section, Gardner's landscape is also defined by its historic buildings, especially in the downtown core. Significant growth in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and less in the later twentieth century, resulted in many historic residences, public buildings, and commercial buildings. Gardner's industrial past is still very present in the many large factory buildings and complexes scattered across the city. Successive waves of immigrants who settled in the city to support its industrial needs have also left their mark on the landscape in the form of social clubs and organizations. These historic buildings and organizations form a rich cultural heritage that will play an important part in planning for Gardner's future.

### A Strong Sense of Place

Buildings from the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the height of Gardner's time as a manufacturing hub, dominate the landscape, especially in the downtown area. Downtown commercial buildings, factories, and houses come in a variety of shapes, sizes, and forms, built to serve the needs of residents and businesses in a time before motorized transportation. Many buildings retain their original features, materials, and forms. These buildings create a sense of place and character for Gardner, bringing variety to the city's built landscape.

Coupled with its historic buildings, the city also has a number of cultural organizations that promote its history. These include the Gardner Museum, the City's Cultural Council, and numerous ethnic social clubs. These organizations preserve and tell the story of the city's history from its earliest years, through its heyday as a furniture manufacturing hub, to today. Looking to the future, the preservation of the city's historic buildings and cultural organizations will help the city retain its sense of place and history.

### Supporting Historic Preservation Efforts

Gardner's landscape is defined by its open space and natural lands and its numerous historic resources, particularly those clustered in downtown. But unlike the city's open space, which many community members value and which the City has done much work to protect, it appears there is less concern for and awareness of the city's historic resources. Rather than potential assets, community members instead see historic buildings as blight and blemishes that mar the appearance of the city. Although the City has an active local Historical Commission, it does not currently have a community-wide historic preservation plan. Without proactive planning for the city's historic resources, as the community sees more and more development, its unique assets could be lost, eroding its sense of history and place, and really what makes Gardner, Gardner.

### Documenting Historic Resources

One of the most basic tasks of a local historical commission is to document the community's historic resources. A community needs to know where its historic resources are, and why they are potentially historically and/or architecturally significant, in order to make decisions about how to protect those resources. While the Gardner Historical Commission made initial efforts to document the city's resources in the 1970s, there have been no further efforts to do so. Major manufacturing complexes such as the Heywood-Wakefield factory complex downtown have been documented, as have a number of potentially significant buildings, but large swathes of the city remain undocumented. These historic resources are potentially important for the future redevelopment of the city, and thus should be documented so the City can confidently incorporate them into future plans.

### Protecting Historic Resources

After documentation, a strong local preservation program makes efforts to protect its significant historic resources using tools such as demolition delay, local historic districts, and preservation restrictions. However, to date, Gardner has done very little to protect its historic buildings. The City has not adopted a demolition delay ordinance or established a local historic district. There are two National Register of Historic Places districts and only two properties individually listed in the National Register, which provides very limited protections for historic resources. Only three buildings in the city are protected by a perpetual preservation restriction. If Gardner wants to maintain its sense of place and its significant historic resources, the City should expand its preservation toolbox to include different methods of protection.

## Land Use

Land use planning is fundamental to shaping the physical form and character of a community. It determines how land is allocated for residential, commercial, industrial, recreational, and conservation purposes, influencing patterns of growth, development, and resource management. Understanding existing land use patterns is a critical first step in shaping Gardner's future development. A thoughtful approach to land use helps ensure a balanced, sustainable, and resilient community that meets the needs of current and future residents. Gardner's current arrangement of land uses reflects the historical growth trends, economic forces, and past planning decisions described in the previous sections. Evaluating these conditions provides insight into how land is utilized today and highlights opportunities and challenges for future land use planning.

A summary of Gardner's recent planning efforts, which have helped to shape the city's land use patterns, is included in Chapter V. City Administration.

### Underutilized and Vacant Land

Gardner's land use profile is defined by its large share of vacant land, the largest land use category in the city. There are 5,100 acres of vacant land comprising about 35 percent of the city's total land area. While a significant portion of this acreage is protected for water supply or conservation purposes, a notable amount remains zoned for residential, commercial, or industrial development. 19 percent of vacant land in the city, about 1,000 acres, is classed as developable or potentially developable by the City's Assessor. Many of these parcels are scattered across the city, including sites within established neighborhoods and along key transportation corridors. Underutilized sites can contribute to blight, reduce property tax revenue, and limit the vibrancy of surrounding areas, especially when they are concentrated near downtown or in strategic growth nodes.

Yet these pockets of developable land within established neighborhoods and downtown also provide a rare opportunity. With strategic planning, select vacant parcels could be repurposed for new housing, commercial ventures, light industrial activity, or recreation, expanding the City's tax base while addressing community needs such as housing affordability, job creation, and public amenities. Priority should be given to parcels within or adjacent to existing infrastructure and services, minimizing costs and supporting smart growth principles. Tools such as Development Overlay Districts, Smart Growth Planned Unit Developments, and the City's success in securing brownfields assessment and cleanup funding from the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) position Gardner to proactively guide reinvestment in these areas. By aligning land use policy with market trends, environmental sustainability goals, and equity considerations,

Gardner can transform underutilized land into catalysts for economic vitality, neighborhood renewal, and long-term resilience.

### Opportunities for Strategic Zoning Reform

In line with the significant amount of vacant land, a build-out analysis of Gardner’s existing zoning and development patterns through 2040 completed for this master plan reveals substantial capacity for additional growth, particularly within areas suited for infill, redevelopment, and adaptive reuse. The property inventory in Gardner includes significant vacant parcels as well as 766 acres enrolled in Chapter 61 programs, which are currently semi-protected but could potentially be developed in the coming years. If current trends of four to six new residential units per year continue, Gardner could expect 60 to 100 additional units by 2040, a modest increase that would do little to address housing demand or diversify the housing stock.

To encourage more housing development, Gardner could harness the untapped development capacity of its vacant lands to better align land use with community priorities. Targeted zoning reforms and strategic land use policies could unlock far greater potential, doubling or tripling projected housing production to 150 to 300 units over the same period. Potential strategies include expanding Smart Growth Planned Unit Development (SGPUD) designations, revising General Residential 3 (GR3) and Commercial 1 (COM1) districts to allow more by-right multi-family housing, and prioritizing the remediation and redevelopment of brownfield sites. These actions would not only respond to community feedback calling for more housing choices, neighborhood amenities, and retail options, but would also advance other goals by fostering compact, walkable, and climate-resilient neighborhoods that support economic vitality and environmental stewardship.

### Zoning Constraints on Residential Growth

A review of building permit activity from 2019 to 2023 indicates a modest yet steady pace of residential development in Gardner, with annual new residential construction permits ranging from none to eight units. In contrast, residential renovations and additions have been more active, with permit volumes peaking at ninety-six in 2023, reflecting ongoing reinvestment in existing homes rather than new supply creation. While this pattern points to a stable housing market, it also underscores a constrained rate of housing growth – particularly in multi-family or higher-density formats that could help meet evolving housing needs. Much of the new construction has been concentrated in the Rural Residential 2 (RR2) and Single-Family Residential 1 (SFR1) districts, which together account for over 12,700 acres, or nearly 90 percent of all land within zoning districts. However, current RR2 zoning prohibits commercial uses and places

restrictions on multi-family development, limiting opportunities for more diverse housing types, mixed-use neighborhoods, and integrated economic activity.

Without targeted zoning updates such as strategic rezoning, expanded overlay districts, or inclusionary provisions, the City's ability to accommodate future housing demand, support affordability, and diversify neighborhood forms may remain limited. These constraints also pose a challenge to align land uses with broader goals for economic vitality, sustainability, and demographic resilience. By revising zoning in the RR2 and SFR1 districts to allow for greater density or promote mixed-use formats, the City can enable new development patterns that respond to changing demographic needs and market trends. Expanding overlay districts, allowing more by-right multi-family housing, and exploring inclusionary zoning could help diversify the housing stock while maintaining the character of existing neighborhoods.

### Leveraging Infrastructure and Brownfield Redevelopment for Growth

Several key growth nodes in Gardner are poised to accommodate future development, particularly in locations with both existing infrastructure and zoning flexibility. Priority areas include the Route 140 corridor, the downtown core, and the Sherman Street industrial zone – locations well-positioned for reinvestment and adaptive reuse. Strategic infrastructure improvements, especially in water, sewer, and roadway capacity, will be critical to realizing the potential of these areas. This need is reinforced by community feedback, with more than half of survey respondents identifying infrastructure limitations as a primary factor influencing land use. In addition, the ability to address brownfields and properties with Activity & Use Limitations (AULs) will be essential to unlocking constrained sites for productive reuse. The City's recent success in securing brownfield remediation funding, most notably the \$400,000 EPA Community-Wide Assessment Grant in 2023, demonstrates its capacity to attract resources and initiate site readiness efforts.

These conditions create a significant opportunity for Gardner to focus its growth strategy on areas that can deliver high returns on public investment. By directing infrastructure upgrades to strategic nodes such as Route 140, downtown, and Sherman Street, the City can address capacity limitations while attracting private sector interest in redevelopment. Continued pursuit of EPA and state-level funding, coupled with targeted zoning updates and public-private partnerships, can transform underutilized or environmentally constrained parcels into vibrant housing, commercial, or mixed-use developments. Such actions will not only strengthen the tax base and eliminate blight but also foster more connected, sustainable, and economically resilient land use patterns that align with Gardner's long-term vision.

## Housing

Gardner is a community with a wide variety of housing types constructed over the past two-plus centuries. It has a particularly rich supply of small multi-family structures (two, three, and four units), offering a range of housing options for Gardner residents. Housing is primarily clustered in downtown and West Gardner — historic areas of settlement — and extending south of Route 2 into South Gardner. More recent developments, primarily single-family houses, are located in the north and east sections of the city. Data suggests that while Gardner’s variety of housing options provide enough housing for city residents, they do not include enough affordable housing for the community as housing in Gardner, as in the rest of the country, has become more expensive in the past ten years. The city’s housing stock is also older, introducing concerns around condition and health and safety issues.

### Affordability

According to state statute, Gardner has a sufficient level of affordable housing. At 14.4 percent, the community is above the 10 percent affordable housing requirement set by G.L. c. 40B. And when comparing rents and house prices in Gardner to Worcester County and the state as a whole, Gardner is well below the other two geographies. Both of these facts would suggest Gardner is an affordable place to live and that it provides enough affordable housing for its residents.

However, other housing data suggests this is not the case. In Gardner, almost half of all renters are housing cost-burdened, as are over a third of homeowners. These households spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs. The renter figure is especially concerning, as the city has a higher proportion of renters than homeowners, meaning a significant portion of the city’s residents are spending most of their income on housing. While Gardner may be considered an affordable place to live in the context of Worcester County or the state, it is increasingly not an affordable place to live for existing Gardner residents. While affordable housing may attract new residents, it will become difficult for existing Gardner residents to live in the city if their housing costs continue to rise.

### Condition of Housing

The city’s housing stock is generally older, which often means higher and more frequent maintenance and repair costs. With such a high percentage of renters in the community, but a low level of rental prices, there are concerns about the ability of landlords and property owners to maintain their properties. In addition, the city’s aging residents may also struggle to maintain their properties as rising costs for things such as food and fuel take up more of their income, delaying needed housing maintenance and repairs.

When driving around the city, numerous red Xs are visible on vacant buildings, meaning they have been deemed unsafe by the Gardner Fire Department. The City has frequently used CDBG funds to demolish vacant and unsafe buildings. While this removes potential hazards, it does leave gaps in the landscape and removes potential housing units that may have been rehabilitated into additional housing stock.

### Shelters and Other Housing Options

During the course of the master plan process, conversations around housing frequently turned to the lack of shelters and other temporary housing options in the city. Gardner does not currently have a shelter space open to the general public. The Montachusett Veterans Outreach Center (MVOC) operates a shelter specifically for veterans and in 2023, as part of larger emergency shelter efforts across the state, the Commonwealth opened a family shelter at the Super 8 Hotel in the city. However, as of summer 2025, the shelter was closed and the organization Making Opportunities Count has been working with the families remaining in the space. In conversations with City staff and Gardner residents, several people noted increasingly visible homelessness around the city, including encampments in the woods that are often difficult for social service organizations to reach.

This lack of shelter space is concerning on several levels. First, there are already unhoused individuals in the city who would benefit from a place to go. Second, combined with affordability and housing quality concerns, a lack of shelter space means there is no safety net for residents. If housing becomes unaffordable for a resident and they cannot find another affordable unit that meets their needs, they have no shelter to go to in Gardner. These people will then need to live outdoors or relocate to another community. Housing quality can create a similar situation. City staff noted there may be housing units that are unfit for habitation, but it is often a difficult decision to enforce safety laws if the staff know that doing so will mean the resident needs to vacate the unit. Without the safety net of a shelter in the city, there may be nowhere for the resident to go until they can find a safe, affordable unit. Both of these concerns are compounded by the fact that the city has an aging population who are often disproportionately affected by housing affordability and quality issues. Providing shelter space and other forms of housing would provide a much-needed safety net for Gardner residents.

### Growing into the Future with Historic Buildings

Gardner has the potential to turn one of its biggest liabilities and concerns – its historic buildings – into one of its assets – housing. Older buildings often act as a form of naturally-occurring affordable housing. Their units may not be perfectly updated, they may not have all the features of new construction, and their spaces may be smaller or oddly-shaped. All of this often combines into a unit that has a lower rent or sale price, creating affordable housing in the community

without relying on subsidies or restrictions. The downtown is dense with a variety of multi-family housing constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While some of these may be in poor condition, efforts to rehabilitate them would bring housing units back online and preserve the city's built heritage and sense of place. The City could also make similar use of several City-owned surplus schools and other buildings around downtown.

However, the City could be more supportive of efforts to rehabilitate its existing housing stock. As noted above, the City does not provide CDBG funding for rehabilitation, nor has it adopted the Community Preservation Act to provide funds for historic preservation and affordable housing projects. A review of ZBA cases in recent years showed that efforts to bring vacant buildings back online often require a special permit or other zoning relief from the ZBA – even if the owner wants to use the building for the use it was constructed for, such as a triple-decker. In all of the City's zoning districts, any residential building of more than two units requires a special permit. Additionally, any use in the city is considered abandoned after two years of non-operation and new projects need to fully comply with the City's current parking regulations. Thus, if a property owner has a triple-decker that has been abandoned for more than two years and they want to bring it back online as a three-family dwelling, they must go before the ZBA for a special permit. This requirement applies even when the property is being returned to its original use and physical form – exactly as it was intended to be used, and as it still exists on the landscape today. This can create delays in permitting and construction that can be costly for a small property owner or developer, and can mean properties remain vacant rather than being rehabilitated. Many of the buildings downtown were also built in a time before cars were common and before modern zoning set lot sizes and setbacks, limiting the parking space available on their lots. Thus, it is often a struggle for the existing triple-decker owner to find ways to comply with the City's current off-street parking requirements. Eliminating some of these zoning barriers might encourage the rehabilitation of these historic residences, remove blight from the landscape, provide housing units, and preserve the city's historic character.

Buildings eligible for or listed in the National Register of Historic Places are potentially eligible for federal and state historic rehabilitation tax credits, which are often the additional level of financing needed to make larger projects financially feasible. In the past thirty years, these tax credits have been used in Gardner to rehabilitate and create housing at the Heywood-Wakefield factory complex and the former Colonial Hotel downtown. Being proactive in documenting historic buildings and listing resources in the National Register can remove that initial step for property owners and encourage the rehabilitation of buildings.

## Economic Development

Economic development encompasses several features of a community: whether residents work within the community or travel elsewhere; major local employers; educational attainment of residents; and wages. While historically the Chair City, with an economy based on the local furniture industry, Gardner has shifted to more of a service-based economy in the later twentieth century, driven by major employers such as Heywood Hospital and Mount Wachusett Community College. These employers are a strength of the community's economy, but other areas of its economic development – wages and out-commuting – suggest areas for improvement for Gardner. Guided by local boards, planning documents, and community input, in the future Gardner's economic development efforts can build on its strengths, adapt to changing market conditions, and support inclusive growth across the region.

### Ability to Live and Work in Gardner

The balance between affordability and economic opportunity defines the ability to live and work in Gardner. Gardner's relative housing affordability continues to be a draw, with costs lower than many parts of Massachusetts. This has made the city attractive for families and new residents, particularly compared to larger regional centers.

At the same time, a lack of higher-paying local jobs forces many residents to commute to surrounding cities such as Worcester, Fitchburg, and Leominster. This dynamic creates a disconnect between where residents live and where they work, shaping both household well-being and the city's economic base. Residents who travel to work have less time to spend at home in their community, and may be directing their spending elsewhere as they run errands in their work community during lunch or after work, rather than patronizing Gardner businesses.

Opportunities exist to strengthen this balance by creating more pathways for residents to both live and work in the city. Supporting industries that provide competitive wages, building stronger career pipelines through partnerships with Heywood Hospital and Mount Wachusett Community College, and investing in diverse housing options would make it easier for residents to remain rooted in Gardner.

### Industrial Districts

Gardner's industrial districts remain a critical part of the city's economic landscape, reflecting both the city's manufacturing heritage and its future potential. In conversations, many residents expressed a desire to return manufacturing to the city. The nearly built-out Summit Industrial Park demonstrates ongoing demand, while redevelopment projects at sites such as the S. Bent Mill showcase the reuse potential of older industrial properties. However, aging infrastructure,

utility limitations, and wetlands and habitat restrictions constrain the immediate readiness of some parcels. Competition from nearby communities with more modern industrial parks also challenges Gardner's ability to capture new investment.

Still, these industrial areas offer unique advantages: large tracts of developable land, site accessibility, and utility access make them attractive for businesses. With infrastructure upgrades and targeted recruitment, Gardner could attract advanced manufacturing, clean technologies, and life science businesses, industries that align well with regional strengths. Partnerships with Mount Wachusett Community College and workforce development programs can also create direct pathways from training to employment, reinforcing the city's ability to retain talent while diversifying its industrial base.

### Workforce Development

Gardner's workforce reflects broader demographic challenges: an aging population, a shrinking share of younger workers, and workforce out-migration. These demographic shifts create pressure in the city's long-term labor supply and its ability to sustain economic activity. But the city also has significant assets to counter this trend, such as Mount Wachusett Community College and the Wachusett Business Incubator. These institutions provide education, entrepreneurship support, and job training that can be tailored to emerging industries.

Future workforce strategies could strengthen direct connections between local employers and training institutions. Expanding apprenticeships in the trades, healthcare training linked to Heywood Hospital, and entrepreneurship pipelines from incubator to industrial parks can better align Gardner's workforce with evolving employer needs and retain talent within the community.

### Diversifying the Local Economy

Manufacturing has long defined Gardner's economic identity, but this focus has left the city vulnerable in the face of economic downturns and broader industrial decline. While manufacturing and fabrication remain core to Gardner's industrial base, this sector no longer provides the same level of stability or growth as in the past.

The City has the opportunity to build sectors aligned with Gardner's strengths and regional opportunities. Healthcare and life sciences linked to Heywood Hospital represent an emerging industry. Partnerships with Mount Wachusett Community College position the city to expand education and workforce pipelines, and the creative economy, rooted in Gardner's furniture-making heritage, can continue to provide opportunities for arts, culture, and small-scale design businesses. Recreational assets such as Crystal Lake and Dunn State Park can expand Gardner's appeal as a destination for eco-tourism and outdoor recreation. Continuing to encourage

entrepreneurship and support small businesses through access to capital, resources, and mentorship programs will stimulate innovation and job creation across various sectors. Diversification offers the potential for greater resilience and balance across multiple sectors, reducing dependence on a single industry base.

### Retaining Businesses

Retaining and growing local businesses is central to Gardner’s long-term economic stability. Many of the city’s established industries are net exporters of jobs, meaning residents often work outside the community even when local businesses are present. Small businesses also face challenges with aging buildings, limited access to capital, and competition from larger regional markets. Nonetheless, Gardner has a strong toolkit with a variety of incentives and programs in place to support existing and new businesses.

The City can further boost retention by encouraging entrepreneurship, offering retail coaching for local shops, and redeveloping vacant or underutilized buildings into productive spaces. With targeted support, Gardner can help local businesses expand, diversify, and generate jobs that keep residents working in the city.

## Transportation

Transportation plays a vital role in supporting mobility, economic vitality, and quality of life in a community. A well-connected and efficiently managed transportation system enables residents, businesses, and visitors to travel safely and reliably, whether by car, public transit, bicycle, or on foot. As communities grow and evolve, transportation planning must address current needs while anticipating future demands and technological advancements. Comprehensive transportation planning promotes sustainability, equity, and accessibility for all users.

### Developing a Comprehensive Transportation Strategy

While Gardner has made notable progress improving its transportation network, significant challenges remain. The City continues to face a legacy of aging infrastructure, a limited municipal budget, and the absence of a unified, long-term transportation vision. Current projects, ranging from roadway repairs to pedestrian improvements, are undertaken in isolation, lacking the coordinated framework needed to maximize impact and align with broader land use, economic development, and environmental goals. Without a comprehensive strategy, the City may miss opportunities to leverage outside funding, address equity and mobility concerns, and build a transportation system that can meet the needs of a growing and evolving community.

This challenge also presents a clear opportunity for Gardner to create a cohesive, multimodal transportation master plan that integrates Complete Streets principles, Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) project development, regional trail connectivity, and expanded transit service into a single, coordinated vision connected to other municipal priorities. Such a plan would guide investment priorities, enhance safety and accessibility for all users, and strengthen coordination with regional and state partners. By proactively identifying priority projects and aligning them with available grants and funding programs, the City can improve mobility, support sustainable growth, and build a transportation network that is equitable, resilient, and well-positioned to serve Gardner's residents, businesses, and visitors for decades to come.

By developing a comprehensive transportation master plan that prioritizes infrastructure renewal and identifies creative funding strategies, Gardner can shift from a reactive maintenance model toward a proactive, sustainable system, improving safety, enhancing quality of life, and positioning the City to support growth well into the future.

### Aging Infrastructure and Limited Funding

Gardner's transportation network is facing mounting pressures from aging infrastructure and limited funding capacity. Approximately 30 to 40 percent of local roadways need resurfacing, and

during public outreach for this plan the condition of roads and sidewalks was a frequent topic of conversation. Much of this deterioration is the result of long-term underinvestment, as annual Chapter 90 funding (historically around \$600,000) has not kept pace with escalating costs. The City's DPW prioritizes reactive repairs over proactive rehabilitation, leaving many streets and sidewalks in varying states of disrepair. Sidewalk maintenance issues mirror roadway conditions, with uneven surfaces, missing segments, and ADA compliance needs persisting in several areas. These infrastructure deficits affect safety, accessibility, and overall mobility for all community members.

The City has secured grants in recent years and could fill its funding gap by expanding these efforts and pursuing TIP projects, MassDOT programs, and public-private partnerships. Integrating ADA upgrades, multimodal enhancements, and long-term maintenance needs into each capital project will help stretch limited funds while supporting a safer, more inclusive transportation network.

### Safety and Traffic Operational Concerns

Gardner's transportation network includes several intersections and corridors with persistent safety and operational challenges. High-crash locations such as the Routes 2A/68 (Timpany Boulevard and West Broadway) intersection, Pearson Boulevard/Elm Street/Union Square, and sections of Timpany Boulevard south of the rotary reflect a combination of poor geometry, outdated traffic signals, and limited sightlines. Between 2016 and 2025, these locations accounted for hundreds of crashes, with the Main-Pleasant-Parker-Central Streets corridor alone recording 945 incidents. Downtown Gardner, despite multiple reconfigurations intended to improve safety, continues to experience congestion and driver confusion due to its complex layout, while the two state-owned rotaries along Route 2 back up regularly during peak periods. These conditions not only increase crash risk but also erode efficiency for residents, commuters, and commercial traffic.

Addressing these issues presents an important opportunity to improve safety, efficiency, and overall mobility. Targeted redesigns at high-crash intersections, upgrades to outdated signal equipment, and improved roadway geometry can significantly reduce collision rates and improve traffic flow. Investments could be supported by Complete Streets funding, the TIP, and state safety grants, enabling Gardner to modernize critical intersections and corridors. Integrating Vision Zero principles, which aim to eliminate traffic fatalities and severe injuries, would ensure that safety improvements prioritize all users (motorists, pedestrians, cyclists, and transit riders). By pairing infrastructure upgrades with enhanced wayfinding, traffic calming measures, and improved multimodal connections, Gardner can transform operational problem areas into safe,

accessible, and efficient gateways that support the City’s long-term transportation, economic development, and quality-of-life goals.

### Limited Multimodal Connectivity and Auto-Dependence

While Gardner has made important progress through its Complete Streets program, sidewalk upgrades, and expansion of the North Central Pathway, significant gaps remain in its multimodal transportation network. Bicycle infrastructure is minimal, limited primarily to short segments along Timpany and Pearson Boulevards and a few shared-lane markings. There is no comprehensive citywide bicycle plan to connect neighborhoods, schools, parks, and commercial districts, leaving cycling as a practical option for only a small share of residents. Similarly, the sidewalk network, though extensive, is inconsistent in quality, with many segments requiring repair or replacement. Nearly half of respondents to the Master Plan Community Survey expressed dissatisfaction with sidewalk conditions, underscoring the importance of addressing these deficiencies. Without a coordinated strategy, multimodal improvements risk being implemented in an ad hoc manner, reducing their effectiveness and the potential for meaningful connectivity.

These challenges also present a clear opportunity for Gardner to strengthen active transportation options in ways that support safety, sustainability, and equitable access. By developing an integrated bicycle and pedestrian master plan, the City could identify priority corridors for bike lanes, shared-use paths, and sidewalk upgrades, as well as connections to regional trails such as the North Central Pathway. Expanding multimodal facilities in conjunction with roadway reconstruction projects would stretch limited resources while enhancing accessibility for all users. Pursuing state and federal funding, through programs such as MassDOT’s Complete Streets, Transportation Alternatives, and Safe Streets and Roads for All, could accelerate implementation of key projects. By committing to a long-term, connected network, Gardner can improve mobility choices, reduce car dependency, and create a healthier, more connected community that supports residents, businesses, and visitors alike.

### Public Transit Gaps and Mobility Equity

Despite the availability of MART fixed-route and ADA-compliant paratransit services, public transit use in Gardner remains very low, with approximately 2 percent of residents relying on transit for commuting. The existing bus system provides key connections within the city and to neighboring communities, but service frequency, route coverage, and hours of operation are limited. Many residents, particularly those without access to a private vehicle, face barriers to reaching employment, education, healthcare, and essential services. Rideshare services such as Uber and Lyft have a minimal presence, taxi service is unavailable, and pedestrian connections to bus stops are inconsistent, further restricting mobility for non-drivers. Community feedback

from the Master Plan survey reflects this gap, with nearly 40 percent of respondents expressing a desire for expanded public transportation options and over a third requesting more rideshare services.

These challenges also present a substantial opportunity to enhance mobility equity and reduce the city's dependence on single-occupancy vehicles. By working with MART to expand bus routes, increase service frequency, and improve regional connections, including to the MBTA Commuter Rail at the Wachusett Station, Gardner can make transit a more viable option for daily travel. The City can also pursue infrastructure improvements that make it safer and more convenient to access transit, such as adding sidewalks, crosswalks, and sheltered bus stops in underserved areas. Leveraging state and federal funding programs, including those that target equity, first-mile/last-mile connections, and climate resilience, could accelerate these improvements. Long-term, integrating public transit enhancements into a comprehensive transportation master plan will help Gardner address accessibility gaps, support economic development, and ensure that all residents, regardless of income, age, or ability, have reliable, affordable, and safe mobility choices.

### Opportunities in Regional Connectivity and Redevelopment

Gardner's location along major state and regional transportation corridors presents significant opportunities to enhance mobility, attract investment, and support long-term economic growth. The inclusion of a potential Gardner stop in the Northern Tier Passenger Rail Study's "Full Local Service" alternative represents a transformative possibility for the city, reconnecting residents to Boston and western Massachusetts via Commuter Rail for the first time since 1987. If realized, this service could broaden employment access, stimulate transit-oriented development, and strengthen the city's role as a regional hub. At the same time, Gardner's downtown and commercial districts are well-positioned to benefit from the redevelopment of brownfield and underutilized sites, particularly those located in growth nodes with strong transportation access. Efforts to address brownfields through EPA and state funding can unlock land for housing, business, and mixed-use projects that reinforce walkability and transit access.

Beyond rail and redevelopment, Gardner has opportunities to expand its EV charging infrastructure and enhance its regional trail connections. The City's existing EV charging stations located at City Hall, the Connors Street lot, and the municipal golf course already support its Green Communities designation, and additional installations at high-visibility, high-use parking lots could further encourage EV adoption. Likewise, strengthening connections to regional destinations via the North Central Pathway and other multi-use trails can increase recreational tourism, promote active transportation, and better link neighborhoods to employment, educational, and cultural assets. By integrating these initiatives into a comprehensive

transportation master plan, Gardner can align infrastructure investments with land use, sustainability, and economic development goals, ensuring regional connectivity and local redevelopment work hand in hand to create a more vibrant, accessible, and resilient city.

## VIII. Implementation Plan

The goals, objectives, and strategies presented here directly address the issues presented in each of the topics above. The table below presents action items for each topic, a priority ranking, and the City departments or boards/commissions that are involved in implementing or undertaking the action item.

### Owner Abbreviations

#### Abbreviation Name

AC	Airport Commission	GIS	Geographic Information Systems
BOA	Board of Assessors	GRA	Gardner Redevelopment Authority
BOH	Board of Health	GC	Golf Commission
BD	Building Department	HC	Historical Commission
CemCom	Cemetery Commission	IDFA	Industrial Development Financing Authority
CC	City Council	M	Mayor
CDBG	CDBG Steering Committee	P&R	Parks & Recreation
CDP	Community Development & Planning	PB	Planning Board
ConCom	Conservation Commission	PD	Police Department
COA	Council on Aging	SC	School Committee
CulC	Cultural Council	SeCe	Senior Center
DPW	Department of Public Works	TC	Traffic Commission
DC	Disability Commission	WSD	Water/Sewer Department
ED	Engineering/Survey Department	YC	Youth Commission
FD	Fire Department	ZBA	Zoning Board of Appeals
GHA	Gardner Housing Authority		

## Cross-Cutting Issues & Opportunities

### Community & Support

CS1	Encourage the many community events that currently exist in the city through financial, regulatory, and/or administrative support.	High	CuIC, COA, M, P&R, SeCe, YC
CS2	Maintain indoor and outdoor spaces where residents and community members can gather for events, such as Perry Auditorium and Monument Park.	High	DPW, P&R
CS3	Develop a cohesive network of sidewalks, bikeways, trails, and transit routes that connects neighborhoods to downtown, employment centers, schools, parks, and services.	Medium	CDP, DPW, ED
CS4	Support young residents and families through development initiatives, recreation investments, and stronger partnerships between the Recreation Department, Youth Commission, and Gardner Community Youth Center.	High	P&R, YC, SC
CS5	Track the city’s changing population demographics – age, race or ethnicity, language or culture, household income – and support new projects and programs relevant to the community's demographics.	Medium	CDP, CC, DPW

### Balancing Growth with Preservation

BG1	Direct growth to areas with existing water, sewer, and transportation infrastructure, and away from rural and environmentally sensitive areas.	High	PB, CDP, CDBG, GRA, ConCom
BG2	Encourage development patterns and coordinate infrastructure planning and capital investments to preserve contiguous open space, protect water quality, and maintain natural drainage systems.	High	PB, CDP, ConCom, WSD
BG3	Identify and protect additional land within the Water Supply Protection Districts.	Low	WSD
BG4	Encourage the preservation and rehabilitation of existing buildings.	Medium	HC, GRA

BG5	Use a variety of zoning techniques such as overlay districts, conservation subdivisions, and land protection strategies to preserve open space while accommodating growth.	Medium	PB, CDP, CC
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### Downtown Revitalization & Redevelopment

DR1	Enhance outreach and awareness of existing business assistance and incentive programs, with a focus on downtown and vacant storefronts, to support the adaptive reuse, rehabilitation, and re-occupancy of underutilized commercial and mixed-use buildings.	High	CDP, CDBG, GRA, M, CC
DR2	Implement zoning changes to allow more mixed use and residential development in the downtown.	High	PB, CDP, CC
DR3	Invest in public realm improvements such as streetscape upgrades, pocket parks, and pedestrian-scale lighting to enhance walkability and safety, especially in underutilized or perceived unsafe areas.	High	DPW, CDP
DR4	Support Transit-Oriented Development by coordinating MART bus facility improvements and North Central Pathway extensions to integrate downtown with regional transportation and encourage car-free mobility.	Medium	CDP, ED

### An Aging Population

AP1	Use existing national and regional guidance to develop an age-friendly community.	Low	COA, DC, M
AP2	Consider all aspects of age-friendly design when planning municipal projects: Complete Streets, housing, culturally-inclusive and translation services, access to behavioral health and caregiver support, and civic participation and volunteering.	Medium	M, CC, CDP, DPW
AP3	Allow for the development of housing types supportive of all ages, needs, and abilities.	High	CDP, PB, CC
AP4	Strengthen recreation opportunities for all ages and abilities by promoting the design of recreational facilities that are accessible, inclusive, and multi-generational.	Low	P&R, DC, COA

AP4.1	Enhance accessibility at existing public facilities and incorporate accessibility into future public open space and recreation improvements.	Medium	DC, P&R
AP5	Promote Gardner’s multi-generational society to educate and socialize residents to the needs of residents of all ages, to develop support for potential future needs.	Low	COA, YC
AP6	Provide information on community events and services in multiple formats, not just digitally or on social media, to reach a variety of populations.	Medium	CulC, COA, M, P&R, SeCe, YC

### Sustainability & Resilience

SR1	Keep and expand open space access equitably while protecting high-value lands.	Low	P&R, ConCom
SR2	Ensure zoning and land use policies promote equitable access to housing, open space, and economic opportunity, particularly in Environmental Justice neighborhoods.	High	CDP, PB, CC
SR2.1	Identify gaps in access to parks, playgrounds, trails, and natural areas using walking distance and demographic data.	Medium	P&R, DC, COA
SR2.2	Focus on acquiring or improving open spaces in neighborhoods with limited access to recreation.	Low	P&R, ConCom, CC
SR3	Promote the use of green infrastructure in public infrastructure projects, open space planning, and private development to manage stormwater, enhance biodiversity, and improve climate resilience.	Medium	P&R, ConCom, DPW, PB
SR4	Update zoning to direct new development to areas with existing infrastructure and lower climate vulnerability, including downtown and established neighborhoods.	Low	CDP, PB, CC

### Funding Resources

FR1	Continue to pursue regional, state, and federal grant funding in all areas to support Gardner’s municipal priorities.	Medium	M, CC
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FR2	Adopt the Community Preservation Act to fund open space, recreation, historic preservation, and affordable housing initiatives.	High	CDP, M, CC
FR3	Coordinate natural resource and open space priorities within the Capital Improvement Program.	Low	M, ConCom, P&R
FR4	Seek federal and state grants to assess, clean up, and redevelop contaminated Brownfield properties.	High	CDP, GRA
FR5	Pursue grants such as the Land and Water Conservation Fund and MassTrails to support land acquisition, restoration, and recreation projects.	Medium	CDP, ConCom, P&R

## Natural Resources and Open Space

**Goal: Protect, restore, and connect Gardner’s natural resources and open spaces to foster a resilient environment and ensure all residents and visitors access, enjoy, and benefit from them.**

<b>NR1</b>	<b>Protect drinking water supplies, recreational waters, and high-value natural resources through watershed planning, ecological restoration, and resilient management practices.</b>		
NR1.1	Develop a watershed management plan for Crystal Lake watershed.	High	ConCom, DPW, PB
NR1.2	Prepare a Wellhead and Surface Water Supply Protection Plan.	High	DPW, ConCom
NR1.3	Advance culvert replacement projects to improve flood resilience, aquatic habitat, and public safety (e.g., Perley Brook and Wilder Brook watersheds).	High	DPW
NR1.4	Pursue projects and grants to improve water quality and aquatic biodiversity through restoration and invasive species removal.	High	ConCom
NR1.5	Continue implementation of Forest Stewardship Program.	High	ConCom

NR1.6	Hire a consultant to inventory invasive species and identify priority restoration areas using native plants.	Medium	ConCom
NR1.7	Develop a coordinated beaver management protocol and evaluate use of beaver deceivers.	Low	ConCom
NR1.8	Pursue technical assistance or training on bog ecosystems and forest best management practices.	Low	ConCom
NR1.9	Designate sensitive bogs as conservation priorities and use buffer zoning and signage.	Low	ConCom, PB
<b>NR2</b>	<b>Improve trail connectivity, condition, and accessibility to support recreation and public enjoyment while protecting natural resources.</b>		
NR2.1	Maintain and improve existing trails through coordination between the Department of Public Works, Parks & Recreation, and volunteers.	High	DPW, P&R
NR2.2	Use GIS to map and classify trail systems by type, such as natural, technical, accessible, multi-use, etc.	High	GIS, ConCom
NR2.3	Connect trail systems at identified locations.	Medium	ConCom
NR2.4	Inventory trail signage and where needed improve accessibility and inclusivity within trail systems and open spaces.	Medium	ConCom
<b>NR3</b>	<b>Build community capacity for long-term stewardship of natural resources and open spaces through education, training, and coordinated volunteer efforts.</b>		
NR3.1	Formalize a trails or open space stewardship committee to coordinate volunteers and community engagement.	High	M, CC
NR3.2	Use City GIS and social media tools to improve public understanding of open space and conservation. Regularly update the City's Parks, Open Space, and Trails Story Map.	High	GIS, ConCom
NR3.3	Engage with community youth programs to develop outdoor education initiatives, trail activities, tree planting events, and environmental stewardship opportunities.	High	ConCom
NR3.4	Expand volunteer trail maintenance events in coordination with local and regional partners.	Medium	ConCom, DPW
NR3.5	Expand public education on invasive species identification, prevention, and management.	Medium	ConCom

NR3.6	Develop citizen science and volunteer programs such as water sampling, invasive pulls, tree planting, and trail maintenance.	Low	ConCom
<b>NR4</b>	<b>Enhance equitable access to open space and recreation areas.</b>		
NR4.1	Use land use planning to ensure open space and recreational amenities are distributed equitably across the community.	High	PB, P&R, ConCom
NR4.2	Prioritize open space and recreational investments in underserved, vulnerable, and Environmental Justice neighborhoods. Focus on acquiring or improving open spaces in neighborhoods with limited access to recreation.	High	P&R, ConCom
NR4.3	Expand trail systems and greenway linkages to connect neighborhoods, parks, and downtown destinations. Improve pedestrian and bicycle connections between residential areas and recreational facilities.	Medium	ConCom, DPW
NR4.4	Strengthen recreation opportunities for all ages and abilities by promoting the design of recreational facilities that are accessible, inclusive, and multi-generational. Enhance accessibility at existing public facilities and incorporate into future public open space and recreation improvements.	Medium	P&R, PB

## Historic and Cultural Resources

**Goal: Value and protect the city’s historic and cultural resources, recognizing the role they can play in supporting future development by providing community character and a sense of place.**

<b>HC1</b>	<b>Incorporate historic resources into Gardner’s larger planning efforts and permitting processes to better protect and preserve them.</b>		
HC1.1	Develop a community-wide historic preservation plan to assess past preservation work and develop future recommendations.	High	HC

HC1.2	Formally incorporate the Historical Commission into the local permitting process via comments on Planning Board and Zoning Board of Appeals projects.	High	CDP, PB, ZBA, HC
HC1.3	Encourage regular training and ongoing education for the Historical Commission to stay up to date on historic preservation best practices.	High	HC
HC1.4	Adopt a demolition delay ordinance.	Medium	HC, CC
<b>HC2</b>	<b>Document Gardner’s historic and cultural resources to more fully understand the community’s important resources.</b>		
HC2.1	Develop a community-wide historic resources survey plan.	Medium	HC
HC2.2	Systematically document Gardner’s historic and cultural resources on Massachusetts Historical Commission inventory forms.	Medium	HC
HC2.3	Pursue National Register of Historic Places listings as appropriate, especially district or thematic listings.	Low	HC
<b>HC3</b>	<b>Invest in the city’s historic buildings.</b>		
HC3.1	Adopt a historic reuse ordinance that allows for additional uses or zoning relief in exchange for the sensitive rehabilitation of historic buildings.	High	HC, PB, CC
HC3.2	Promote the adaptive reuse of municipal buildings, such as the Elm Street School, for housing.	High	GRA, HC, CDP
HC3.3	Develop zoning or financial incentives to encourage the creation and/or rehabilitation of upper-story housing in the downtown area.	High	CDP, CC, M, HC
HC3.4	Explore listing districts of historic resources in the National Register of Historic Places to encourage the future use of federal and state historic rehabilitation tax credits.	Medium	HC
<b>HC4</b>	<b>Fund Gardner’s historic and cultural resources.</b>		
HC4.1	Continue providing funding to local cultural events through the Gardner Cultural Council.	High	CulC
HC4.2	Pursue grant opportunities through the Massachusetts Cultural Council, Massachusetts Historical Commission, Preservation Massachusetts, the National Park Service, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and others as available.	Medium	HC

## Land Use

**Goal: Promote balanced, sustainable, and equitable land use patterns that revitalize Gardner’s downtown, diversify housing options, and direct growth to areas with existing infrastructure while preserving the city’s rural landscapes, natural resources, and historic character.**

LU1	Revitalize and redevelop downtown as a vibrant, walkable, mixed-use community core.		
LU1.1	Update zoning regulations to allow higher-density residential and mixed-use development in downtown and designated districts. Amend the Commercial 1 and General Residential 3 zoning districts to allow more by-right mixed-use and multi-family development downtown.	High	CDP, PB, CC
LU1.2	Encourage the redevelopment of underused parcels and surface parking lots for moderate-density housing that complements the surrounding neighborhood character.	Medium	CDP, GRA
LU1.3	Partner with the Gardner Redevelopment Authority to assemble small, irregular parcels into development sites and actively market them for redevelopment.	Low	GRA, CDP
LU1.4	Adopt design guidelines for infill and adaptive reuse projects that respect Gardner’s historic scale, architecture, and streetscape patterns.	Low	CDP, PB
LU2	Promote strategic infill development and adaptive reuse to support housing and economic growth.		
LU2.1	Identify and map priority infill and redevelopment areas in downtown Gardner and adjacent neighborhoods.	High	CDP, PB
LU2.2	Identify preferred locations for mixed-use, multi-family, and small-scale commercial development throughout the city.	High	CDP, PB
LU2.3	Amend the Rural Residential 2 and Single-Family Residential 1 zoning districts to allow a broader range of housing types, including duplexes, townhouses, accessory dwelling units, and small multi-family units, by right or by Special Permit.	High	CDP, PB, CC
LU2.4	Explore policies such as inclusionary zoning, density bonuses, affordable housing overlay districts, tax incentives, or reduced parking requirements that would require or incentivize the	Medium	CDP, PB, M, CC

	inclusion of affordable units in larger residential or mixed-use developments to expand housing access.		
LU2.5	Incentivize the reuse of vacant lots and obsolete commercial or industrial properties for new housing, light industry, or community facilities.	Low	GRA, IDFA, CDP
LU2.6	Coordinate with state and federal programs to promote the use of historic rehabilitation tax credits, housing grants and brownfield funding.	Low	CDP
<b>LU3</b>	<b>Preserve rural landscapes, natural resources, and historic character.</b>		
LU3.1	Enforce and update overlay district regulations (e.g., Groundwater and Surface Water Protection) and strengthen buffers around bogs, wetlands, and drinking water sources.	Medium	CDP, PB, ConCom
LU3.2	Promote active use of Chapter 61 and 61A lands, encourage local agriculture, and explore agritourism opportunities that align with rural character.	Low	CDP, BOA
LU3.3	Identify and protect key visual corridors, especially views of Wachusett Mountain and other defining landscapes, through zoning, site plan review, and design guidelines.	Low	CDP, ConCom, PB
<b>LU4</b>	<b>Modernize zoning and land use policies to support balanced, climate-resilient growth.</b>		
LU4.1	Review and modernize the zoning ordinance to address outdated provisions, streamline permitting, and align regulations with Master Plan goals.	High	CDP, PB, CC
LU4.2	Incorporate green infrastructure, low-impact development, and renewable energy siting into zoning and subdivision regulations. Encourage or require electric vehicle (EV)-ready infrastructure in new development and major redevelopment projects.	Medium	CDP, PB, CC
LU4.3	Broaden the reach of Development Overlay Districts, solar overlays, and mixed-use zones to encourage redevelopment and renewable energy without compromising community character.	Medium	CDP, PB, CC
LU4.4	Update the Land Development Guidebook, adopt digital permitting tools, and coordinate board review processes to make development more predictable and transparent.	Low	CDP, BD
<b>LU5</b>	<b>Strengthen infrastructure and public investments to support targeted growth.</b>		

LU5.1	Pursue brownfield grants, MassWorks infrastructure funding, and Green Communities grants to align infrastructure improvements with land use goals.	High	CDP, DPW
LU5.2	Prioritize water, sewer, and roadway upgrades in identified growth nodes (e.g., Route 140, Sherman Street, downtown, South Gardner) to support infill and redevelopment.	Medium	DPW, WSD, CDBG
LU5.3	Integrate Complete Streets principles, multimodal connectivity, and transit-oriented design into development decisions.	Medium	CDP, PB, ZBA
LU5.4	Collaborate with developers and businesses through public-private partnerships to share infrastructure costs and catalyze redevelopment projects.	Low	CDP, CC
LU5.5	Integrate land use, housing, transportation, and climate goals into the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP).	Low	M, CC, CDP

## Housing

**Goal: Promote the development of a variety of safe, affordable, and high-quality housing options – in existing and new buildings – to meet the needs of households of all ages, sizes, incomes, and abilities.**

HO1	Develop a housing supply that is truly affordable for current and future Gardner residents.		
HO1.1	Provide zoning incentives such as dimensional relief and density bonuses for projects that meet the specific housing needs of Gardner residents.	High	CDP, PB, ZBA
HO1.2	Revise the zoning ordinance to encourage a range of housing types in suitable areas. Additional housing types might include manufactured housing, townhouses, or small multi-unit buildings.	High	CDP, PB, CC
HO1.3	Prepare and update a housing needs assessment and Housing Production Plan every five years.	Medium	CDP
HO1.4	Evaluate inclusionary zoning or other incentive-based approaches to increase the production of housing at different levels of affordability.	Medium	CDP, PB, CC

HO1.5	Explore ways to support the creation of shelters and other forms of temporary housing within the city that are available to a variety of populations.	Medium	M, CDP
HO1.6	Evaluate municipally owned or tax-title properties for housing development opportunities of new affordable and workforce housing, especially housing that is not restricted to older residents or veterans.	Low	CDP, GHA, COA
HO1.7	Partner with local non-profit organizations to support the development of different types of housing for different income levels.	Low	M, GHA
<b>HO2</b>	<b>Encourage the maintenance, repair, and upgrading of housing units.</b>		
HO2.1	Establish an Affordable Housing Trust fund under G.L. c. 44, §55C.	High	M, CC
HO2.2	Provide an appropriate level of City staff and funding to support health and safety code enforcement.	High	M, BD, BOH
HO2.3	Establish a municipal housing coordinator position to oversee all housing-related issues in the city.	High	M, CC
HO2.4	Restore the use of Community Development Block Grant funding for housing rehabilitation.	Medium	CDP
HO2.5	Develop a guidebook for property owners with information on maintaining and rehabilitating smaller multi-family housing units.	Low	CDP, BD
<b>HO3</b>	<b>Support the creation of new housing units in areas already served by utilities, transportation networks, and close to workplaces and services.</b>		
HO3.1	Revise the zoning ordinance to provide zoning relief and ease the rehabilitation of vacant multi-family dwellings.	High	CDP, PB, CC
HO3.2	Reconsider parking requirements, especially in the downtown area, for multi-family dwellings to balance modern parking and transportation needs with the existing built environment.	High	CDP, PB, CC
HO3.3	As the Rear Main project progresses, reorient the City's Community Development Strategy to the production and rehabilitation of housing elsewhere in the city.	Medium	CDP, GRA
<b>HO4</b>	<b>Consider the housing needs of Gardner's future demographics.</b>		

HO4.1	Use the regularly-updated housing needs assessment to dictate zoning, permitting, and funding changes that support a variety of housing types.	Low	CDP, PB, CC
HO4.2	Encourage and allow for the production of housing that supports a variety of individuals: all ages and family sizes, the recently unhoused, those with different cultural needs, and those with disabilities or unique medical needs.	Low	PB, CC, BD, BOH

## Economic Development

**Goal: Cultivate a vibrant, diverse, and resilient local economy that supports businesses of all sizes, attracts new investment and innovation, and expands equitable economic opportunities for all residents.**

<b>ED1</b>	<b>Improve economic development capacity and communication to support existing businesses' ability to remain and grow in Gardner and to attract new businesses.</b>		
ED1.1	Develop and maintain an economic development strategy identifying target industries, incentives, and workforce development initiatives.	High	CDP, PB, GRA
ED1.2	Make businesses development regulatory processes more friendly and transparent to better attract desired investment. Review current permitting regulations and make amendments as needed to improve consistency in fees and requirements.	High	CDP, BD, BOH
ED1.3	Increase awareness and promotion of existing business assistance and incentive programs to support the redevelopment of vacant and underutilized commercial and mixed-use buildings in the downtown.	High	CDP, GRA
ED1.3.1	Develop and implement a marketing strategy plan to attract development or businesses to the city's commercial and industrial districts.	Medium	CDP, M, GRA
ED1.3.2	Work with the Chamber of Commerce to develop events and market businesses.	Low	CDP

ED1.3.3	Hold regular business owner workshops to develop stronger lines of communication between City Hall and businesses to better identify and respond to business needs and interests.	Medium	CDP, M
ED1.4	Fully utilize the City’s website as a facilitator of economic development. Streamline the economic development page to improve navigability and usability, and continually update economic, demographic, and site readiness data.	Medium	CDP, GRA, M
ED1.5	Establish a City committee or working group charged with economic development strategy, or work more closely with the Gardner Redevelopment Authority and expand their purview.	Medium	CDP, GRA, CC, M
ED1.6	Create a comprehensive business guide for permitting and doing business in Gardner to streamline regulatory processes and promote transparency for new and expanding businesses.	Low	CDP, BD, ED
<b>ED2</b>	<b>Align workforce education and training with employer needs to retain residents and attract skilled workers.</b>		
ED2.1	Establish partnerships with local institutions, such as Heywood Hospital, Mount Wachusett Community College, local high schools, and apprenticeship programs, to develop training programs aligned with emerging industry needs.	Medium	CDP, M, SC
ED2.2	Increase awareness of workforce training and career advancement opportunities among residents and create and maintain a list of resources on the City’s website.	Medium	CDP
ED2.3	Partner with community youth programs such as the Gardner Community Youth Center, Recreation Department, and Youth Commission to introduce children to STEM, arts, entrepreneurship, and career exploration opportunities in the community.	Medium	P&R, YC, SC
ED2.4	Identify and promote other job training programs, such as the Brownfields Job Training Program.	Low	CDP
ED2.5	Support entrepreneurship through the Wachusett Business Incubator and other startup resources. Identify locations for larger incubator spaces and affordable opportunities for startups and small businesses.	Low	CDP, GRA
ED2.6	Proactively meet with major employers to identify workforce and space needs and employee amenities.	Low	CDP, M
<b>ED3</b>	<b>Strengthen key commercial and industrial districts through reinvestment, zoning changes, and coordinated planning.</b>		

ED3.1	Support downtown revitalization and redevelopment through reinvestment, façade improvements, infrastructure upgrades, and business assistance.	High	CDP, CDBG, GRA, M, CC, DPW, ED
ED3.1.1	Consider streetscape, design, and infrastructure improvements to make commercial areas like Downtown Gardner and South Gardner more cohesive and walkable.	High	CDP, DPW, ED
ED3.1.2	Consider establishing a Business Improvement District or Community Benefits District in Downtown.	Low	CDP, M, CC
ED3.2	Regularly review and update Urban Renewal Plans to reflect current economic conditions and opportunities.	High	GRA, CDP
ED3.3	Continue to implement the recommendations of the 2017 Business Site Study.	Medium	CDP
ED3.4	Identify and map vacant storefronts and underutilized properties as priority locations for redevelopment and economic opportunity.	Medium	CDP, GRA
ED3.5	Partner with the Gardner Redevelopment Authority to assemble and market underutilized parcels for redevelopment.	Medium	CDP, GRA
ED3.6	Coordinate with organizations such as the Downtown Gardner Association to enhance economic activity and placemaking.	Low	CDP, CuIC
ED3.7	Consider financial incentives such as reduced tax rates, abatements, or small grants to encourage property improvements, local hiring, or capital improvements.	Low	CDP, M, CC, BOA
ED3.8	Utilize District Improvement Financing (DIF) Master Plans to support strategic development areas.	Low	CDP, M, CC
<b>ED4</b>	<b>Leverage local, state, regional, and federal resources to support economic development.</b>		
ED4.1	Maximize the impact of economic development efforts through coordinated partnerships and funding.	High	CDP
ED4.2	Continue to pursue grant funding and opportunities for priority projects.	Medium	CDP, M

ED4.3	Utilize and promote state incentives including Opportunity Zones, Economic Development Incentive Program (EDIP), District Improvement Financing, and 43D Priority Development Areas.	Medium	CDP
ED4.4	Coordinate efforts with the Gardner Redevelopment Authority, Greater Gardner Chamber of Commerce, Downtown Gardner, and Montachusett Regional Planning Commission.	Medium	CDP, GRA, M
ED4.5	Consider financial incentives to attract small businesses such as revolving loan funds or relocation tax credits.	Low	CDP, M, CC
ED4.6	Continue to utilize CDBG funds to assist with renovations of downtown businesses and areas in need of reinvestment.	Low	CDP, CDBG
ED4.7	Participate in regional initiatives and work with neighboring communities to identify, plan and implement priority projects.	Low	CDP, M

## Transportation

**Goal: Develop a safe, accessible, and resilient multimodal transportation system that reduces car dependency, supports economic vitality, and ensures equitable mobility for all residents through coordinated investments in roadways, sidewalks, transit, and regional connections.**

TR1	Modernize and maintain transportation infrastructure to enhance safety, efficiency, and resilience.		
TR1.1	Prioritize roadway rehabilitation and resurfacing projects using a data-driven pavement management system to target roads in poor condition.	High	DPW, TC
TR1.2	Focus safety improvements on high-injury corridors, school zones, and areas with high pedestrian activity. Target high-crash locations for redesign, such as Routes 2A/68, Pearson Boulevard/Elm Street/Union Square, and Timpany Boulevard, incorporating geometric improvements, updated signals, improved sightlines, and traffic calming measures.	High	DPW, ED, TC, PD

TR1.3	Leverage state and federal funding sources (e.g., Chapter 90, TIP, MassDOT safety grants) and explore public–private partnerships to stretch limited local funds.	High	DPW, CDBG
TR1.4	Integrate accessibility compliance upgrades into all roadway, transit, and sidewalk projects to ensure universal accessibility, meeting ADA and universal design standards.	Medium	DPW, ED, DC
TR1.5	Implement a Safe Streets/Vision Zero-informed approach that prioritizes the safety of pedestrians, bicyclists, transit riders, and drivers. Create a citywide Safety Action Plan to eliminate traffic fatalities and severe injuries.	Medium	DPW, ED, PD, TC
TR1.6	Expand roadway drainage and climate-resilient design practices to better withstand flooding, extreme heat, and severe weather, and reduce long-term maintenance costs. Prioritize resilience improvements on critical corridors and evacuation routes.	Low	DPW, ED
<b>TR2</b>	<b>Improve and expand pedestrian infrastructure and walkability.</b>		
TR2.1	Develop and implement a sidewalk improvement program to address deteriorated or missing segments, prioritizing projects based on pedestrian crash data, routes to schools, transit stops, and Environmental Justice neighborhoods.	High	DPW, PD
TR2.2	Enhance pedestrian safety near schools and downtown through improved crosswalks, curb extensions, lighting, and traffic calming.	Medium	DPW, ED, PD, TC, SC
TR2.3	Advance the Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A) initiative and develop a Vision Zero-informed Safety Action Plan.	Medium	DPW, ED, PD, TC
TR2.4	Adopt a Complete Streets approach for all new roadway projects to ensure safe, comfortable access for people of all ages and abilities.	Medium	DPW, ED
TR2.5	Implement a wayfinding signage system to improve navigation and connectivity for pedestrians between neighborhoods, downtown, parks, and community destinations.	Low	DPW, ED
<b>TR3</b>	<b>Expand and connect bicycle infrastructure and multi-use trails.</b>		
TR3.1	Develop a citywide bicycle and micro-mobility master plan to identify priority corridors and connect neighborhoods, schools, commercial areas, and parks.	High	DPW, ED, PD, TC, CDP

TR3.2	Expand the North Central Pathway and complete planned connector projects, including the multi-use bridge over Route 140, to extend the trail network and integrate downtown with regional transportation and destinations.	High	DPW, ED
TR3.3	Add on-street bicycle facilities (bike lanes, protected lanes, or shared-use markings) on key arterials such as Pearson Boulevard, Parker Street, and Main Street as part of roadway reconstruction projects.	Medium	DPW, ED, TC
TR3.4	Install secure bicycle parking and support facilities (e.g., repair stations) at downtown destinations, schools, and transit hubs.	Medium	DPW
TR3.5	Promote active transportation education and awareness programs in partnership with local schools, employers, and community organizations.	Low	PD
<b>TR4</b>	<b>Strengthen public transit services and enhance mobility equity.</b>		
TR4.1	Collaborate with MART to expand fixed-route coverage, improve frequency, and extend hours of service to better serve employment centers, healthcare facilities, and educational institutions.	High	CDP
TR4.2	Improve transit stop infrastructure by adding shelters, benches, lighting, and real-time arrival information, prioritizing stops in underserved neighborhoods.	Medium	DPW
TR4.3	Enhance pedestrian and bicycle access to transit stops to support first-mile/last-mile connectivity.	Medium	DPW, ED, DC
TR4.4	Explore partnerships for rideshare and mobility services to fill gaps in transportation access, particularly for seniors, people with disabilities, and low-income residents.	Low	CDP, DC, COA
TR4.5	Advocate for the reestablishment of Commuter Rail service through continued engagement with MassDOT's Northern Tier Passenger Rail initiative and regional partners.	Low	M, CC, CDP
<b>TR5</b>	<b>Reduce car dependency through land use and sustainable, multimodal transportation integration.</b>		
TR5.1	Align transportation investments with compact, mixed-use development patterns that shorten trip distances.	Medium	CDP, PB

TR5.2	Expand electric vehicle (EV) charging infrastructure in strategic locations such as municipal lots, downtown, South Gardner, and near multi-family housing to support Gardner’s Green Communities goals.	Medium	DPW
TR5.3	Prioritize walking, biking, trails, and transit access in downtown and designated growth areas.	Medium	DPW, CDP
TR5.4	Invest in the Gardner Municipal Airport by implementing the recommendations of the 2025 Airport Master Plan Update including undertaking strategic airport infrastructure upgrades, constructing municipally owned hangars, and positioning the airport to support emerging aviation technologies.	Medium	AC, CC
TR5.5	Promote shared mobility options including rideshare, carshare, and bike-share services to diversify transportation choices.	Low	CDP
<b>TR6</b>	<b>Establish a comprehensive, long-term transportation master plan.</b>		
TR6.1	Develop a citywide multimodal transportation master plan that integrates Complete Streets, roadway and sidewalk maintenance, transit expansion, and trail development into a unified framework.	High	DPW, ED, PD, TC, CDP
TR6.2	Create a prioritized capital improvements plan (CIP) that aligns transportation investments with land use, economic development, and sustainability goals.	Medium	DPW, CDP, M
TR6.3	Establish project development protocols to streamline design, permitting, and funding applications for major projects.	Medium	ED
TR6.4	Regularly review and update the transportation master plan to incorporate emerging technologies, evolving mobility trends, and updated community needs.	Low	DPW, ED, PD, TC, CDP

## Funding Opportunities

Below are potential sources of grant and other funding for the topic areas of this Master Plan. All grants are subject to change and funding availability. The City should confirm any grant deadlines and requirements with the granting agency.

**Community Preservation Act** - included as an action item above, it is recommended that the City adopt the Community Preservation Act (CPA). Over 200 communities have adopted the program, which provides locally-directed funding for affordable housing, historic preservation, and open space and recreation. CPA funds could be used to support many of the priority items in the implementation plan.

**Community One Stop for Growth** - This state program is a unified application portal that provides municipalities with access to multiple state grant programs supporting land use planning, zoning, and community coordination initiatives. Through its “Preparing for Growth” category, the program funds master plans, zoning updates, housing production plans, community engagement, site assessments, and technical assistance. It also helps build local planning capacity and encourages coordination across municipalities and agencies on regional economic development and infrastructure projects.

One Stop programs that may pertain to Gardner include, but are not limited to:

- *Brownfields Redevelopment Fund*: Finances the environmental assessment and remediation of brownfield sites for projects that will provide substantial public benefit through the creation of employment or housing opportunities.
- *Community Planning Grant Program*: Supports housing-related planning for specific sites, areas, or the community (e.g. housing production plans), development of 40R/40Y districts, zoning diagnostics and amendments, and urban renewal.
- *HousingWorks Infrastructure Program*: Supports predevelopment and construction for infrastructure projects that will support housing creation. The program prioritizes need, readiness to proceed, financial feasibility, progress, and commitment to date, and outcomes/impact relating to housing to be created in a timely manner.
- *Massachusetts Downtown Initiative Capital Program*: Supports downtown vitality by providing planning (Downtown/Village Center Improvement Plan and District Management Creation) and capital implementation (such as public realm and streetscape improvements, wayfinding and signage improvements, and public facilities and gathering spaces improvements) grants to help communities transform their downtowns into thriving, walkable, and inclusive business-friendly districts.

- *Massachusetts Vacant Storefront Program*: Allows communities to use refundable tax credits as a tool to attract businesses to prominent vacant storefronts within downtowns and commercial areas.
- *MassWorks Infrastructure Program*: Provides capital funds for public infrastructure projects that support and leverage private mixed-use development housing production to spur economic growth and development and create jobs.
- *Real Estate Services Program*: Supports planning for the reuse of public surplus property as well as district redevelopment.
- *Site Readiness Program*: Encourages private investment in new commercial, industrial, or mixed use development through the conversion of abandoned properties or obsolete buildings and facilities by providing funding to communities for site preparation, predevelopment, and permitting.
- *Underutilized Properties Program*: Funds projects that will improve, rehabilitate or redevelop blighted, abandoned, vacant or underutilized properties to achieve the public purposes of eliminating blight, spurring innovation, increasing housing production, supporting economic development projects, increasing the number of commercial buildings accessible to persons with disabilities.

Additionally, One Stop offers the *Housing Choice Grant Program*, which is only available to municipalities that have been designated as Housing Choice Communities (HCCs). Communities that receive this designation are prioritized for MassWorks, Complete Streets, MassDOT capital projects, LAND and PARC grants, and are eligible for 0.5% discount on State Revolving Fund loan interest rates to improve water infrastructure. HCCs must apply for this designation, which is awarded to municipalities demonstrating certain levels of housing production and adoption of pro-housing best practices.

### *Natural Resources & Open Space*

**Land Conservation Assistance Program** - Administered by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy & Environmental Affairs (EEA) Division of Land Services, this program provides funding to support various aspects of land protection projects. Eligible activities include preparing grant applications, carrying out land transaction tasks, updating or developing municipal Open Space & Recreation Plans, or planning for the development or renovation of a park.

**Climate Stewardship Incentive Grants** - Offered by the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR), this grant program provides cost-share funding for forest management practices that promote climate resilience in line with the *Forests as Climate Solutions* framework. Supported activities include planning harvests, retaining legacy trees,

marking trees, managing invasive species, applying climate-smart best management practices, treating trees at risk from pests, and installing temporary protections from animal browsing.

**PARC Grants (Parkland Acquisitions and Renovations for Communities)** - This program, administered through EEA's Department of Conservation Services (DCS), supports municipalities in park acquisition, renovation, or new park development.

**LAND Grants (Local Acquisitions for Natural Diversity)** - Also managed by EEA-DCS, this program assists municipal conservation commissions in protecting open space. Eligible projects include acquisition of land or conservation restrictions for conservation and passive recreation.

**Riparian Zone Restoration Program** - This rolling grant program from EEA supports efforts to restore under-vegetated riparian corridors, prioritizing sites with permanently protected land, cold-water fisheries, impervious surfaces, flood-storage potential, or extreme-heat conditions. Funding may cover some or all costs of restoration work, including plant materials, wildlife protection, permitting, and installation and maintenance.

**The Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP)** - Administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), this program provides funding to protect farmland and its conservation values by restricting nonagricultural uses. It also supports the protection of grazing lands and the restoration and enhancement of wetlands on eligible land.

**Early-Phase Dam Removal Planning Assistance** - The Massachusetts Rivers Alliance offers early-phase technical assistance to initiate dam removal projects. Assistance may include site assessments, preliminary project scoping, engineering review, and development of a dam removal "starter kit" to advance project planning. Technical assistance is provided at no cost to recipients and is limited to dam removal (not repair of fish passage alternatives).

**Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness (MVP) Action Grant** - Offered through EEA, this program funds climate adaptation projects in municipalities that have completed MVP planning. Projects must advance community-identified actions, use climate change data, and support nature-based and equitable solutions.

**Regional Restoration Partnerships** - Managed by EEA's Division of Ecological Restoration (DER), this program supports regional collaboratives, including watershed groups and regional planning agencies, working with municipalities and local partners to implement river and wetlands restoration projects. Selected partnerships receive designation that positions them for future funding to expand capacity and implement resilience-focused restoration projects.

**MassTrails Grants** - DCR's MassTrails grants support recreational trail and shared-use pathway projects across the Commonwealth. Eligible activities include project development, design, engineering, permitting, construction, and maintenance of recreational trails, shared-use pathways, and the amenities that support trails.

### *Historic & Cultural Resources*

**Cultural Facilities Fund** - The Massachusetts Cultural Council's Cultural Facilities Fund supports the maintenance and rehabilitation of cultural facilities owned by non-profits, including municipalities. Grant rounds are open yearly in the winter.

**Freedom's Way National Heritage Area** - This grant program supports the goals and objectives outlined in the *Freedom's Way National Heritage Area Management Plan* and include inclusive storytelling, education, interpretation and curation, community planning and resource conservation, historic preservation, and regional cultural events.

**Massachusetts Preservation Projects Fund** - The Massachusetts Historical Commission offers Massachusetts Preservation Projects Fund (MPPF) grants yearly. These grants support planning for and the physical rehabilitation of State Register of Historic Places-listed resources owned by municipalities and non-profits. Grants are 50/50 reimbursable matching grants and require a preservation restriction be placed on the building at the end of the project. The application process usually begins in November/December.

**Survey & Planning Grants** - The Massachusetts Historical Commission offers its Survey & Planning Grants yearly. Grants are 50/50 reimbursable matching grants. Pre-applications are usually available in early fall, with grants awarded the following spring and used the following fiscal year. Funds are federal and subject to availability.

### *Land Use*

**Planning Assistance Grants** - These grants are available to municipalities and Regional Planning Agencies to support planning, zoning, and land use actions aligned with Massachusetts' Sustainable Development Principles. Planning Assistance Grants promote regulations that reduce resource consumption, expand diverse housing, and address climate change, while helping communities access technical expertise and complete required public processes. Funding priorities include zoning for sustainable housing production, such as Housing Choice Best Practices, along with strategies to reduce energy use and emissions through compact, mixed-use development, and zoning tools that enable permanent land conservation.

**District Local Technical Assistance** - Administered by the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC), this program is a state-funded initiative that supports municipalities with planning, coordination, and implementation efforts. Through an annual request process, communities can receive assistance for projects such as zoning updates, housing and economic development strategies, climate resilience planning, and regional collaboration initiatives. The program is designed to help communities advance local and regional priorities by building capacity and delivering actionable plans, policies, and programs.

**Community Compact Best Practice Areas** - The Commonwealth's Community Compact Best Practice Program is a voluntary initiative that provides funding and technical support to municipalities implementing targeted best practices to improve local governance, including land use planning and coordination. Communities select focus areas such as zoning updates, master planning, and site identification to better align land use with housing and economic development goals. Gardner has previously participated in and adopted several of the Best Practice areas.

### *Housing*

**Massachusetts Housing Partnership (MHP) Technical Assistance** - MHP provides technical assistance to explore opportunities for redevelopment of existing state public housing and new development on surplus public land and buildings. Funding supports site feasibility analysis and development of a Request for Proposals if the site is deemed feasible. In addition, MHP regularly provides technical assistance to ZBAs throughout the comprehensive permit 40B process and has intermittently offered grants to boards and committees focused on housing.

**MassHousing** - MassHousing's Commercial Conversion Initiative provides municipalities with planning services to accelerate the reuse and redevelopment of underutilized commercial buildings by completing physical viability analyses that identify well-positioned buildings for commercial-to-housing conversions.

### *Economic Development*

**Community Workforce Partnerships Grant Program** - Through the Community Workforce Partnerships Grant Program, the Executive Office of Economic Development (EOED) funds projects or programs that create workforce development opportunities within Massachusetts cities and towns. The program supports community-led responses to community-defined economic opportunities and challenges, with a particular focus on equipping residents and small business employees with the knowledge, support, and skills to succeed in today's economy.

**Municipal and Tribal Technical Assistance Grant Support** - Through this program, the Commonwealth's Federal Funds & Infrastructure Office (FFIO) provides technical assistance to municipalities, federally recognized tribes, and eligible regional organizations that are seeking or have received federal funding for infrastructure, climate, housing, or economic development projects.

**Destination Development Capital Program** - The Massachusetts Office of Travel & Tourism's Destination Development Capital Program awards funds to strengthen the economy of Massachusetts through projects that enhance tourism resources and infrastructure and aid in destination resiliency.

**Community Investment Tax Credit Program (CITC)** - Administered by the Commonwealth's Executive Office of Housing & Livable Communities, CITC enables local residents and stakeholders to work with and through community development corporations (CDCs) to create and adopt community investment plans, and partner with nonprofit, public, and private entities to improve economic opportunities for low and moderate income households and other residents.

**Economic Adjustment Assistance (EAA)** - This federal program, administered by the U.S. Economic Development Administration (EDA), provides investments to help communities revitalize, expand, and upgrade their physical infrastructure. EAA provides technical, planning, and public works and infrastructure assistance to enable communities to attract new industry, encourage business expansion, generate local investment, and create or retain long-term jobs through land acquisition, development, and infrastructure improvement projects that establish or expand industrial or commercial enterprises. Projects must advance the EDA's Investment priorities and be consistent with the region's current Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS). They also must be in a geographic region subject to the EDA's economic distress criteria.

**EDA Planning and Local Technical Assistance Programs** - The EDA also provides technical assistance to strengthen the capacity of local, regional, and state entities to support economic development, foster job creation, and attract private investment. The Planning program assists recipients in managing and coordinating the development and implementation of economic development plans, such as feasibility studies, impact analyses, and other plans to guide the creation and retention of high-quality jobs and private investment attraction.

## Transportation

**Chapter 90 Program** - The Commonwealth’s Chapter 90 program is a state-funded, formula-based reimbursement program administered by MassDOT that provides annual funding to municipalities for capital improvements to local transportation infrastructure. Funding supports projects such as road and bridge repairs, sidewalk upgrades, and traffic and safety improvements, with allocations based on local road mileage, population, and employment.

**Green Communities Grant Program** - As a designated Green Community, Gardner is eligible for funding through the Commonwealth’s Department of Energy Resources (DOER). Funds support projects that reduce energy use and advance clean energy goals. Eligible initiatives include electric vehicle charging infrastructure, building upgrades such as weatherization, HVAC improvements, lighting retrofits, and energy audits. With a growing emphasis on transportation electrification, the program helps communities expand EV infrastructure and reduce emissions while improving the efficiency and sustainability of municipal operations.

**Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A) Grant Program** - The SS4A program is a competitive federal grant initiative established by the Infrastructure Investment & Jobs Act that provides approximately \$5 billion over five years to support local, regional, and Tribal efforts to improve roadway safety and eliminate traffic fatalities and serious injuries. Administered by the U.S. Department of Transportation, the program funds planning and implementation activities, including the development of safety action plans and projects that enhance safety for all roadway users, such as pedestrians, bicyclists, transit riders, and motorists, while emphasizing a data-driven, equitable “Safe System” approach.

**Complete Streets Funding Program** - This program, administered by MassDOT, provides technical assistance and construction funding to help municipalities plan and implement multimodal transportation improvements for all users. Communities that adopt Complete Streets policies and develop project prioritization plans become eligible for funding, which supports projects such as sidewalks, crosswalks, bicycle facilities, and transit enhancements. The program aims to create safer, more accessible, and better-connected local transportation networks.

**Municipal ADA Improvement Grant Program** - This program provides reimbursement funding to Massachusetts cities and towns to enhance accessibility for people with disabilities by supporting updates to ADA Self-Evaluation and Transition Plans, as well as capital improvements that remove barriers and improve access to municipal programs, services, and facilities; the program is administered by the Massachusetts Office on Disability (MOD).

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## Appendix I – Inventory & Assessment

### Natural Resources & Open Space

#### Existing Conditions and Trends

##### *Geology, Topography, and Soils*

Gardner sits in a geologic area known as the Gardner Belt, part of the larger Merrimack Terrane. When the last glaciers covering this region melted, they left behind unique land features, such as a long ridge called an esker, and scattered patches of sand and gravel. The Gardner Esker is a unique and ecologically important landscape that partially lies on City-owned land and is accessible through the Cummings Conservation Area, which now includes a walking trail and educational signage starting at Bridge Street. While a railway line cuts through the esker, the City plans to continue exploring ways to protect and enhance this area.<sup>12</sup>

Most of Gardner’s soils are deep, sandy, and loamy, formed long ago by glaciers that moved over granite, schist, and gneiss rock. These soils are common on gently rolling plains and old glacial hills. Some areas also contain soils created by rivers and lakes from that same glacial era. Gardner’s soil types fall into two main groups. In the western part of the city, the Hinckley-Merrimac soils are sandy and gravelly. The rest of the city mostly has Paxton-Woodbridge soils, which are deeper and more typical of forested and hilly areas.

Gardner is in the upland hills just east of the Connecticut River Valley. Many parts of the city have rolling hills, and some slopes are quite steep, over 10 percent in grade, which can make building more expensive and affect stormwater runoff and erosion. Elevations in Gardner range from just over 900 feet near the Otter River to about 1,300 feet at Reservoir Hill, the city’s highest point. About twelve miles southeast of Gardner and visible from various locations throughout the city stands Wachusett Mountain, the tallest peak east of the Connecticut River in Massachusetts, reaching 2,006 feet.<sup>13</sup>

##### *Surface Water*

The surface water in Gardner flows within two larger watersheds: the Millers River watershed and the Nashua River watershed (**Map NR.1**). The majority of the city’s land area lies within the Millers River watershed (18.4 square miles), while the remaining 4.6 square miles are within the Nashua River watershed. The Millers River watershed includes two public water supply

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<sup>12</sup> Leedy, *Open Space and Recreation Plan*, 4-8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 4-1.

subwatersheds, Crystal Lake and Perley Brook Reservoir, both of which are designated as Outstanding Resource Waters under the Commonwealth's Surface Water Quality Standards. Outstanding Resource Waters are deemed exceptional due to their socio-economic, recreational, ecological, or aesthetic values.<sup>14</sup>

Perley Brook Reservoir, built in 1958, supplements the City's water supply. While it remains closed to the public for most uses, shoreline fishing is allowed. An Eagle Scout project in 2018 constructed two bog bridges along the trail between Rome Conservation Area and Perley Brook/City Forest. The bridges provide improved access through two seasonally wet areas along the trail and will reduce or eliminate erosion to the streams and wetlands flowing into Wilder Brook.<sup>15</sup>

Crystal Lake serves as Gardner's main drinking water source and the City has protected much of the land surrounding the lake. While active recreation like swimming and boating are no longer allowed, residents enjoy walking, bird watching, and photography along the lake's shores. The North Central Pathway bike trail runs along the lake, and Crystal Lake Cemetery provides a peaceful setting for walkers and nature lovers.<sup>16</sup> Created in 2018, Crystal Lake Community Forest is a native forested garden and nature trail with interpretive signage. Located close to Heywood Hospital and Mount Wachusett Community College, it provides visitors, patients, staff, and local students with education and wellness opportunities.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to Perley Brook Reservoir and Crystal Lake, there are other important waterbodies that support recreation, water supply, and conservation. Dunn Pond, located in Dunn State Park, draws many visitors who enjoy its public beach, picnic areas, visitor center, and fish-stocking program, making it a popular recreational destination year-round. However, excessive bacteria growth has led to the closure of Dunn Pond several times in recent years, limiting the ability of residents and visitors to use the pond for swimming.<sup>18</sup> Wright's Reservoir, the city's largest artificial waterbody, was originally built for industrial use but now plays a key role in local flood control. Although public access is limited, it offers freshwater fishing and scenic views.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> MassGIS, "Outstanding Resource Waters," March 2010.

<sup>15</sup> 2018 City of Gardner Conservation Commission Annual Report, City of Gardner, <https://gardnerk12.org/DocumentCenter/View/680/Annual-Report-PDF>, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Leedy, *Open Space and Recreation Plan*, 4-2.

<sup>17</sup> 2018 City of Gardner Conservation Commission Annual Report, 4.

<sup>18</sup> Landry, Stephen, "Which greater Gardner area lakes and ponds are most likely to be closed? Find out here," *The Gardner News*, July 9, 2024, <https://www.thegardnernews.com/story/news/local/2024/07/09/beach-closures-ponds-lakes-north-central-massachusetts-bacteria-frequency-reason/74328422007/>.

<sup>19</sup> Leedy, *Open Space and Recreation Plan*, 4-2.

Sediment buildup and invasive species have heavily affected Parker Pond, a twenty-nine-acre manmade pond near the city center. Past studies have evaluated its condition and potential for dredging. If restored, the pond could support warm water fishing and public recreation, with opportunities for improved access.

The Otter River forms part of Gardner’s western border with Templeton and is the city’s only true river. It flows north and empties into the Millers River. Fed by several brooks, the Otter River offers great opportunities for fishing, hiking, wildlife viewing, and waterfowl hunting. The Gardner Fish & Gun Club and the City’s Recreation Department stock it regularly with trout. Gardner also manages the Snake Pond Well at the headwaters of the Otter River. The City has prioritized protecting this area for both water supply and open space conservation.<sup>20</sup>

### *Wetlands and Vernal Pools*

Wetlands play a vital role in Gardner’s natural environment because they store floodwaters, filter pollutants, and support wildlife habitat. Wetlands are areas where water is present either at or near the surface of the soil for part or all of the year. They may appear as ponds, marshes, swamps, or bogs and are defined by saturated soils and water-loving vegetation. Gardner contains over 2,200 acres of wetlands, accounting for approximately 15 percent of the city’s total area (**Table NR.1**).<sup>21</sup> Among these, wooded swamps dominate, making up over 40 percent of all wetland acreage, followed by open water (26 percent). The remaining areas include deep and shallow marshes, shrub swamps, and bogs.

Scattered throughout Gardner are nineteen certified vernal pools and forty-five potential vernal pools – small, seasonal wetlands that fill with water during the spring and dry up by summer’s end. These habitats provide critical breeding grounds for amphibians and invertebrates that might not be able to survive in fish-populated waters. By their nature, vernal pools are ephemeral, yet their ecological value is immense (**Map NR.2**).

In addition to more common wetland types, there are several rare and ecologically sensitive areas, including acidic bogs and peatlands. At Quag Pond, for example, the state-listed threatened plant species, Dwarf Mistletoe, thrives in a delicate bog environment. Two other high-quality bog systems, an unnamed level bog and the Kettlehole Level Bog, are in remote areas without formal public access. However, the Kettlehole Bog lacks natural buffering, making it more vulnerable to nearby development. Another sensitive habitat includes acidic shrub peatlands,

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<sup>20</sup> Leedy, *Open Space and Recreation Plan*, 4-3.

<sup>21</sup> MassGIS, “MassDEP Wetlands (2005),” December 2017, prepared by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection.

which support unique plant species but have been weakened by their proximity to developed areas.<sup>22</sup>

**Table NR.1, Wetland Types**

Wetland Type	Area (Acres)	Percent of Total Wetlands	Percent of Total City Area
Bog	35.2	2.0%	<1.0%
Deep Marsh	298.4	13.0%	2.0%
Open Water	578.9	26.0%	4.0%
Shallow Marsh Meadow	123.7	6.0%	1.0%
Shrub Swamp	250.5	11.0%	2.0%
Wooded Swamp	950.7	42.0%	6.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,237.4</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>15.0%</b>

*Source: MassGIS, “MassDEP Wetlands (2005),” December 2017, prepared by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection.*

### *Floodplains and Dams*

The Federal Emergency Management Agency’s (FEMA) Flood Insurance Rate Maps (FIRMs) identify areas in Gardner that are subject to flooding. Due to the city’s steep slopes and natural drainage patterns, these flood-prone areas are clearly defined. Fortunately, Gardner’s many wetlands help absorb and store excess water, reducing the risk of flooding downstream. Key waterways that contribute to local flooding include Otter River, Perley Brook, Wilder Brook, Pond Brook, Baker Brook, Foster Brook, and Greenwood Brook (**Map NR.3**). The City continues to monitor and manage these areas to protect public safety and natural resources.

Gardner has twenty-one dams: ten City-owned, seven privately owned, and four state-owned.<sup>23</sup> The Massachusetts Office of Dam Safety oversees dam records, inspections, and emergency planning, assigning hazard ratings based on potential consequences of failure rather than structural integrity. Eleven dams in Gardner are rated moderate or high hazard. The City owns all three high hazard dams: Cowee Pond, Perley Brook Reservoir, and Wright’s Reservoir. Crystal Lake Dike, though unrated, poses major concern due to its size, downtown location, and lack of spillway.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Leedy, *Open Space and Recreation Plan*, 4-8.

<sup>23</sup> MassGIS, “Dams,” February 2012, prepared by the Massachusetts Office of Dam Safety.

<sup>24</sup> Dodson & Flinker, *City of Gardner Community Resilience Building Workshop Summary of Findings*, September 2020, <https://www.gardner-ma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/7411>, 18-20.

High and significant hazard dams require more frequent inspections and must submit annual Emergency Action Plans (EAPs), though many Gardner dams lack current EAPs. Some, like Hilchey Pond and Ramsdall Dams, may be in poor condition. The state also ranks dams for ecological restoration potential, or how much the dam's removal would improve surrounding habitats and river health. Hilchey Pond Dam ranks in the top 10 percent statewide, with several others including Cowee and Old Poor Farm Pond dams scoring in the top 25 percent.<sup>25</sup>

### *Fisheries and Wildlife*

Gardner's forests, wetlands, rivers, ponds, and open spaces support a rich variety of wildlife and fish species. These natural areas provide vital habitats for deer, bear, moose, otter, foxes, raccoons, beavers, muskrats, and many other animals. Birdwatchers often spot red-tailed hawks, bald eagles, ospreys, loons, wood ducks, and a wide range of owls and songbirds throughout the city's open spaces and along forest edges. Popular locations like Crystal Lake Cemetery, the Otter River Conservation Area, and the North Central Pathway offer excellent opportunities for wildlife viewing and nature study.<sup>26</sup>

Gardner is also home to game species such as turkey, grouse, woodcock, deer, and rabbit. The High Ridge Wildlife Management Area, managed by the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, is a vast 2,018-acre conservation expanse that stretches across Gardner, Ashburnham, and Westminster. This diverse landscape includes steep hillsides, level fields, cold-water streams, marshes, and mixed hardwood forests. The preservation and promotion of High Ridge Wildlife Management Area not only enhances biodiversity but also supports low-impact recreation such as hiking and wildlife observation, aligning with broader conservation and health goals. Outside of High Ridge, local sporting clubs also help maintain healthy game populations on private lands.<sup>27</sup>

The city's wetlands and water bodies provide habitat to a variety of amphibians and reptiles, including salamanders, snakes, turtles, and newts. Gardner offers outstanding fishing for both warm water and cold-water species. Wright's Reservoir and Lake Wampanoag are known for producing trophy-sized largemouth bass, along with pickerel, bluegill, perch, and crappie. These ponds are easily accessible and popular with local anglers. Perley Brook Reservoir, Dunn Pond, and other cold-water sites like Kendall Pond, Bailey Brook, and Hubbardston Brook support trout populations thanks to spring-fed waters and regular stocking. The Otter River, a catch-and-

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 18-20.

<sup>26</sup> Leedy, *Open Space and Recreation Plan*, 4-7.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 4-7.

release stream, also receives trout and features unique “tea-colored” water due to natural minerals.<sup>28</sup>

Gardner’s connected system of streams, wetlands, and forests creates vital wildlife corridors that allow animals to move safely through the landscape. However, roads and development, especially along Route 2, interrupt some of these natural paths.

### Vegetation

Gardner protects and manages a rich variety of natural vegetation across its forests, wetlands, and open spaces. About 59 percent of Gardner’s dry land area remains undeveloped, consisting of forests, wetlands, and former agricultural fields. Since the 2015 *Open Space and Recreation Plan*, the city has lost ninety-five acres of undisturbed land area to new development.<sup>29</sup>

Gardner’s upland forests primarily contain white pine, red maple, and oak, while wetland forests feature species such as spruce, fir, tamarack, and hemlock. These forested areas offer harvestable timber, support wildlife habitat, and help control pollution and flooding. While most vegetation in Gardner is native and relatively undisturbed, invasive plants, such as Japanese barberry, bittersweet, buckthorn, autumn olive, and knotweed, have spread through abandoned fields and along roadsides. The City actively manages its forest lands through Forest Stewardship Management Plans at sites including Cowee Pond, Perley Brook, Crystal Lake, Snake Pond, and Wildwood Cemetery Forest. Since 2014, Gardner has carefully harvested timber on about 186 acres in these areas to maintain healthy forests and provide safe, enjoyable spaces for residents.<sup>30</sup> The City also continues to manage and inventory public shade trees as part of its broader effort to care for its green infrastructure.

Many of Gardner’s native trees face threats from invasive insects, disease, and climate change. The emerald ash borer, a destructive beetle, has been found in several counties in Massachusetts, including Worcester County, and may have been recently seen in Gardner. Because of this threat, the entire state is under quarantine to help slow its spread. Other harmful pests include the Asian longhorn beetle, first discovered in Worcester in 2008 and still being managed, and the hemlock woolly adelgid, which damages hemlock trees.

Gardner’s red pine plantations are dying in some areas, especially near Green and Stone streets. As the trees die, they leave behind dry wood that increases the risk of wildfires. Invasive plants

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 4-7.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 4-5.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 4-6.

and animals are already replacing many of Gardner’s native species, and this problem is expected to worsen with climate change. Active management will be needed to protect the health of local forests.<sup>31</sup>

### *Natural Communities*

Gardner is home to several rare and ecologically significant natural landscapes recognized by the Massachusetts Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program (NHESP). These include four unique natural communities: an acidic shrub fen, a kettle hole level bog, and two level bogs. These sensitive habitats support regional biodiversity and play an important role in the city’s ecological health. The state identifies and maps these natural communities as part of its ongoing efforts to conserve habitats of high biological value across Massachusetts.<sup>32</sup>

### *Open Space and Conservation*

Approximately 30 percent of Gardner’s land area — over 4,000 acres — is permanently protected as open space, a notable commitment that protects Gardner’s water resources, buffers neighborhoods from flooding, and preserves critical natural ecosystems (**Map NR.4** and **Table NR.2**). These protections were secured through legal mechanisms such as deed restrictions, conservation restrictions, or ownership by a public or nonprofit conservation entity. The City of Gardner owns more than half of this protected land, while the Commonwealth of Massachusetts holds roughly 25 percent. The remainder belongs to land trusts, private nonprofits, and private entities.

City-owned open space parcels include the Alisaukas, Bailey Brook, Cummings, Deerberry Ridge, Green Street, Otter River, and Wilder Brook conservation areas; Crystal Lake; Gardner High School Fields; Gardner Water Supply Land; Reservoir Hill; and some playgrounds, parks, cemeteries, Greenwood Memorial Pool, and the municipal golf course.

The Commonwealth manages several properties including Dunn State Park (131.8 acres), High Ridge Wildlife Management Area (881.7 acres), Gardner Veterans Skating Rink, Mount Wachusett Community College Fields, Quag Pond Bog access, and Westminster State Forest.

The North County Land Trust is leading an ecological restoration project on twenty acres at the Ebenezer Keyes Conservation Area. Their efforts aim to re-establish a globally rare island sandplain grassland, a habitat type once disturbed by failed development. This initiative increases the land's ecological value and climate resilience while supporting native species, including

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<sup>31</sup> Dodson & Flinker, *City of Gardner Community Resilience Building Workshop Summary of Findings*, 36.

<sup>32</sup> MassGIS, “NHESP Natural Communities,” May 2024.

several classified as “special concern” in Massachusetts. The project includes ongoing monitoring of plant and animal populations and active management of invasive species.<sup>33 34</sup>

**Table NR.2, Open Space by Ownership**

Owner	Number of Parcels	Acres	Percent of Total Open Space	Percent of Total City Area
Land Trust	17	675.0	14.0%	5.0%
Municipal	113	2,573.9	55.0%	17.0%
Private	8	100.3	2.0%	1.0%
Nonprofit				
Private for Profit	5	236.5	5%	2%
State	22	1,116.0	24.0%	8.0%
Total	165	4,701.7	100.0%	32.0%

*Source: MassGIS, “Protected and Recreational Open Space,” April 2025.*

While most of Gardner’s open space enjoys strong protections, some parcels carry limited or no legal safeguards (**Map NR.5** and **Table NR.3**). Approximately one percent of all land area in Gardner has limited protection through informal use, traditions, or legal stipulations that require a majority municipal vote to change status, such as cemeteries or the municipal golf course. Two percent of all land in Gardner is unprotected open space vulnerable to development.

**Table NR.3, Open Space by Level of Protection**

Owner	Number of Parcels	Acres	Percent of Total Open Space	Percent of Total City Area
Limited	19	183.2	4.0%	1.0%
None	7	253.0	5.0%	2.0%
In Perpetuity	139	4,265.5	91.0%	29.0%
Total	165	4,701.7	100.0%	32.0%

*Source: MassGIS, “Protected and Recreational Open Space,” April 2025.*

Open space in Gardner serves a variety of public and environmental functions (**Map NR.6** and **Table NR.4**). Approximately 33 percent supports water supply protection, three percent preserves historic or cultural sites, and 64 percent serves conservation or recreation purposes. These lands enhance public access to nature, preserve biodiversity, and strengthen community resilience.

<sup>33</sup> “Ebenezer Keyes Restoration Project Blog,” North County Land Trust, accessed July 7, 2025.

<https://northcountylandtrust.org/conservation-projects/ebenezer-keyes-restoration-project-blog/>.

<sup>34</sup> “Ebenezer Keyes CA Restoration,” iNaturalist, accessed July 7, 2025.

<https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/ebenezer-keyes-ca-restoration?tab=about>.

**Table NR.4, Open Space by Primary Purpose**

Owner	Number of Parcels	Acres	Percent of Total Open Space	Percent of Total City Area
Recreation and Conservation	10	355.2	8.0%	2.0%
Conservation (non-facilities based)	70	2,118.3	45.0%	14.0%
Historic/Cultural	12	149.3	3.0%	1.0%
Recreation (facilities based)	31	513.8	11.0%	3.0%
Water Supply Protection	42	1,565.1	33.0%	11.0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>4701.7</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>32.0%</b>

*Source: MassGIS, "Protected and Recreational Open Space," April 2025.*

Of the five municipalities neighboring Gardner, Templeton and Westminster have approximately 25 percent of their total municipal area as open space, Ashburnham has 32 percent, the same as Gardner, while Winchendon and Hubbardston contain a higher percentage of open space lands (41 percent and 44 percent, respectively; **Table NR.5**). All these communities, however, have populations under 10,000 residents, significantly lower than Gardner.

**Table NR.5, North Central Massachusetts Open Space by Municipality**

Municipality	Total Open Space Area (Acres)	Open Space as a Percent of Total Municipal Area
Ashburnham	8,426.8	32.0%
Gardner	4,701.7	32.0%
Hubbardston	12,293.6	44.0%
Templeton	5,445.6	23.0%
Westminster	7,031.1	26.0%
Winchendon	8,473.5	41.0%

*Source: MassGIS, "Protected and Recreational Open Space," April 2025.*

## Trails

Gardner boasts over 46 miles of trails in total (**Figure NR.1**).<sup>35</sup> One of the most popular is the North Central Pathway, providing over two miles of recreational trail through Gardner and an additional three miles in neighboring Winchendon. It connects key community destinations such as downtown Gardner, Veterans Memorial Skating Rink, Heywood Hospital, and Mount Wachusett Community College. From there, the pathway continues through scenic landscapes and forested areas across the city.

The Oakmont Trails span approximately two miles in the eastern part of the city and extend into the neighboring towns of Ashburnham and Westminster. High Ridge Wildlife Management Area offers more than seventeen miles of trails, also in the eastern section of Gardner. To the north, Perley Brook Reservoir features over nine miles of trails, while the Cummings Conservation Area, located in the northwest near Templeton, contains roughly three miles of trails.

## Equity and Inclusive Access

Equity in access to open space and recreation is a key priority for Gardner. All five of the City's primary playgrounds – Pulaski, Greenwood, Bickford, Jackson, and Park Street – are located within EJ areas, with Pulaski, Greenwood, and Bickford meeting full ADA compliance. Ongoing upgrades to playgrounds and recreational infrastructure are guided by the principles of inclusive design. Additionally, new pocket parks – such as Orpheum Park, Maki Park, and a park along Rear Main Street/Derby Drive – are either completed or in development, all within EJ communities, further promoting equitable distribution of resources.<sup>36</sup> Many of these parks are within the urban renewal boundary, an area prioritized for spending the City's CDBG funds, which have been used for some of the projects.

## Local Policies and Practices

Key City boards and departments involved in the protection of Gardner's open space and the provision of recreational resources include the Conservation Commission, Planning Board, and DPW.

For more about the City's boards, commissions, departments, and past planning efforts, see Chapter V. City Administration.

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<sup>35</sup> City of Gardner, Geographic Information Systems, "Parks, Open Space & Trails," n.d.

<sup>36</sup> Leedy, *Open Space and Recreation Plan*, 5-10.

### *Conservation Commission*

The Wetlands Protection Act as well as the City of Gardner’s Wetland Protection Ordinance are administered by the Conservation Commission. The Commission also works towards the acquisition, stewardship, and protection of open space. The Commission hosts an annual volunteer Earth Day trail maintenance and stewardship event, co-sponsors Owl Prowls with North County Land Trust, and works with the local Boy Scouts on community trail projects. The Commission also plays an active role in public outreach for the City’s Forest Stewardship Program.<sup>37</sup> The Commission conducts many activities aimed at implementing the goals of the *2023 Open Space and Recreation Plan*.<sup>38</sup>

### *Wetlands Protection Ordinance*

Gardner’s Wetland Protection Ordinance (Chapter 650 of the City’s ordinances) regulates activities such as building, grading, vegetation removal, or filling when they occur within 100 feet of wetlands, 200 feet of perennial streams, or within floodplains. In addition, the ordinance establishes a thirty-foot no-disturbance zone and a sixty-foot no-build zone, providing protections that go beyond state regulations. These measures safeguard water resources, wildlife habitat, and flood control while allowing for responsible development that preserves the natural environment.

The City has a separate stormwater ordinance and two water resource protection overlay districts; more information on these is available in the Land Use section, below.

### *Recent Investments and Facility Improvements*

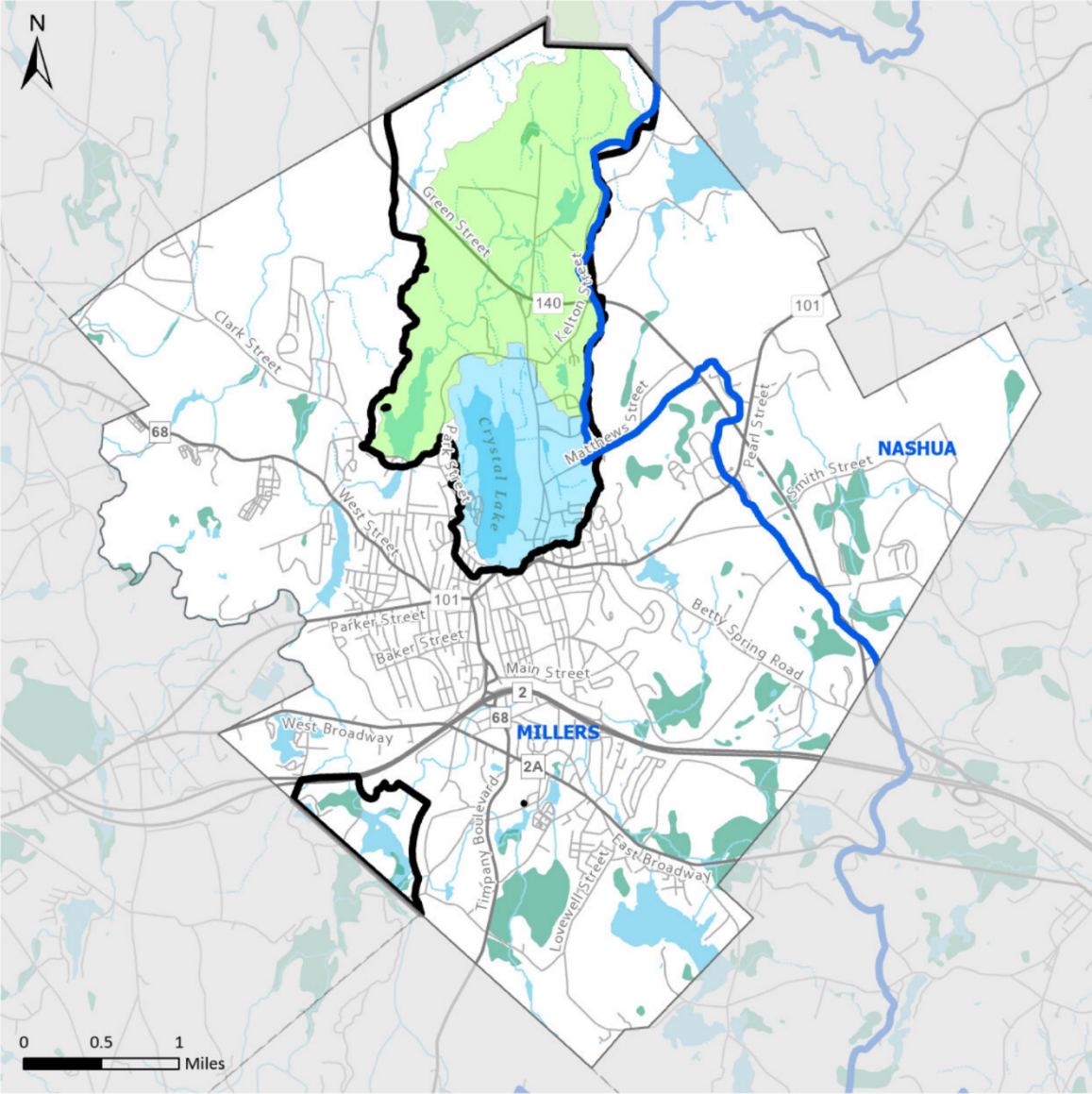
Since 2015, the City has made strategic investments to modernize its parks and playground infrastructure. These efforts include the revitalization of Stedman Ballfield – now enhanced with a new outdoor fitness station – and the creation of the Bailey Brook Conservation Area and Park. The thirty-seven-acre site exemplifies Gardner’s commitment to balancing conservation with public access: the west side will remain a conserved natural area in perpetuity, while the east side offers accessible trails, a wetland overlook, and recreational amenities for all ages. The City has also made improvements outside at Greenwood Pool, although the historic indoor pool building was recently demolished and will not be replaced. Additional park improvements have been supported through local funding and the CDBG program, leveraging creative financing and partnerships to realize the City’s goals.

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<sup>37</sup> *2018 City of Gardner Conservation Commission Annual Report*, 4.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

Map NR.1, Watersheds and Water Protection Overlay



Map X. Watersheds and Water Protection Overlay

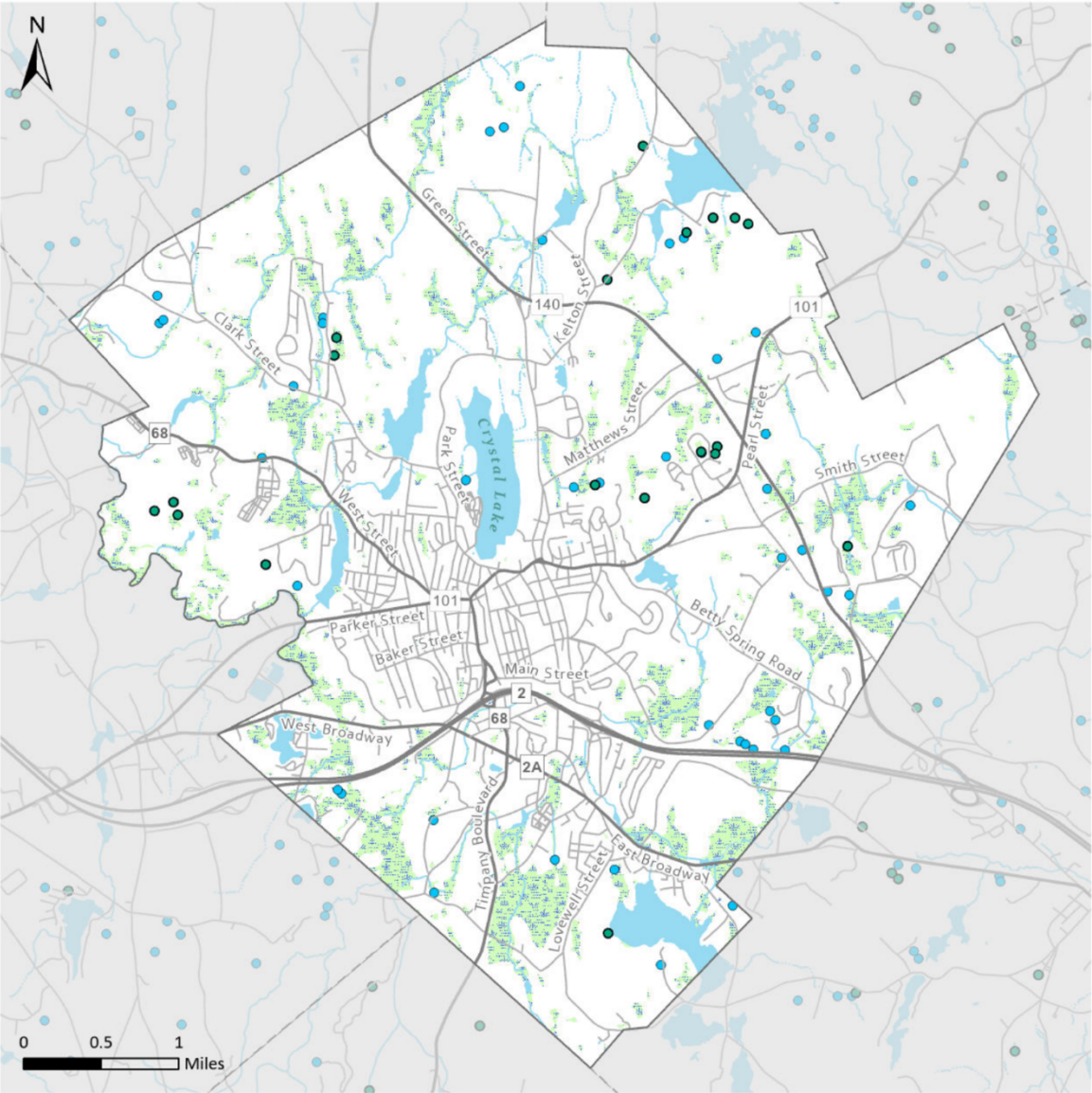
- MassDOT Roads
  - Interstate
  - U.S. Highway
  - State Route
  - Non-numbered Road
- Linear Features
  - Perennial Stream
  - Intermittent Stream
  - Water
  - Wetland
- Water Protection Overlay
  - Water Protection Overlay
- Surrounding Towns
  - Surrounding Towns
- Major Watershed Boundaries
  - Major Watershed Boundaries
- Outstanding Resource Waters
  - Crystal Lake
  - Perley Brook Reservoir



Date: June 2025  
 Source: Mass GIS and City of Gardner

The information depicted on this map is for general planning purposes only. It is not adequate for legal boundary definition, regulatory interpretation, or parcel level analysis. Use caution when interpreting the information on this map.

Map NR.2, Wetlands and Vernal Pools



Map X. Wetlands and Vernal Pools

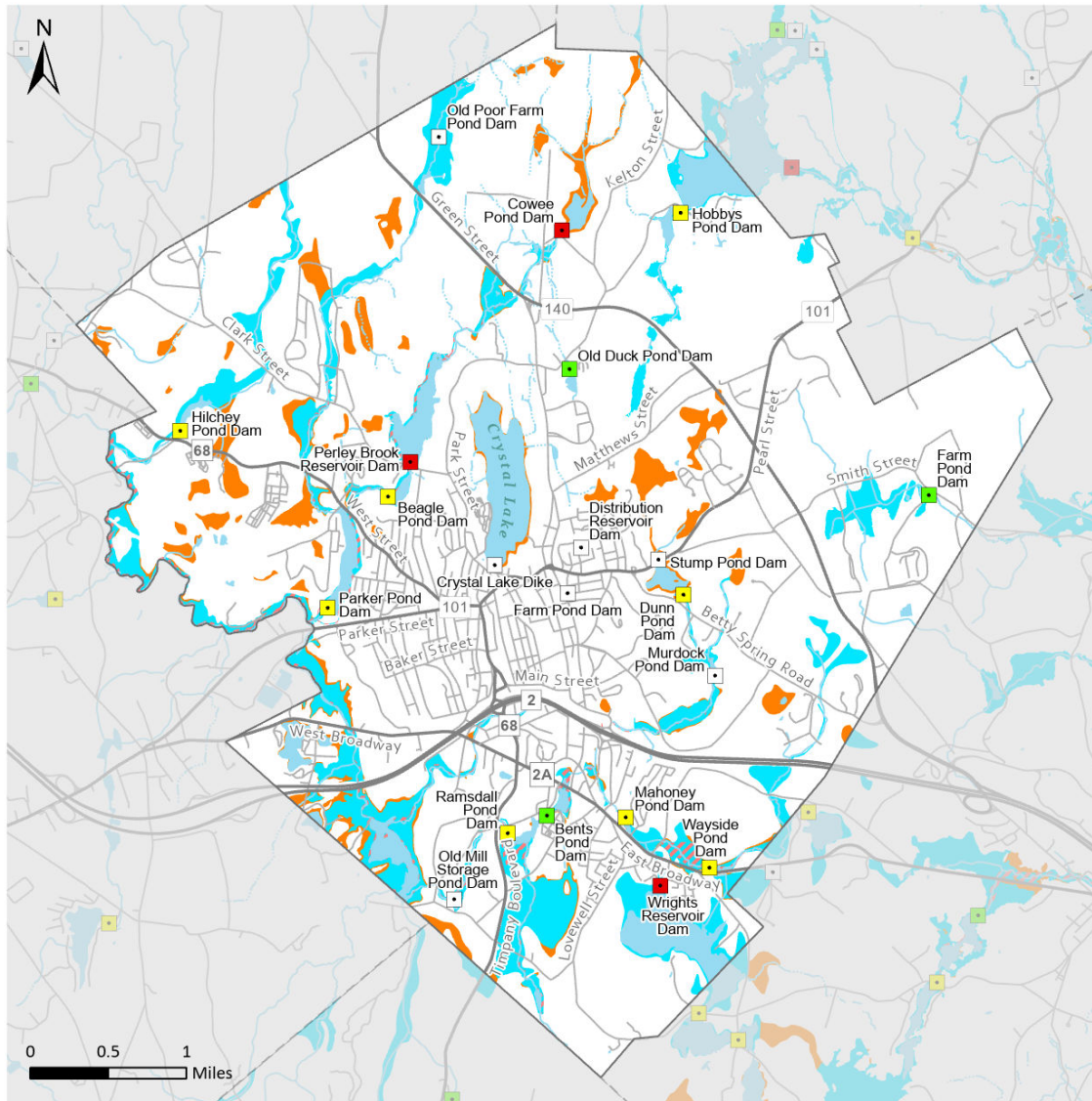
- Base Map**
- Interstate
  - U.S. Highway
  - State Route
  - Non-numbered Road
  - Surrounding Towns
- Water and Wetlands**
- Perennial Stream
  - Intermittent Stream
  - Water
  - Wetlands (DEP)
  - Certified Vernal Pools
  - Potential Vernal Pools



Date: July 2025  
 Source: Mass GIS and City of Gardner

*The information depicted on this map is for general planning purposes only. It is not adequate for legal boundary definition, regulatory interpretation, or parcel level analysis. Use caution when interpreting the information on this map.*

Map NR.3, Floodplains and Dams



Floodplains and Dams

MassDOT Roads

- Interstate
- U.S. Highway
- State Route
- Non-numbered Road
- Surrounding Towns
- Perennial Stream
- Intermittent Stream
- Water

Dams

- High Hazard
- Significant Hazard
- Low Hazard
- N/A

FEMA National Flood Hazard Layer

Flood Hazard Zones

- 1% Annual Chance Flood Hazard
- Regulatory Floodway
- 0.2% Annual Chance Flood Hazard

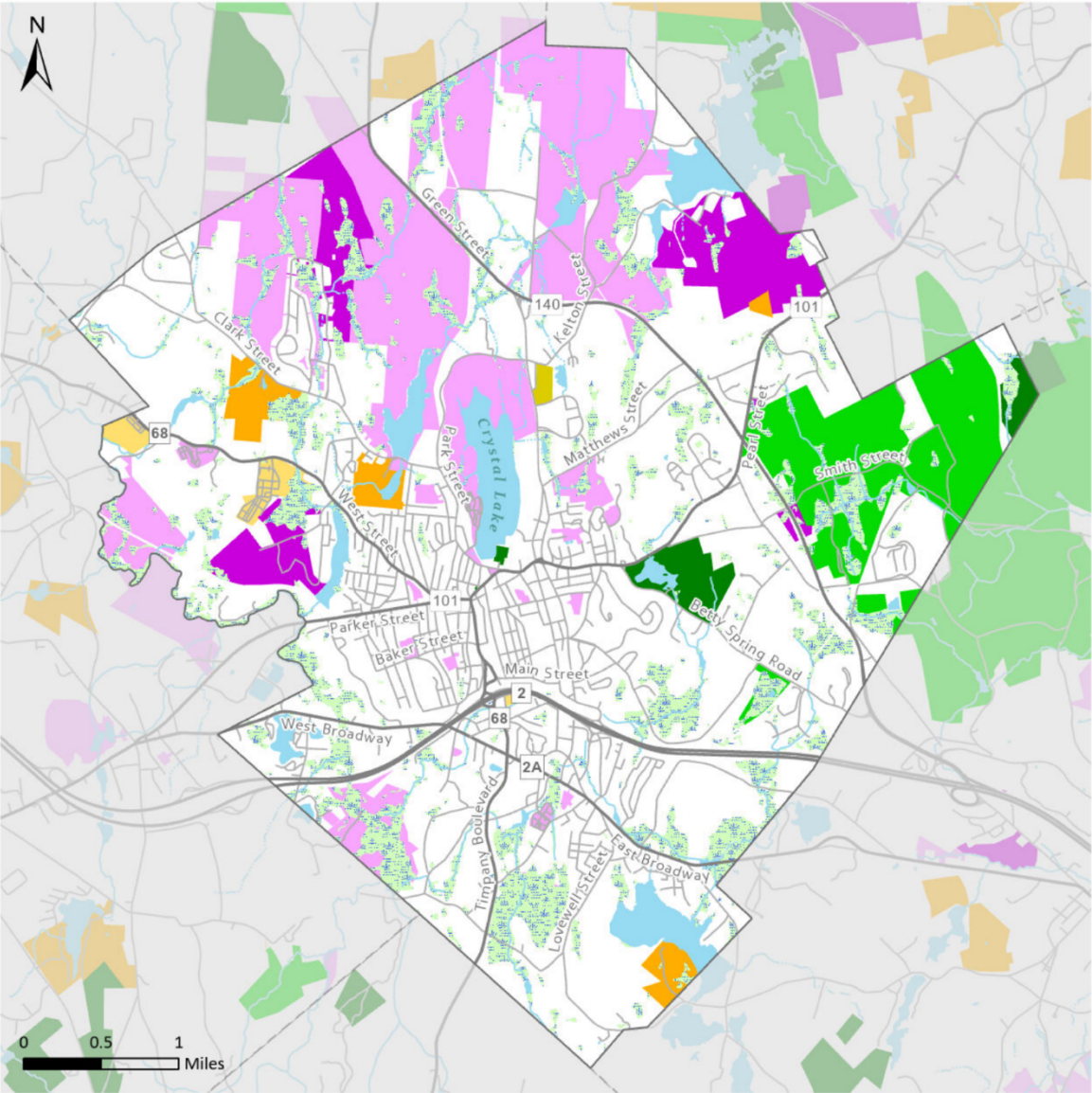


Date: August 2025

Source: Mass GIS and City of Gardner

The information depicted on this map is for general planning purposes only. It is not adequate for legal boundary definition, regulatory interpretation, or parcel level analysis. Use caution when interpreting the information on this map.

Map NR.4, Open Space by Ownership



Map X. Open Space by Ownership

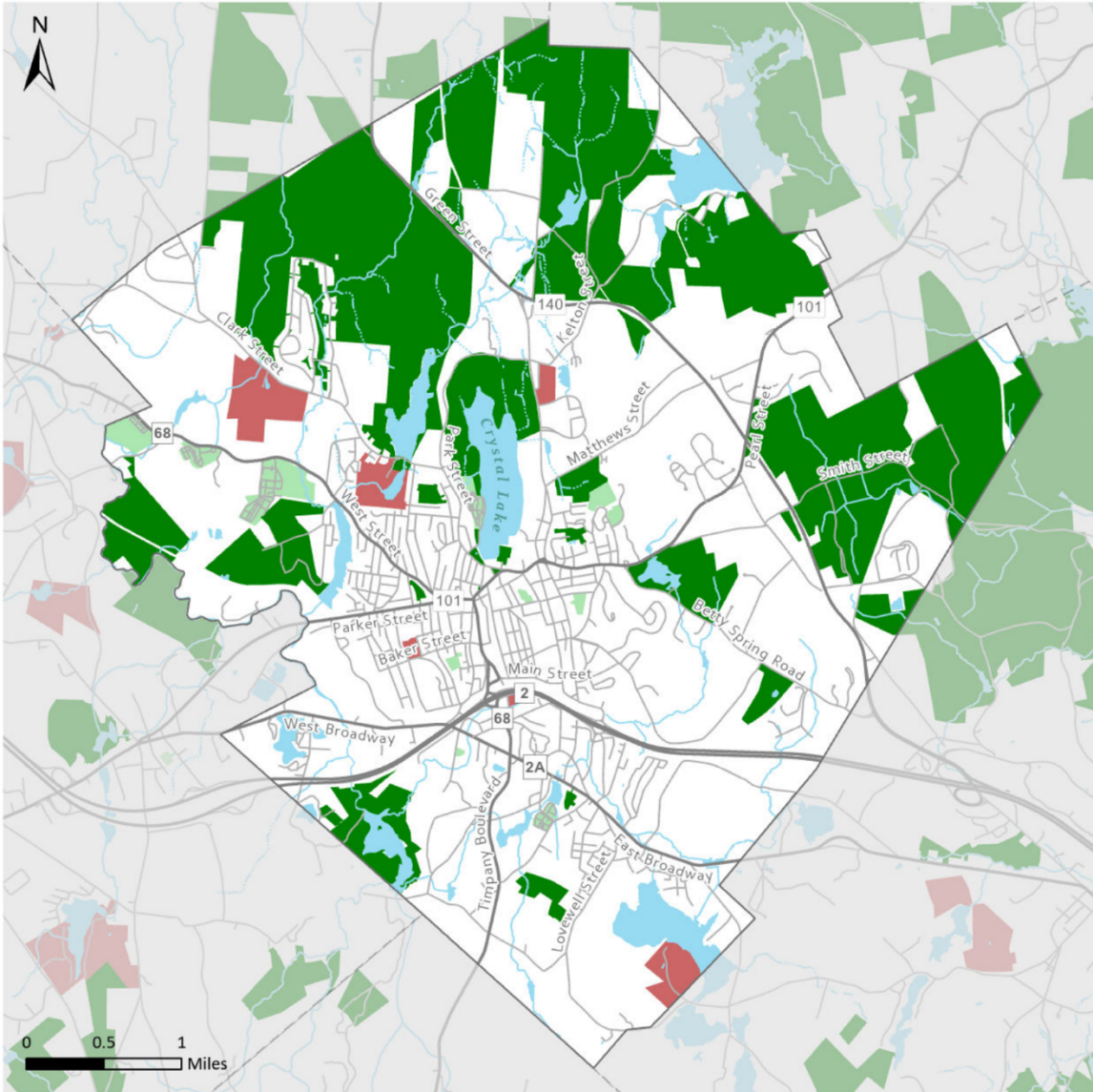
- Base Map**
- Interstate
  - U.S. Highway
  - State Route
  - Non-numbered Road
  - ▭ Surrounding Towns
- Water and Wetlands**
- Perennial Stream
  - Intermittent Stream
  - Water
  - ▭ Wetlands (DEP)
- Open Space by Ownership**
- ▭ DCR-State Parks & Recreation
  - ▭ Department of Fish & Game
  - ▭ Commonwealth of Massachusetts
  - ▭ County
  - ▭ Municipal
  - ▭ Public Non-Profit
  - ▭ Land Trust
  - ▭ Non-Profit
  - ▭ Private



Date: July 2025  
 Source: Mass GIS and City of Gardner

*The information depicted on this map is for general planning purposes only. It is not adequate for legal boundary definition, regulatory interpretation, or parcel level analysis. Use caution when interpreting the information on this map.*

Map NR.5, Open Space by Level of Protection



Map X. Open Space by Level of Protection

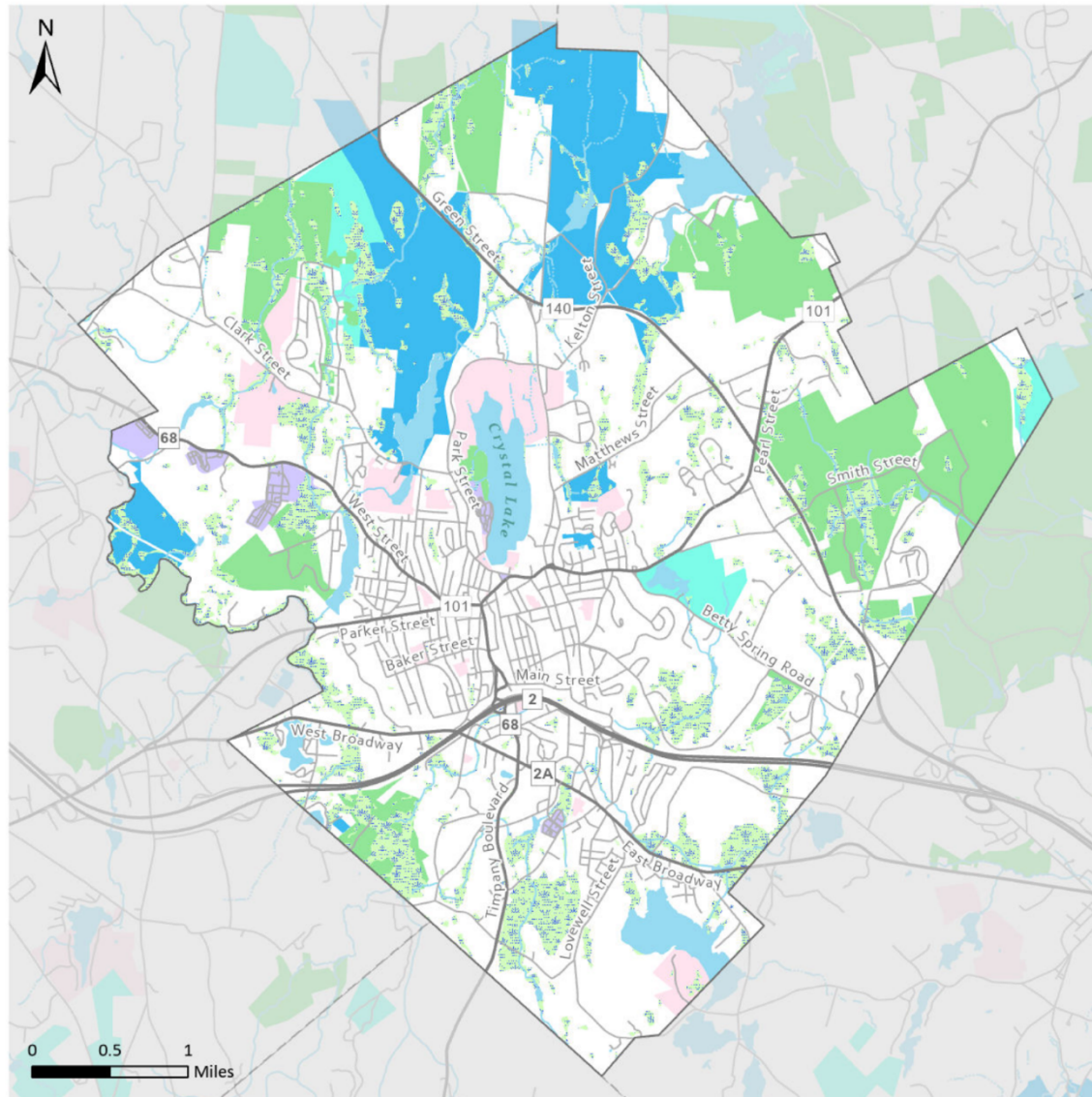
- Interstate
  - U.S. Highway
  - State Route
  - Non-numbered Road
  - Perennial Stream
  - Intermittent Stream
  - Water
  - Surrounding Towns
- OpenSpace: Level of Protection
- In Perpetuity
  - Limited
  - None



Date: July 2025  
 Source: Mass GIS and City of Gardner

*The information depicted on this map is for general planning purposes only. It is not adequate for legal boundary definition, regulatory interpretation, or parcel level analysis. Use caution when interpreting the information on this map.*

Map NR.6, Open Space by Primary Purpose



Map X. Open Space by Primary Purpose

Base Map

- Interstate
- U.S. Highway
- State Route
- Non-numbered Road
- ▭ Surrounding Towns

Water and Wetlands

- Perennial Stream
- Intermittent Stream
- Water
- ▭ Wetlands (DEP)

Open Space by Primary Purpose

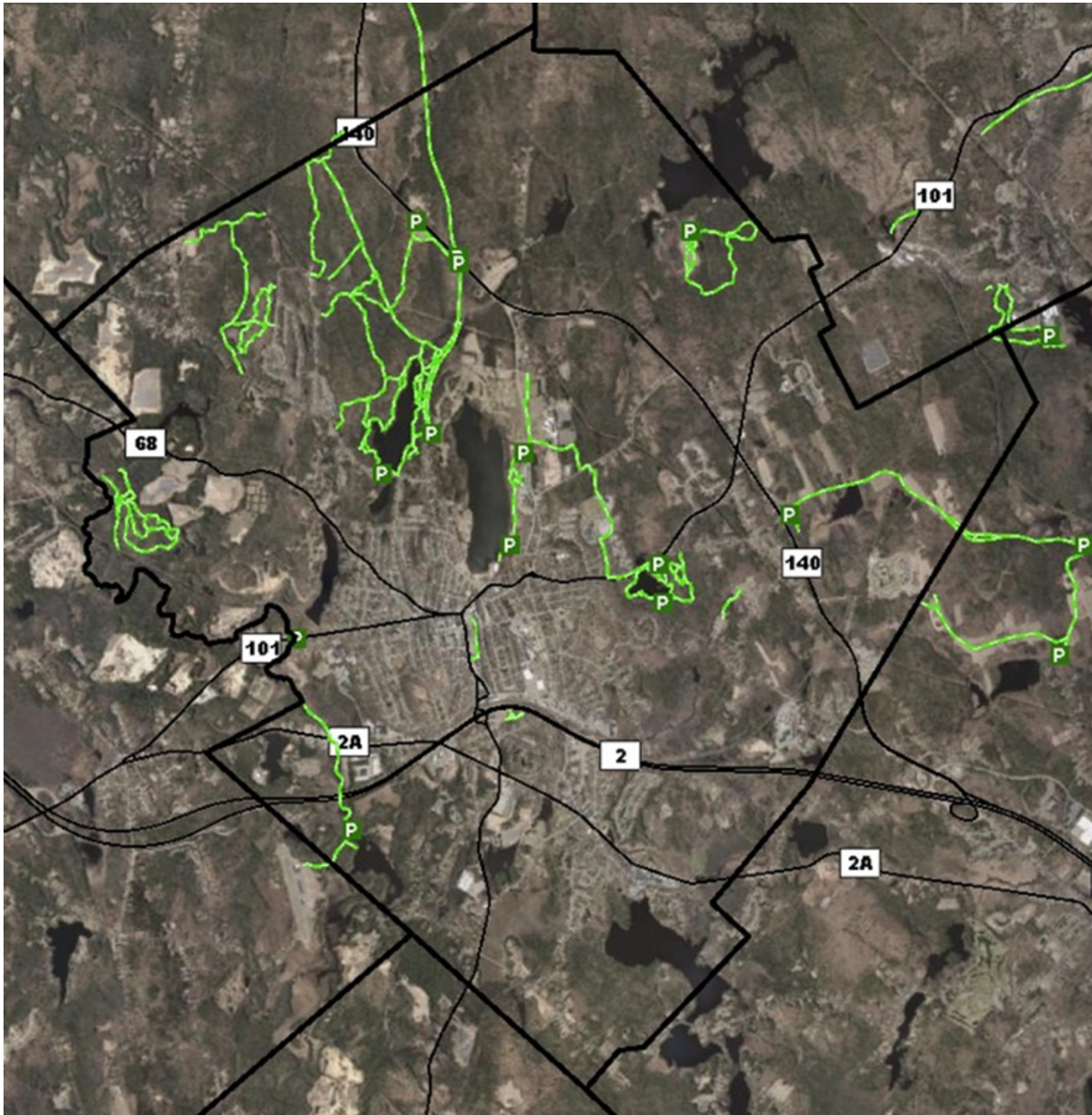
- ▭ Conservation
- ▭ Recreation
- ▭ Recreation and Conservation
- ▭ Historical/Cultural
- ▭ Water Supply
- ▭ Underwater



Date: July 2025  
 Source: Mass GIS and City of Gardner

*The information depicted on this map is for general planning purposes only. It is not adequate for legal boundary definition, regulatory interpretation, or parcel level analysis. Use caution when interpreting the information on this map.*

Figure NR.1, Bike Path and Trail Network



Source: "MrMapper Existing Formal Trails," Montachusett Regional Planning Commission, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://mrmapper.mrpc.org/WebApps/v2.15/ExistingFormalTrails/>.

## Historic & Cultural Resources

### Existing Conditions and Trends

As an upland area in a border region between several Native groups, Gardner did not experience significant Native American settlement before the arrival of Europeans.<sup>39</sup> Watered sites, such as Crystal Lake, the Otter River, and smaller brooks and tributaries, may have been used seasonally for hunting and fishing by the Nipmuc and Pennacook.

The land today known as Gardner was historically part of the towns of Westminster, Ashburnham, Winchendon, and Templeton. Gardner became a separate town in 1785, named for Colonel Thomas Gardner, a casualty of the Battle of Bunker Hill. The primarily agricultural community grew slowly through the eighteenth century. There are twenty-two documented houses dating before 1800, although these have not been confirmed with interior investigation. Twelve are smaller one-and-a-half story Capes and ten are larger two-and-a-half story structures. One of the earliest buildings in the city is believed to be 20 Lennon Street (GAR.28); it was originally located elsewhere and has been modified with vinyl siding and replacement windows.<sup>40</sup> These early buildings generally reflect a rural, agricultural community in form and style, and are dispersed throughout the city's landscape. There are no commercial or institutional buildings dating from the eighteenth century.

The beginning of the nineteenth century saw the development of small home-based industries focused on manufacturing, particularly chairs. The Heywood brothers – Walter, William, and Levi – developed one of the most successful chair manufacturing businesses in the nineteenth century. Eventually merging with the Wakefield Rattan Company, Heywood-Wakefield developed a complex of factory buildings at the heart of West Gardner (GAR.B). The firm anchored the city's chair industry, which included more than 3,500 workers by 1910. The Simplex Time Recording Company grew out of Heywood-Wakefield, incorporating in 1902 when Heywood-Wakefield employee Edward G. Watkins developed a time recorder to track employees. Today known as SimplexGrinnell, a division of Johnson Controls, the firm manufactures various security and safety alarms and maintains an office in Westminster.

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<sup>39</sup> This brief history of Gardner is summarized from Esther Gilman Moore, *History of Gardner, Massachusetts, 1785-1967*, (Gardner, MA: Hatton Printing, Inc., 1967), and the Massachusetts Historical Commission, "MHC Reconnaissance Survey Town Report - Gardner," 1984.

<sup>40</sup> The Massachusetts Historical Commission assigns a three-letter town code and numerical code to each historic resource entered into the Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System (MACRIS). When available these are given in this section as GAR.###.

Outside of the large Heywood-Wakefield complex, much of which has been redeveloped into housing, Gardner's industrial heritage is still visible on the landscape. Numerous industrial buildings are incorporated into downtown's neighborhoods, located close to where workers lived. Particularly notable is that Gardner remained a strong industrial community through the second half of the twentieth century, resulting in the ongoing replacement of old industrial buildings and the construction of new ones into the immediate postwar years. However, outside of major complexes like the Heywood-Wakefield factory, little of Gardner's industrial heritage has been documented. A review of the industries summarized by Esther Gilman Moore in *History of Gardner, Massachusetts, 1785-1967* shows that many of the buildings are not documented, and a number have since been demolished, leaving gaps in Gardner's landscape and history.

The chair and furniture industry accelerated Gardner's growth through the nineteenth century, bringing the population from under 1,000 in 1800 to just over 10,000 by 1900. Immigration drove this population growth, first from Ireland beginning in the 1840s but then from Italy, Canada's eastern provinces, and then Scandinavia around the turn of the century. Today many of these groups still have a presence in the city, with Scandinavian bath houses and private social clubs such as the Acadien Social Club and Polish American Citizens Club.

The arrival of immigrant groups also led to a proliferation of religious organizations and buildings, particularly in the downtown area. Notable churches include the Victorian Gothic First Congregational Church (5 Central St., GAR.2), the Colonial Revival First Baptist Church (14 High St., GAR.98), the English Revival First Lutheran Church (209 Lawrence St., not documented), and numerous examples of the Shingle Style, representative of their construction during the final quarter of the nineteenth century and first quarter of the twentieth century (Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church, 166 Cross St., GAR.62; Hillside Methodist Church, 170 Peabody St., not documented). While a number of these religious buildings are still in use by religious organizations, others have been converted to different uses, such as housing or commercial space (Bethel Evangelical Lutheran Church, 122 West St., not documented), and still others are vacant. At least one, Gardner's only synagogue, Congregation Ohave Shalom (152 Pleasant St., GAR.70), was demolished in recent years.

While outlying areas of the city continued in agricultural use with a dispersed settlement pattern, during the nineteenth century industrial workers clustered around factories located in central and south Gardner, leaving a pattern of small single-family and various kinds of multi-family housing on the landscape. These include numerous one-and-a-half story end-gable side-entry houses, a form popular beginning in the early nineteenth century for single-family houses. The later nineteenth century saw the introduction of larger two-family dwellings, often in the same end-gable format but sometimes with different roof and room configurations.

As in many urban industrial areas of Massachusetts, triple-deckers are also present in significant numbers. Gardner's triple-deckers are notable as they are a wider form, frequently with a centered entry door and full-width porches across the front. These are distinct from the triple-deckers of Boston and Worcester, which were narrower with a side entry door and a porch that often only covered one half of the facade. There are also a handful of double triple-deckers, providing six units per building, and sometimes more with a finished basement space. Particularly impressive are the two Colonial Revival brick examples at 27-29 Graham St. (GAR.65 and GAR.255). Almost none of this housing, especially outside of West Gardner Square, is documented.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Gardner residents were served by railroad connections to the east and west, and electric trolley lines that looped through Union Square, West Gardner, and South Gardner, connecting out to Fitchburg. The electric trolley lines fell victim to the introduction of automobiles and heavy snowstorms during the winter of 1918, and passenger rail service to Boston ended in the 1960s. The city's airport was incorporated in 1927 as a private business and transferred to municipal ownership in 1937.

For many years the community has benefited from public and recreational spaces. Martha Heywood and Helen R. Heywood founded Heywood Hospital (not documented) in 1907 in honor of Henry Heywood, their husband and father, respectively. The hospital has been expanded since then and is currently undertaking the construction of a surgical pavilion. In 1915, Levi Heywood Greenwood donated a public indoor-outdoor pool complex (69 Park St., GAR.1) to the residents of Gardner, in honor of his parents. The pool served the community for a century but was recently demolished. In 1936, Gardner Golf Course (not documented) opened to the public, with two subsequent expansions bringing the course to eighteen holes. The clubhouse is the eighteenth century Joseph Bacon House (152-154 Eaton St., GAR.44).

Responding to the needs of the growing community, Gardner incorporated as a city in 1923. Industries continued to operate in the city well into the twentieth century, but as the furniture business moved south and then abroad, Gardner's population began to fall from a peak in 1940. Because of this, the city has seen only limited suburban residential development in the later twentieth century, compared to Worcester and communities in the eastern part of the state. Some initial subdivision activity filled in the outlying gaps around downtown, such as southwest and southeast of West Gardner, and in more outlying areas, including the development of two mobile home parks. Otherwise, residential development proceeded piecemeal along existing routes. Typical of other Massachusetts communities, much of this twentieth century residential development is Capes and ranches in minimal traditional styles.

## Local Policies and Practices

### *Arts and Culture Organizations*

The city's various immigrant groups and cultures are still prominent today through private social clubs that continue to operate. Groups such as the **Polish American Citizen's Club**, **Acadien Social Club**, and **Napoleon Club** have clubhouses and regular social and charitable events. At least one business still in operation – Finnish steam bath **EZ Steam Club** – reflects the Nordic roots of some of the city's early twentieth century immigrants.

Outside of the social clubs, the community has a number of arts and culture organizations that operate within Gardner and regionally. **The Gardner Museum** is a private non-profit local history organization opened in 1978 that operates out of the former Levi Heywood Memorial Library building.<sup>41</sup> The museum offers permanent and rotating exhibitions, events, and a gift shop, with the building available to rent for events. Gardner is part of the **Freedom's Way National Heritage Area**, a non-profit organization promoting historic sites, natural areas, and cultural organizations within the forty-five communities of the heritage area. Heritage areas encourage tourism within the area through connected marketing and supporting regional organizations through grants.

The City's free, public **Levi Heywood Memorial Library** opened in the building that now houses the Gardner Museum in 1886, and after another location on City Hall Avenue, moved to a new building in 2004.<sup>42</sup> In addition to providing reading materials, the library hosts a variety of events throughout the year for Gardner residents of all ages. The library also has a Local History Room with collections of City documents and other materials relating to the history of Gardner.

Established in 2000, **Gardner Area League of Artists** supports a variety of artists in the north-central Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire area.<sup>43</sup> They host exhibitions, classes, and other events. They also organize exhibits at Heywood Hospital's Center for Wound Care, bringing art out into the community.

Since 1976 Mount Wachusett Community College has hosted **Theatre at the Mount** as part of the college's Associate of Arts in theater degree program.<sup>44</sup> The theater space was significantly renovated in 2015. Theatre at the Mount holds several productions a year, including showings

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<sup>41</sup> "History of the Building," The Gardner Museum, Inc., accessed July 7, 2025.

<https://www.gardnermuseuminc.com/the-building>.

<sup>42</sup> "About Us - Library History," Levi Heywood Memorial Library, accessed July 7, 2025.

<https://www.leviheywoodmemlib.org/responsiveaboutus.html#history>.

<sup>43</sup> Gardner Area League of Artists, accessed July 7, 2025. <https://www.galagardner.org/>.

<sup>44</sup> "History of Theatre at the Mount," Mount Wachusett Community College, accessed July 7, 2025.

<https://mwcc.edu/campus-life/tam/history/>.

targeted towards school groups. They also host regular classes, workshops, and summer programs available for community members.

### *Gardner Cultural Council*

The City's appointed Cultural Council promotes the arts within Gardner. Members primarily provide grants to arts and culture organizations operating within the city, funding that comes from the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

### *Gardner Historical Commission*

The City's Historical Commission, established under G.L. c. 40, §8d, is an advisory body without any regulatory powers. In recent years, the Historical Commission has been collecting and cataloguing artifacts from formerly City-owned buildings slated for demolition or sale. They are also working to establish an office in City Hall. Outside of the Historical Commission's very limited budget, the City does not provide any funding for historic preservation efforts. Gardner has not adopted the Community Preservation Act.

### *Historic Resources Documentation*

Since the 1960s, communities have been encouraged to document their historic resources – buildings, structures, objects, landscapes, parks, cemeteries, and the like – on inventory forms produced by the Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC). Like most other Massachusetts communities, the Gardner Historical Commission undertook a volunteer-led survey in the mid-1970s to document the city's historic resources. This work documented many of the major, old, and significant resources, with 211 buildings, twelve structures, fourteen objects, four areas, and one burying ground documented in the city to date (**Map HC.1**).

However, Gardner has not pursued additional documentation work since that initial work in the 1970s. A review of the MHC's Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System (MACRIS) and MACRIS Maps shows significant amounts of the city where no historic resources have been documented, even though a review of the area on the ground reveals potentially notable resources in the area. Documentation efforts are one of the primary responsibilities of local historical commissions, as knowing where a community's historic resources are and why they are important can help the local historical commission make decisions about how to protect and preserve those resources.

### *Protected Historic Resources*

Currently the city's many historic resources are unprotected by any historic preservation tools. There are no locally-designated historic districts, nor does the City have a demolition delay

ordinance. The Historical Commission did propose a demolition delay ordinance in 2014, but it was met with little interest to discuss or adopt the proposal.

Gardner has eleven individual buildings listed in the National Register of Historic Places, three districts of multiple properties, and one property – the Blue Moon Diner – included as part of a statewide thematic listing of diners. The National Register of Historic Places provides some limited protection for historic resources in the form of a consultative review process if a project will involve federal or state permitting, licensing, or funding. But most actions a private property owner might take, such as rehabilitation or demolition, do not involve the federal or state government and thus would not be subject to review.

The city does have three properties with a perpetual preservation restriction (**Table HC.1**). This is a legal easement that grants a third party the right to review and approve changes to a property, in perpetuity. All three restrictions are held by the MHC.

**Table HC.1, Preservation Restrictions in Gardner**

Name	Address	MHC ID	PR Holder	Deed Reference
Elm Street Fire Station	58 Elm Street	GAR.206	MHC	12886/100
Levi Heywood Memorial Library	28 Pearl Street	GAR.11	MHC	19696/320
Gardner Court House and Police Department	115 Pleasant Street	GAR.226	MHC	21493/28

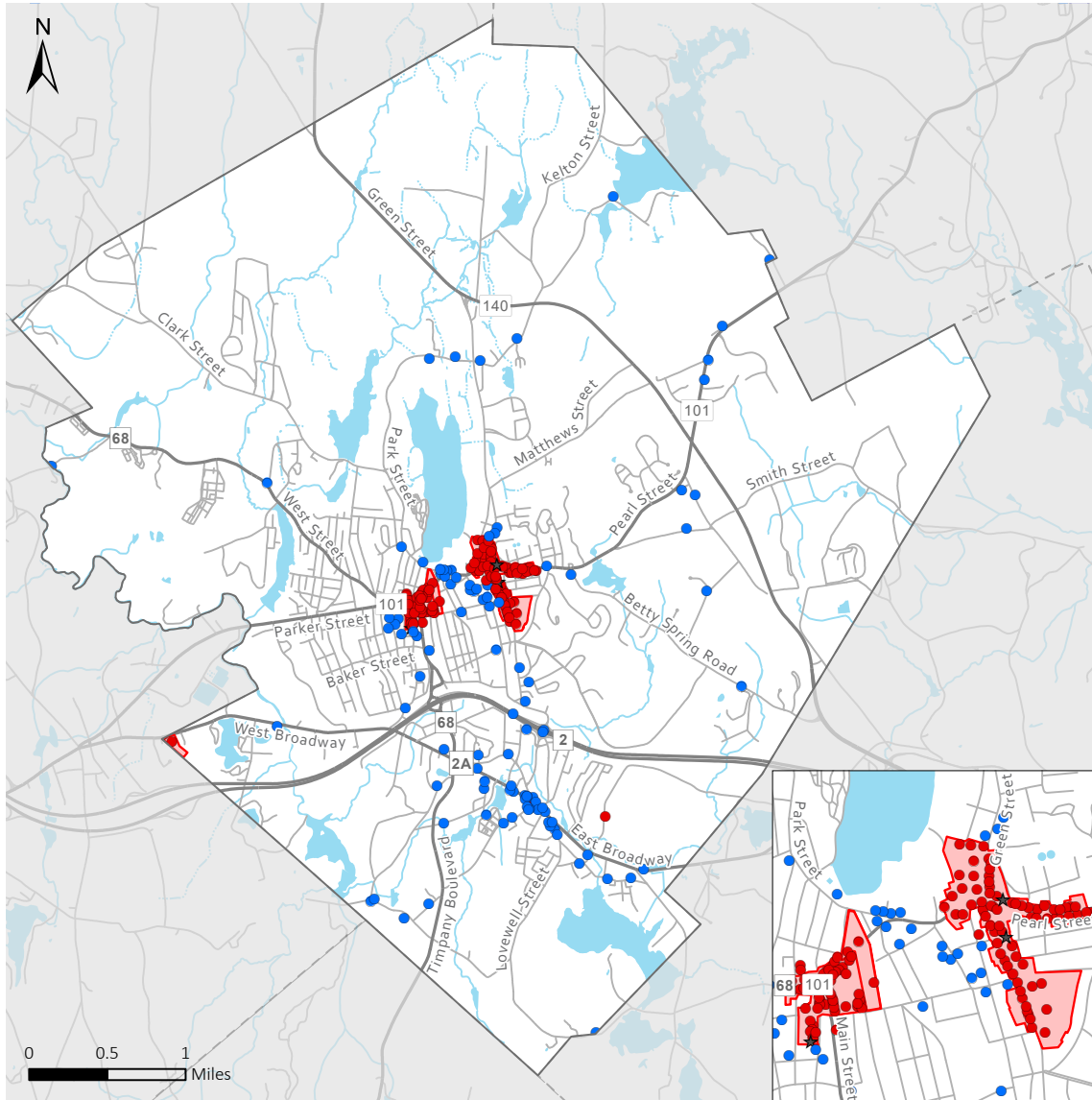
*Source: MACRIS and the Worcester County Registry of Deeds*

### *Condition of Historic Resources*

A review of the city’s historic resources raises concerns about their condition. Lack of investment in the city has left many buildings in poor condition. Red Xs are visible on many buildings, a sign that the Fire Department will not enter a building due to concerns about its safety. The City has been active in demolishing blighted structures, but this leaves gaps on the landscape where historic buildings have been removed and not replaced. A number of buildings on the City’s vacant building list maintained by the Building Commissioner are notable for their age, architecture, or role in the city’s history. These include 156 Park Street (GAR.64), which visually dates to the third quarter of the eighteenth century and has a notable architectural feature, a Beverly jog, on its east end; 56 Pearl Street (GAR.202), an interesting brick Queen Anne/Shingle Style house; 11 Carter Road (GAR.47), a former eighteenth century schoolhouse; and 209 Lawrence Street (not documented), a stone English Revival church. As the City currently does not use CDBG funds for housing rehabilitation, and has not adopted the

Community Preservation Act, there is no local funding for property owners looking to preserve or rehabilitate their historic buildings.

Map HC.1, Historic Resources



Map X. Historic Resources

Massachusetts Historical Commission Historic Inventory

- National Register of Historic Places
- ★ Preservation Restriction
- ☆ Massachusetts Historic Landmark
- ▲ Local Historic District
- ▼ NRHP and LHD
- Inventoried Property
- National Register of Historic Places
- Preservation Restriction
- Massachusetts Historic Landmark
- Local Historic District
- NRHP and LHD
- Inventoried Property

MassDOT Roads

- Interstate
- U.S. Highway
- State Route
- Non-numbered Road
- Water
- Surrounding Towns



Date: August 2025  
 Source: Mass GIS and City of Gardner

*The information depicted on this map is for general planning purposes only. It is not adequate for legal boundary definition, regulatory interpretation, or parcel level analysis. Use caution when interpreting the information on this map.*

## Land Use

### Existing Conditions and Trends

Gardner’s existing land uses reflect the city’s historic development patterns described in the Historic Resources section, as well as the City’s base zoning that was first established in 1970 (**Map LU.1**). While the city’s manufacturing heyday has passed, remnants of this era still shape its built environment. Several large mill buildings that once housed furniture production have been repurposed to accommodate diverse uses, including furniture retail showrooms, office spaces, residential lofts, and even an assisted living facility. This adaptive reuse reflects the city’s efforts to preserve its industrial heritage while supporting modern needs.

As a small urban center, Gardner maintains a relatively low overall population density of 2.41 housing units per acre, with the number falling even lower outside the historic neighborhoods surrounding downtown.<sup>45</sup> This development pattern is driven by the extensive areas north of downtown that are designated as water supply protection zones, conservation lands, and wildlife sanctuaries, which significantly limit development in these parts of the city. Older neighborhoods near downtown, characterized by a traditional street grid, have seen minimal population growth in recent decades.

Economic and population trends, detailed in the Economic Development and Housing sections, further drive changes to the city’s land use patterns. Gardner provides essential services and amenities to residents within the broader Montachusett region, functioning as a regional nucleus for employment, commerce, healthcare, and recreation and anchored by institutions like Mount Wachusett Community College and Heywood Hospital. A relatively stable population level has led to little growth over the later twentieth century.

According to the City of Gardner’s 2025 assessor’s data, most land development and current active uses are located within and around the downtown area. Commercial and industrial uses comprise 3.5 and 4.4 percent of the total land area, respectively, and are typically concentrated near the city’s core and major transportation corridors, contributing to a compact and accessible urban center (**Table LU.1**). Mixed-use development, while only occupying twenty-eight acres (0.2 percent), represents the city’s historic nineteenth and early twentieth century development pattern of a mix of uses – residential, commercial, and industrial. Residential land uses are interwoven within and around the downtown area, but also with sizable pockets in South Gardner. This category occupies a substantial portion of the city, comprising 3,933 acres or 26.7 percent of the total land area.

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<sup>45</sup> “Residency,” Massachusetts Housing Partnership, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://residency.mhp.net/>.

**Table LU.1, Current Land Uses and Acreages**

<b>Land Use</b>	<b>Acres</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Residential	3,933	26.7%
Commercial	514	3.5%
Mixed-Use	28	0.2%
Industrial	647	4.4%
Recreational Land	229	1.6%
Agricultural Land	84	0.6%
Exempt	2,582	17.5%
Forested Land	2	0.01%
Vacant Land	5,169	35.1%
Right-of-Way	974	6.6%
Rail Right-of-Way	124	0.8%
Water	403	2.7%
Null*	39	0.3%

*Source: City of Gardner, MA, Assessor, "Parcel Data," 2025.*

*\* The land use category identified as Null were those parcels which did not have any assigned land use in the Assessor's database.*

The bulk of Gardner's land remains undeveloped or allocated to non-urban uses. In fact, vacant and forested land constitutes the largest single category, at 5,171 acres (35.1 percent). Many of the lands classified as vacant are protected as Gardner Water Supply Land, especially in north Gardner, or various conservation areas. Exempt lands, such as those owned by governmental or institutional entities (hospitals, schools, religious institutions, etc.), cover 2,582 acres (17.5 percent). This is a notable percentage as the City cannot collect property taxes on this land. Much of this category is state-owned land such as Mount Wachusett Community College, Dunn State Park, the North Central Correctional Institute and MassWildlife properties in the northeast part of the city.

Recreational and agricultural lands are modestly represented at 1.6 and 0.6 percent, respectively, providing limited open space and farming functions. Rights-of-way, including roads and rail, together account for about 7.4 percent of the city's land, representing the city's connectivity and infrastructure framework.

## Chapter 61 Program

The G.L. c. 61 program is a set of three related programs – Chapter 61, 61A, and 61B – that offer property tax reductions to landowners who commit to keeping their land in productive forestry, agricultural, or open space use. Each program reduces the property tax assessment based on land use rather than market value, and municipalities are granted a right of first refusal to acquire the property if the land will be sold or converted to a non-qualifying use. These programs aim to preserve open space and discourage development pressures that may come with rising land values and property tax assessments. There are twenty-two parcels in Gardner with over 766 acres designated under the Chapter 61 program.

- **Chapter 61 – Forestry Program**

Chapter 61 is for land actively managed for timber and forest production, requiring a forest management plan approved by a licensed forester. In Gardner, this program represents the smallest component of the Chapter 61 program, encompassing just sixty-six acres across three parcels.<sup>46</sup> All three Chapter 61 parcels in Gardner are in the extreme southern portion of the city, with two properties abutting Westminster and the third bordering Hubbardston. The limited scale and specific location of Chapter 61 parcels in Gardner reflects both geographic constraints and the prioritization of other open space land uses throughout the city.

- **Chapter 61A – Agriculture/Horticulture Program**

Chapter 61A supports agricultural and horticultural lands, offering benefits to landowners who are commercially farming or growing food or nursery products. Over 203 acres of agricultural land across five parcels are protected under this program in Gardner.<sup>47</sup> Agricultural products include fruits, vegetables, ornamental shrubs, trees, animals, and other items.

- **Chapter 61B – Recreational Land Program**

Chapter 61B targets recreational or open space lands, such as those used for hiking, camping, or non-commercial wildlife observation. This program is the most prominent of the three Chapter 61 program classifications in Gardner, accounting for over 496 acres of privately-owned land designated for passive recreational uses, such as hiking, fishing, wildlife observation, and other non-commercial outdoor activities.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> “Parcel Data,” Assessor, City of Gardner, 2025.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

The bulk of Chapter 61B acreage in Gardner is concentrated in two major holdings: the Dubzinski Trust property, located on the southwest side of Wrights Reservoir and encompassing over 127 acres, and the Gardner Fish & Gun Club, which maintains 122 acres off Clark Street in the western portion of the city. Together, these two properties make up more than half of all Chapter 61B designated land in Gardner. Like the city's Chapter 61 forestry parcels, these recreational lands are predominantly found in the more rural outskirts away from the urbanized core of Gardner.

## *Contaminated Sites and Use Limitations*

### **Brownfields**

Gardner faces a significant challenge with more than 100 identified brownfield sites scattered across its urban and residential landscape (**Figure LU.1**).<sup>49</sup> These properties, which range in size from less than one acre to over 30 acres, are remnants of the city's industrial past and have known or likely contaminants that can affect their potential future use. Concentrated primarily in the downtown core and historic city center, brownfields are also distributed throughout residential neighborhoods, often adjacent to waterways and near schools, churches, playgrounds, and local businesses. This proximity to sensitive land uses presents environmental justice concerns and highlights the critical need for effective site assessment, cleanup, and redevelopment strategies to safeguard public health and support community revitalization.

The City has successfully secured funding from multiple sources to address these brownfield sites, including direct grants from the EPA for site assessment, cleanup, and planning activities. According to the EPA Brownfields Funding History database, Gardner has been awarded both Assessment and Cleanup grants, including a \$400,000 Community-Wide Assessment Grant in 2023 to evaluate contaminated sites and plan for their redevelopment.<sup>50</sup> These funds have enabled the City to identify, assess, and prioritize dozens of brownfield properties, particularly within its downtown and former industrial areas, advancing efforts to revitalize underutilized land and protect public health.

Additionally, the City has benefited from support provided by the MRPC, which channels federal funds for regional environmental initiatives. Gardner has also utilized state-level assistance through the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP), the Massachusetts Attorney General's Brownfields Initiative, and MassDevelopment's Brownfields

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<sup>49</sup> Leedy, *Open Space and Recreation Plan*, 4-9.

<sup>50</sup> "Massachusetts Brownfields Funding History – Gardner," US Environmental Protection Agency, accessed July 7, 2025. <https://www.epa.gov/brownfields/massachusetts-brownfields-funding-history#mGardner>.

Fund. This coordinated use of local, state, and federal funding underscores Gardner’s proactive stance in mitigating the risks associated with contaminated and underutilized properties.

By addressing brownfields, Gardner is not only improving environmental conditions but also laying the groundwork for economic and community development. Revitalizing these properties supports the City’s broader planning goals such as downtown revitalization, improved housing stock, and enhanced public spaces. Transforming contaminated sites into productive assets can catalyze new investment, create jobs, and restore neighborhood vitality.

### **Activity and Use Limitations**

The Commonwealth’s EEA has also identified numerous properties in Gardner with AULs, which, like brownfields, reflect a legacy of industrial and commercial activity throughout the city. Used at properties where contaminants may remain on site even after cleanup, an AUL is a legal restriction to ensure the property’s future uses remain protective of public health and the environment. AULs are commonly used as part of post-remediation strategies to limit exposure and define acceptable land uses following environmental releases of contaminants. AULs limit potential future uses to those that will contain or not disturb known contaminants, even if additional uses may be allowed by the City’s underlying zoning.

Sites such as the Garlock Printing and Converting facility at 100 Fredette Street, the Gardner Police Station at 200 Main Street, and several former gasoline stations and commercial properties have been subject to environmental oversight due to the presence of oil or hazardous materials. Many of these properties have progressed through various regulatory phases, from immediate response actions after spills to Tier I permitting, and are currently classified under different levels of Response Action Outcomes (RAO), indicating some degree of remediation has occurred.<sup>51</sup> The presence of AULs in Gardner underscores the importance of integrating environmental due diligence into land use planning, especially when considering redevelopment and reuse of historically contaminated sites.

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<sup>51</sup> “Waste Site & Reportable Releases Results – Gardner,” Data Portal, Massachusetts Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, accessed July 7, 2025.

<https://eeaonline.eea.state.ma.us/portal/dep/wastesite/results?queryString=siteType:Only%20sites%20with%20Activity%20%26%20Use%20Limitations&townName:GARDNER>.

## Waste Management and Land Use Impacts

### Transfer Station

Gardner’s municipal landfill, located on West Street, officially ceased operations in 2005, with a final capping of the site by 2007. Despite the closure, the facility continues to serve an important role in municipal solid waste management as a waste transfer station. At this location, residential waste is temporarily collected and consolidated before transportation off-site to regional disposal facilities. This operational shift allows the City to continue offering essential waste services while avoiding the environmental liabilities and long-term costs associated with operating a traditional landfill.

### Sludge Landfill

The City maintains an active sludge landfill at 808 West Street to support Gardner’s Wastewater Treatment Facility. This specialized landfill is designated for the disposal of biosolids—nutrient-rich organic materials derived from the treatment of domestic sewage. While these biosolids are treated to meet regulatory standards and are considered safe, careful long-term disposal planning is necessary to prevent potential environmental contamination from residual industrial compounds. Based on current usage patterns, the existing sludge landfill is expected to reach capacity between 2027 and 2030, prompting the City to pursue long-term solutions for biosolids management.

The City is advancing a proposal to expand the existing sludge landfill by an additional 8.75 acres (**Figure LU.2**). This expansion project is currently undergoing review through the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) process, which ensures that environmental impacts are properly assessed and mitigated for large projects. According to the City’s public information documents, the expansion would provide adequate capacity to support local sludge disposal needs through at least 2044. In developing this proposal, Gardner evaluated nine alternative disposal strategies, including off-site transport, advanced treatment technologies, and composting. However, these options were ultimately deemed environmentally, economically, or logistically infeasible for long-term implementation.

The decision to expand the West Street sludge landfill reflects the City’s effort to balance fiscal responsibility, environmental protection, and operational practicality. The selected path forward not only addresses the need for reliable biosolids management but also aligns with broader community infrastructure and public health goals. By investing in the on-site expansion, Gardner ensures continued autonomy in managing its wastewater byproducts, limits costly reliance on external facilities, and reinforces its commitment to sustainable waste practices. The City’s transparent public engagement, including informational meetings and detailed documentation, underscores its intent to move forward with accountability and environmental stewardship.

## Local Policies and Practices

Gardner’s approach to land use and development is shaped by a robust framework of local policies, boards, and regulatory procedures. Key municipal bodies – including the Planning Board, Conservation Commission, Zoning Board of Appeals, and various other commissions – play essential roles in reviewing, guiding, and approving development proposals. These boards operate within the context of adopted planning documents such as the zoning ordinance and prior planning efforts, all of which provide policy direction for land use decisions. Together with established permitting processes, these local mechanisms ensure that growth in Gardner is coordinated, sustainable, and aligned with the community’s long-term goals.

See Chapter V. City Administration, for more information on the City’s land use boards and departments and past planning efforts.

## *Zoning*

The first official land use regulation in Gardner was adopted on November 18, 1968, by Ordinance No. 399, detailing regulations and penalties related to the placement and maintenance of mobile homes and trailers. Only a few years later, a more comprehensive zoning ordinance established on December 9, 1970, by Ordinance No. 470. The City has amended the zoning ordinance several times since 1970 – most recently in 2018 – and it is currently listed under Chapter 675 of the City Code. As with most other zoning ordinances and bylaws in Massachusetts, Gardner’s zoning ordinance intends “to promote the general welfare of the City, to protect the health and safety, convenience and general welfare of its inhabitants, to encourage the most appropriate use of land throughout the City, [and] to preserve the cultural, historical and agricultural heritage of the community,” among other items.<sup>52</sup>

The municipal limits of the City include over twenty-three square miles of land and water, totaling over 14,500 acres. The City has seven base zoning districts covering 14,537 of the 14,728 acres in Gardner (**Map LU.2** and **Table LU.2**). The other areas outside of these zoning districts consist of rights-of-ways, such as roads, (181 acres) and water (10 acres).

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<sup>52</sup> “Section 675-110,” *City of Gardner Zoning Ordinance*, City of Gardner, MA, accessed July 7, 2025. <https://ecode360.com/34392320#34392320>.

**Table LU.2, Base Zoning Districts and Acreages**

Land Use	Acres	Percentage
Single-Family Residential 1	2,565	17.4%
Rural Residential 2	10,140	68.9%
General Residential 3	520	3.5%
Commercial 1	134	0.9%
Commercial 2	359	2.5%
Industrial 1	312	2.1%
Industrial 2	507	3.4%
Rights-of-Way	181	1.2%
Water	10	0.1%

*Source: City of Gardner, MA, Assessor, "Parcel Data," 2025.*

While nearly 90 percent of Gardner is zoned for residential purposes (SFR1, RR2, and GR3 combined), only 26.7 percent of the land is currently used for residential development. This significant discrepancy is largely explained by the prevalence of vacant land, which accounts for 35.1 percent of the city’s acreage, much of it under water supply or conservation protection designations in north Gardner. These patterns highlight the impact of environmental constraints and protected lands on development, emphasizing the importance of strategic land management to accommodate future growth within the city’s existing regulatory framework.

**Single-Family Residential 1 (SFR1)**

The SFR1 zoning district primarily allows single- and two-family dwellings by right and protected uses such as agriculture, schools, and religious institutions. Other uses, including bed-and-breakfasts, small retail, hospitals, and libraries, require a special permit, while most commercial uses are prohibited. SFR1 areas encircle downtown Gardner and extend north toward Heywood Hospital, west to Barthel Avenue, east to Betty Spring Road, and south to the Westminster line.

**Rural Residential 2 (RR2)**

The RR2 zoning district primarily allows single-family dwellings by right, with two- to four-family dwellings, hotels, and bed-and-breakfasts requiring a special permit. Libraries, museums, and country clubs are permitted, but most other non-residential uses need a special permit, and no commercial or industrial uses are allowed. By far the City’s largest zoning district, RR2 covers much of north, west, and east Gardner, as well as large areas to the south along the Templeton and Hubbardston boundaries.

### **General Residential 3 (GR3)**

The GR3 zoning district permits single- and two-family dwellings by right, while higher-density housing, rooming houses, bed-and-breakfasts, and senior residential developments require a special permit. Limited commercial uses, such as small convenience stores, laundromats, and funeral homes, are also allowed by special permit. This district mainly surrounds downtown, with additional areas near Route 2, Dunn State Park, and in northwest Gardner around Brookside Drive.

### **Commercial 1 (COM1)**

Primarily intended for business uses, the COM1 zoning district permits offices, banks, restaurants, retail, hotels, and a range of recreational and personal services by right. Motor vehicle services, multi-family housing, and certain residential uses like bed-and-breakfasts and senior developments require a special permit. COM1 areas are concentrated downtown near Main, Parker, and Central streets, with additional sections along Route 140, Route 101, and parts of South Gardner.

### **Commercial 2 (COM2)**

The COM2 zoning district heavily emphasizes commercial uses, permitting motor vehicle sales by right, and hotels and motels as the only residential uses. Other business activities like those in COM1 are allowed, with additional intensive automotive services (repairs, car washing, etc.) and limited senior housing permitted by special permit. COM2 areas are mainly located along Main Street, Pearson Boulevard, Timpany Boulevard, and certain sections of Routes 2, 2A, and 68.

### **Industrial 1 (IND1)**

The IND1 zoning district allows industrial uses by right, including light manufacturing, warehousing, research labs, and various business services. Residential uses are limited to hotels and motels by special permit. IND1 areas are found in pockets across the city, including sections east of downtown near Sherman and Chestnut streets, along Coburn Avenue, in South Gardner, and at the Summit Industrial Park off Pearl Street.

### **Industrial 2 (IND2)**

Industrial and limited business uses are allowed by right in the IND2 zoning district, permitting light manufacturing, warehousing, wholesale showrooms, and veterinary hospitals. Residential uses are restricted to hotels, motels, and some senior housing by special permit; additional uses like professional offices, small retail, and adult uses also require a special permit. IND2 areas are located west of downtown along Wilkins Road and Industrial Rowe, with larger sections near Route 2, Route 140, and the Westminster border.

The zoning ordinance also contains six zoning overlay districts (**Map LU.2**).

### **Floodplain Overlay District (FPD)**

The FPD includes all special flood hazard areas identified on Gardner’s FEMA FIRMs and the Flood Boundary and Floodway Map. These areas cover the 100-year regulatory floodplain designated by various FEMA zones. The FPD intends to protect public safety by minimizing risks to life, property, and emergency responders during flood events. It also helps control new development that could worsen flood hazards or cause additional damage. FEMA recently released updated FIRMs for central and western Massachusetts, which took effect on July 8, 2025. These new digital maps replace old paper versions, incorporate updated flood studies, and are clearer and easier to interpret.

### **Groundwater Protection Overlay District (GWPOD)**

The GWPOD covers about 231 acres in southwestern Gardner, south of Route 2 and west of Sawyer Street including the Otter River Conservation Area and Snake Pond. This district aims to protect groundwater resources to ensure safe, reliable drinking water supplies. It helps prevent contamination and conserve important natural areas.

### **Surface Water Protection Overlay District (SWPOD)**

The SWPOD spans roughly 2,612 acres, from Crystal Lake and Park Street north to the Winchendon and Ashburnham borders. It extends west to Perley Brook Reservoir and east behind Mount Wachusett Community College along Kelton Street. The district safeguards surface water sources critical to the City’s drinking water by limiting activities that could pollute or degrade these resources.

### **Development Overlay District 1 (DOD1)**

Designed to support redevelopment and revitalization in economically stressed IND1 and COM1 zones, the DOD1 expands permitted uses and modifies dimensional standards. The City Council has established three DOD1 areas: a seventeen-acre section along Parker Street/Route 101 in west Gardner, an eight-acre area on Main Street between Donlan Street and Willow Street, and a sixteen-acre section bounded by Logan, Sherman, and Main streets and the former railroad right-of-way. These overlays offer more flexible development options to attract investment and reuse underutilized sites. They play a key role in encouraging economic growth and adaptive reuse.

### **Mill Street Corridor Development Overlay District (MSCDOD)**

Another overlay district, the MSCDOD, provides commercial and industrial development and redevelopment options. This overlay district covers the Mill Street Corridor Urban Renewal Area and encourages uses that will provide local employment and enhance the tax base while protecting surrounding neighborhoods from land use conflicts. This overlay district is located north and south of Mill Street in South Gardner, on approximately forty-three acres just east of Timpany Boulevard.

### **Large-Scale Ground-Mounted Solar Photovoltaic Overlay District (SPVOD)**

The SPVOD designates areas for large solar installations and sets standards for their design, operation, and eventual removal. It includes three subdistricts: the 123-acre Summit Solar Overlay near Summit Industrial Park, the 643-acre West Street Solar Overlay north and south of West Street, and the 153-acre West Street Solar Expansion extending toward Parker Pond. These overlays help protect scenic, natural, and historic resources while ensuring public safety. They also require financial assurances for proper decommissioning of the facilities. Several solar fields have been permitted and constructed in the West Street Solar Overlay area.

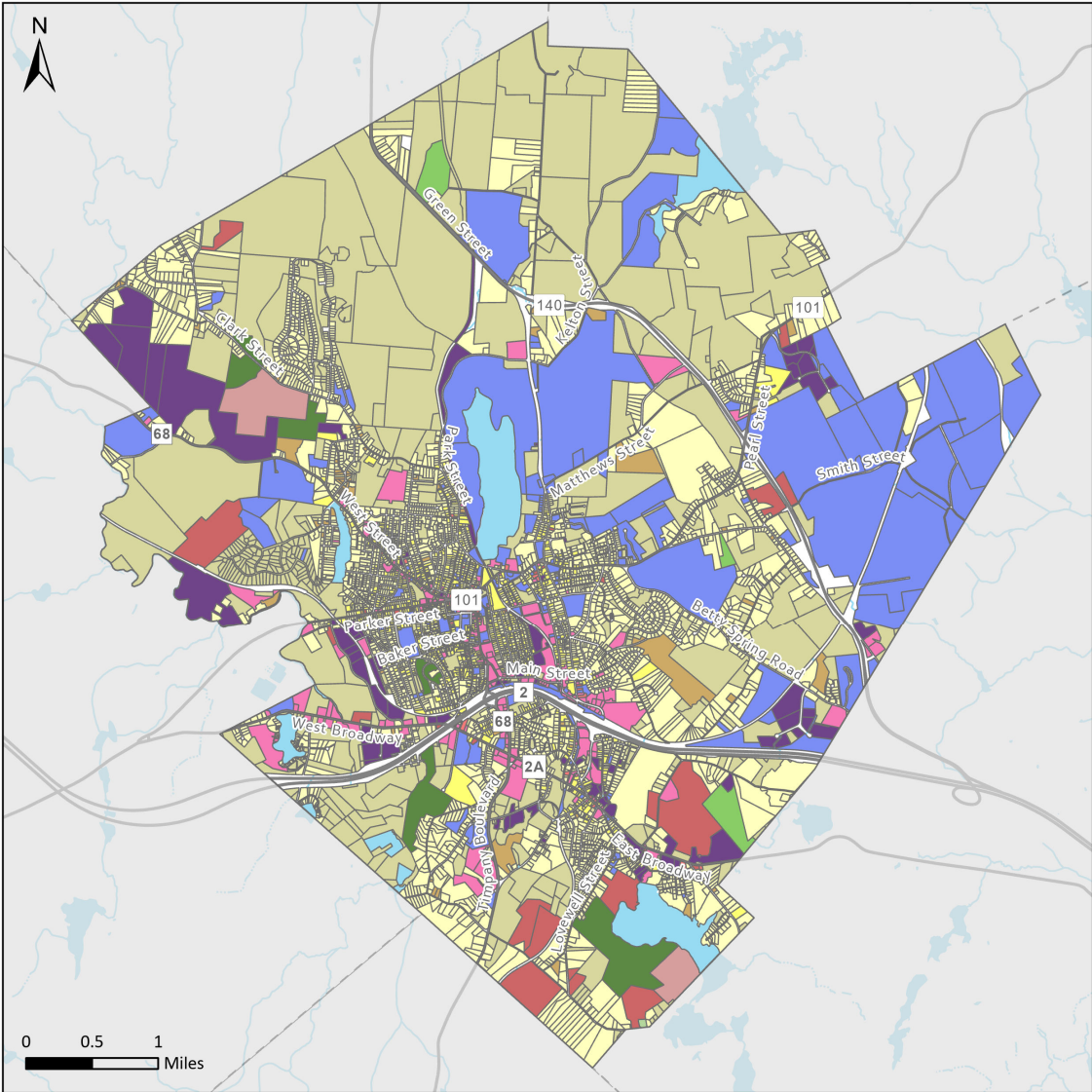
### **Smart Growth Planned Unit Development (SGPUD)**

Although not technically a zoning overlay district, the SGPUD ordinance enables alternative, compact, mixed-use developments via special permit from the Planning Board. SGPUDs encourage pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods, innovative design, and diverse housing options while preserving open space. The special permit process allows for increased density, reduced parking, and uses not otherwise permitted. SGPUDs are allowed in the RR2, COM2, and IND2 zones on lots greater than 60,000 square feet, and in IND1 on lots greater than 50,000 square feet. Gardner currently has two SGPUDs, the Carlson Lane Cluster and the Leo/Fernwood/Brookside Cluster.

Gardner's zoning ordinance incorporates progressive planning tools that promote smart growth principles: encouraging compact land use, diverse housing options, and economic development. A separate permitting process, Open Space Residential Development, requires 50 percent of subdivision land be preserved as common open space to reduce sprawl, while SGPUD and mixed use by right provisions foster higher-density neighborhoods that blend residential and commercial uses, enhancing walkability and reducing reliance on automobiles. Tools such as Accessory Apartments and Senior Residential Development enable multi-generational living and offer varied housing choices for older adults. The Zoning Ordinance also protects environmental resources through Water Supply and Wetlands Protection overlay districts, Stormwater Management regulations, and renewable energy allowances for wind and solar installations.


Collectively, these measures balance growth with conservation, supporting sustainable development without compromising Gardner’s ecological health and community character.

Map LU.1, Land Use



Land Use Map

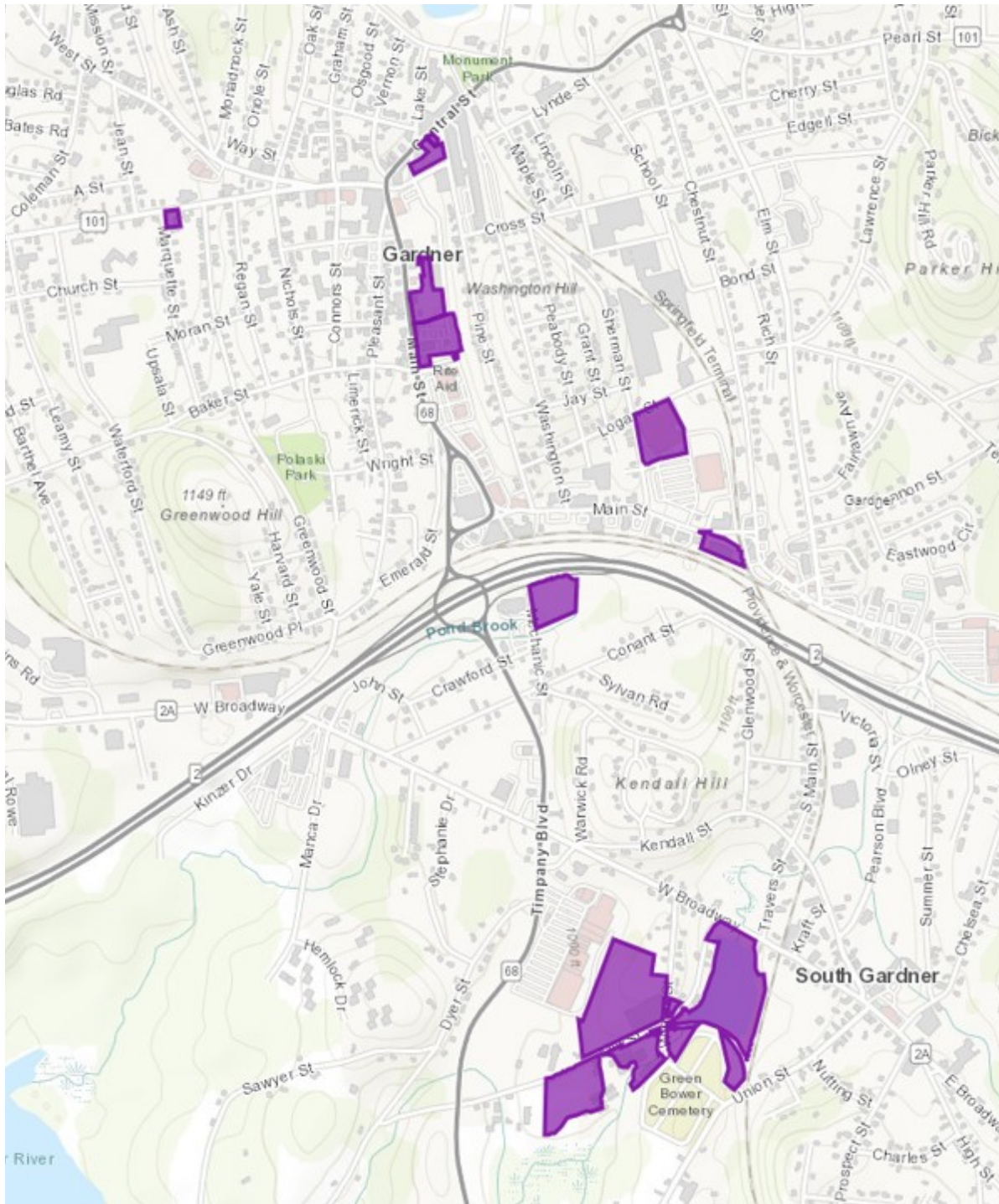
- State Route
- Land Use
  - Single Family Residential
  - Multi-family Residential
  - Other Residential
  - Commercial
  - Mixed Use (Primarily Residential)
  - Mixed Use (Primarily Commercial)
  - Mixed Use (Other)
  - Industrial
  - Ch. 61
  - Ch. 61A
  - Ch. 61B
  - Exempt
  - Vacant Lands
  - Water
  - Surrounding Towns

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Date: July 2025  
 Source: Mass GIS and City of Gardner

*The information depicted on this map is for general planning purposes only. It is not adequate for legal boundary definition, regulatory interpretation, or parcel level analysis. Use caution when interpreting the information on this map.*



Figure LU.1, Potential Brownfields in Gardner



Source: "Potential Brownfields in Central MA," Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Department of Environmental Protection, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://mass-eoeea.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=26519e6f0fa149958e2732145f295431>.

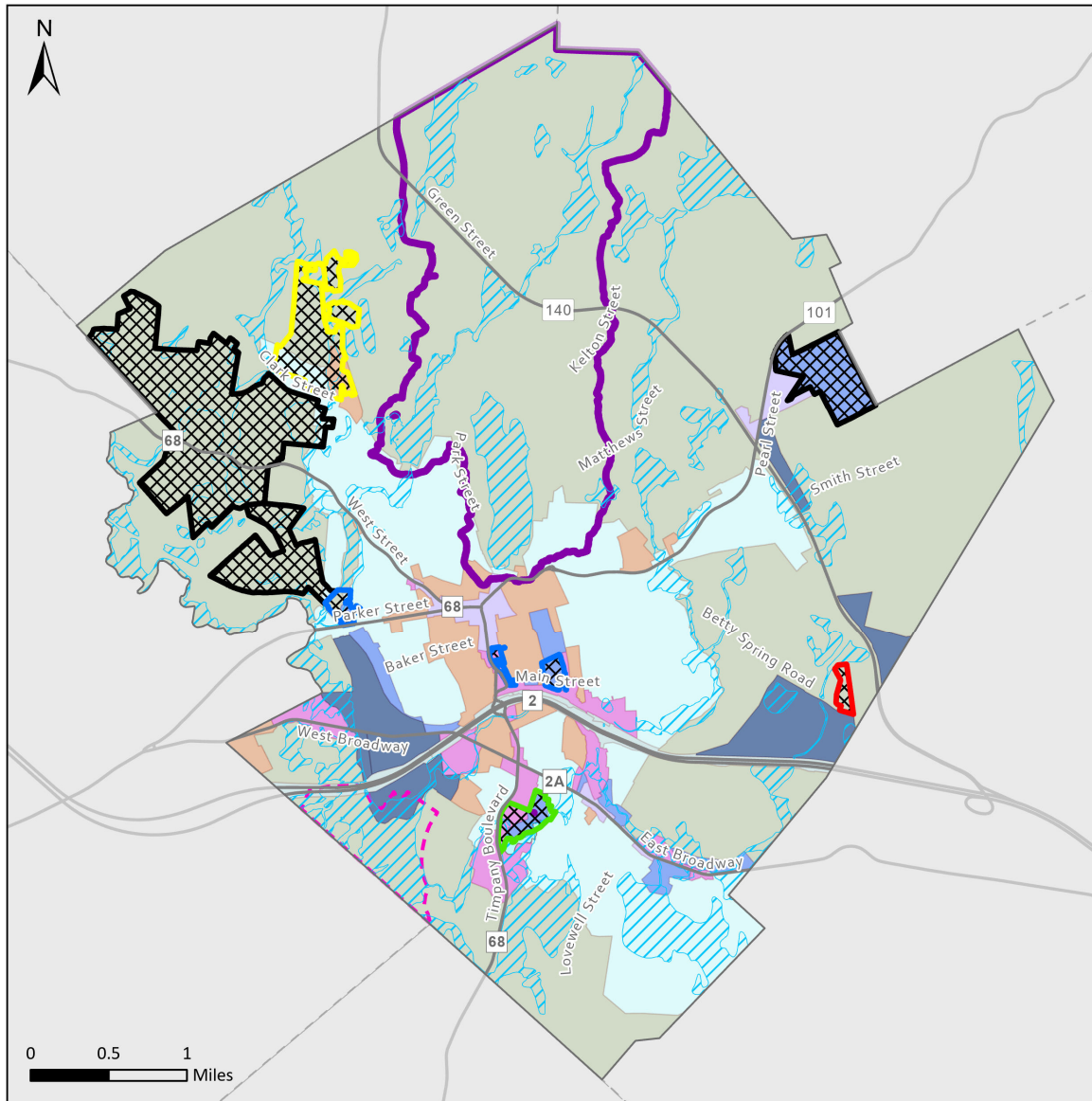
Figure LU.2, Sludge Landfill Expansion Project Area



-  City of Gardner Tax Lot
-  Project Site (Disposal Area + Infrastructure)

Source: Woodard & Curran, "Gardner Sludge Landfill Expansion Project," February 10, 2025, [https://www.gardner-ma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/11196/2025-01-23\\_Feb-10-Public-Information-Mtg-Presentation?bidId=.](https://www.gardner-ma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/11196/2025-01-23_Feb-10-Public-Information-Mtg-Presentation?bidId=)

Map LU.2, Zoning Map



**Zoning Map**

**Zoning**

- Commercial (COM1)
- Commercial (COM2)
- Industrial (IND1)
- Industrial (IND2)
- Single Family Residential (SFR1)
- Rural Residential (RR2)
- General Residential (GR3)
- Right of Way

**Site Specific Granted Overlays**

- Carlson Lane Cluster
- Development Overlay District 1
- Leo Fernwood Brookside Cluster
- Mill Street Corridor Overlay District
- Summit Solar Overlay
- West Street Solar Expansion
- West Street Solar Overlay

**Water Protection Overlays**

- Groundwater Protection Overlay District (O2)
- Surface Water Protection Overlay District (O6)

**Surrounding Towns**

**Zoning**



Date: July 2025

Source: Mass GIS and City of Gardner

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## Housing

### Existing Conditions and Trends

#### *Gardner Residents*

As noted earlier, data shows Gardner’s population is aging, and the population is estimated to decrease overall in the coming decades. Since 2013, the city’s median age has risen from 40.6 to 43.5, higher than both Worcester County (39.4 to 40.3) and the state as a whole (39.2 to 40.0).<sup>53</sup> By 2050, the only population age cohorts projected to grow are those over 70 years old; all other age cohorts are projected to lose population (**Table HO.1**).<sup>54</sup> This will result in an overall loss of population, decreasing by a little over 3,000 residents from 2020 to 2050. Reflecting the data, interviews with City staff and appointed board and commission members included several discussions about the limited number of housing options for seniors.<sup>55</sup>

An aging, declining population will have implications for Gardner’s housing stock in two ways. First, the city will likely not need to generate as many new units to meet its housing needs. At the same time, it will likely need different housing options to serve an aging population – smaller units, accessible units that allow aging in place, housing that offers different levels of medical services, and units affordable to those on a fixed retirement income. To meet these changing needs, the city’s housing stock will require modifications or even new kinds of housing. This will require more specific, targeted development of units rather than simply building more housing overall.

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<sup>53</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates, 2013-2023. Table S0101.

<sup>54</sup> UMass Donahue Institute, 2024.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Ellis (Senior Center Director, City of Gardner, MA) and Susan Avallone (Board of Health member, City of Gardner, MA), interview by Jennifer Doherty and Adam Duchesneau, Monday, May 5, 2025.

**Table HO.1, Gardner Population Projections by Age Cohort, 2020 to 2050**

Age	2020	2025	2030	2035	2040	2045	2050	Change from 2020
0-4	1,112	1,003	869	803	780	755	701	-411
5-9	1,101	990	896	772	715	699	678	-423
10-14	1,091	1,075	971	880	757	703	689	-402
15-19	1,057	947	940	861	788	675	629	-428
20-24	1,148	904	841	842	792	736	625	-523
25-29	1,589	1,329	1,107	1,064	1,080	1,029	959	-630
30-34	1,594	1,656	1,387	1,182	1,162	1,194	1,140	-454
35-39	1,394	1,550	1,613	1,336	1,154	1,150	1,189	-205
40-44	1,261	1,353	1,495	1,562	1,285	1,113	1,117	-144
45-49	1,308	1,266	1,365	1,503	1,569	1,293	1,124	-184
50-54	1,387	1,204	1,181	1,269	1,389	1,456	1,199	-188
55-59	1,674	1,365	1,207	1,185	1,269	1,388	1,453	-221
60-64	1,680	1,732	1,431	1,266	1,247	1,331	1,452	-228
65-69	1,240	1,492	1,540	1,277	1,134	1,112	1,189	-51
70-74	1,006	1,109	1,364	1,407	1,167	1,037	1,022	16
75-79	676	966	1,098	1,344	1,379	1,146	1,022	346
80-84	392	466	699	792	969	996	827	435
85+	577	576	564	669	777	920	1,005	428
<b>Total</b>	<b>21,287</b>	<b>20,983</b>	<b>20,568</b>	<b>20,014</b>	<b>19,413</b>	<b>18,733</b>	<b>18,020</b>	<b>-3,267</b>

*Source: UMass Donahue Institute, Population Estimates Program, V2024 Population Projections, May 2024.*

### *Housing Unit Characteristics*

As of 2023, Gardner had 9,487 housing units, of which 579 (6.1 percent) were vacant and 8,908 were occupied.<sup>56</sup> Vacancy rates between five and ten percent are considered a sustainable level for a community, providing opportunities to move as needed but not an excessive number of vacant units. The number of housing units grew by 6.8 percent (605 units) over the previous ten years, with the overall vacancy rate shrinking by 41.3 percent (407 units), suggesting there has been active work in the city since 2013 to add new units, bring vacant units back into use, or demolish vacant properties. Notably, though, the number of households grew 12.8 percent between 2013 and 2023. Residential permitting averaged 4.5 permits per year between 2019 and

<sup>56</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates, 2013-2023, Table B25002.

2024.<sup>57</sup> While there is still a good level of vacancy in the community, the City will want to make sure the addition of new units is keeping pace with the needs of the city’s households.

Occupied housing units (8,908 total) are closely split between owner-occupied and renter-occupied, at 5,055 or 56.7 percent, and 3,853 or 43.3 percent, respectively.<sup>58</sup> This diverges from Worcester County and the rest of Massachusetts, which have lower proportions of renters – 34.3 and 37.4 percent, respectively.<sup>59</sup> Representative of the higher number of renters, Gardner has fewer single-family detached houses and a higher number of small (two to nine unit) multi-family dwellings than the rest of Worcester County and Massachusetts (**Maps HO.1 and HO.2**, and **Table HO.2**).

**Table HO.2, Housing Units by Type**

	Gardner		Worcester County		Massachusetts	
Total Housing Units	9,487		353,405		3,014,657	
1 Unit:	4,800	50.6%	223,368	63.2%	1,725,086	57.2%
1, Detached	4,503	47.5%	201,388	57.0%	1,550,002	51.4%
1, Attached	297	3.1%	21,980	6.2%	175,084	5.8%
2	1,006	10.6%	26,731	7.6%	283,336	9.4%
3 or 4	1,259	13.3%	41,751	11.8%	320,710	10.6%
5 to 9	601	6.3%	18,542	5.2%	172,273	5.7%
10 to 19	368	3.9%	13,389	3.8%	128,312	4.3%
20 to 49	591	6.2%	11,422	3.2%	134,009	4.4%
50 or More	723	7.6%	15,481	4.4%	226,169	7.5%
Mobile Home	130	1.4%	2,642	0.7%	23,618	0.8%
Boat, Rv, Van, Etc.	9	0.1%	79	0.0%	1,144	0.0%

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates, 2013-2023, Table DP04.*

Gardner’s households tend to be smaller than those of Worcester County and the rest of the state, and they are living in older and lower-valued housing (**Table HO.3**). The city’s aging population may be leading to a smaller household size. In Gardner in 2023, 29.2 percent of households had at least one resident under 18 years of age; this fell in between Worcester

<sup>57</sup> City of Gardner, Building Department, Permit Summary Information received June 3, 2025.

<sup>58</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates, 2013-2023, Table DP04.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

County, at 30.4 percent, and Massachusetts at 28.2 percent. Between 2013 and 2023, the number of households with four to six residents decreased 31 percent. Therefore, although the city added households during this period, they were often smaller, with three-person households experiencing the most growth (41.4 percent). If the population continues to age, the city will need more, smaller housing units of only one or two bedrooms, rather than larger three-plus bedroom houses. Of note, however: the number of households with seven or more residents drastically increased during the same period, from five to 112. This could indicate households doubling up, potentially an indicator of housing stress, or increased multigenerational households.

The age and value of Gardner’s housing stock is a result of the city’s development patterns, with a boom in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and limited development through the end of the twentieth century (**Maps HO.3, HO.4, and HO.5**). Planning Board decisions over the last several years include only one new housing development, the rehabilitation of 32-52 Parker Street; and in early 2025 the City approved its first new subdivision in over ten years. At the ZBA, there were more decisions in the same period related to residential development, especially multi-family developments, as those require a special permit through the ZBA. Many of the projects were smaller rehabilitation projects rather than true new construction, often bringing back online previously vacant multi-family houses.

**Table HO.3, Housing Characteristics**

	<b>Gardner</b>	<b>Worcester County</b>	<b>Massachusetts</b>
Household Size - All	2.20	2.50	2.50
Household Size - Renters	1.91	2.20	2.14
Median Age of Structures	1953	1966	1963
Median Value of Owner-Occupied Housing	\$271,300	\$390,700	\$525,800

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates, 2013-2023, Table DP04.*

As with the age of the population, the age of the housing stock creates its own issues. Older housing units need regular repairs to maintain livability; at the same time, increasing construction costs can hamper lower-income property owners’ ability to make these necessary repairs. In interviews with Board of Health staff, they stated they increasingly work on housing issues.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Michah Blondeau (Director of Public Health, City of Gardner, MA) and Angela DiPrima (Assistant Director of Public Health, City of Gardner, MA), interview by Jennifer Doherty and Adam Duchesneau, May 5, 2025.

Even when the City sends out violation notices, staff have little capacity to follow up, either through criminal fines, undertaking the work through the City’s nuisance ordinance (Chapter 500 of the City’s General Ordinances), or by working with the Attorney General’s Neighborhood Renewal Initiative. Although the City previously dedicated CDBG funds towards housing rehabilitation work, it has not done so for several years, removing a source of funding for private property owners looking to make repairs.

*Housing Affordability*

Compared to Worcester County and Massachusetts, Gardner offers a relatively more attainably priced housing market. Over the past twelve months, publicly listed rents in Gardner regularly averaged a few hundred dollars lower than Worcester County as a whole (**Table HO.4**). Likewise, purchase prices for both single-family homes and condominiums trend lower for Gardner (**Figure HO.1**), which aligns with the generally lower median values for owner-occupied housing shown in **Table HO.3** above.

**Table HO.4, Rents in Gardner and Worcester County, 2024-2025**

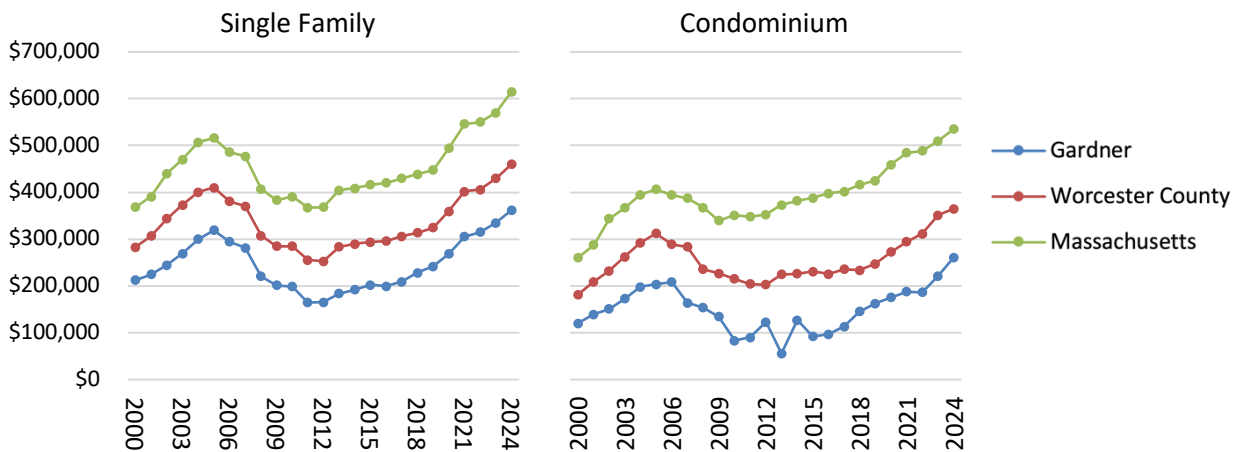
	One Bedroom		Two Bedroom		Three Bedroom	
	Gardner	Worcester County	Gardner	Worcester County	Gardner	Worcester County
Median	\$1,320	\$1,921	\$1,625	\$2,272	\$1,993	\$2,600
Average	\$1,326	\$1,900	\$1,492	\$2,265	\$1,993	\$2,603
25 <sup>th</sup> Percentile	\$1,253	\$1,484	\$1,185	\$1,705	\$1,976	\$2,020
75 <sup>th</sup> Percentile	\$1,400	\$2,358	\$1,798	\$2,826	\$2,010	\$3,186

*Source: 2024-2025 rental data from Rentometer, checked July 15, 2025, <http://www.rentometer.com>*

*Due to the small number of rentals in the period searched, information for studios and four-bedroom units was not available for Gardner*

**Figure HO.1, Median Sale Prices (Inflation-Adjusted), 2000-2024**

Source: Banker & Tradesman Town Stats



Gardner maintains a good number of income-restricted affordable housing units — 1,347 as of May 2025, or 14.4 percent of the city’s year-round housing units as determined by the 2020 Decennial Census.<sup>61</sup> This achievement means Gardner has met the 10 percent affordability threshold set by Chapter 40B, the state’s affordable housing law.

However, as is true in most communities, meeting the 10 percent Chapter 40B threshold generally does not address affordability gaps in Gardner. Households are considered unaffordably housed, or “cost-burdened,” if they spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing. In Gardner, almost half of all renters meet that definition, and that number has increased over the past ten years. In 2023, 46.9 percent of renters spent more than 30 percent of their income on their gross rent, up from 41.6 percent in 2013.<sup>62</sup> Housing cost burden is less of an issue for homeowners with a mortgage but still affects over a third of homeowners (38.0 percent).<sup>63</sup>

### Income

While the city has achieved the statutory minimum for affordable housing *and* has a relatively attainable housing market compared to the county as a whole, incomes are also lower among Gardner households; the estimated median household income for Gardner is \$62,948, well under the median incomes for Worcester County (\$93,561) and the state (\$101,341).<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup> “Chapter 40B Subsidized Housing Inventory (SHI),” Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, provided via email May 15, 2025.

<sup>62</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates, 2013-2023, Table DP04.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates, 2013-2023, Table S1901.

For purposes of determining eligibility for various federal housing programs, HUD calculates the area median income (AMI) and related income limits for larger geographic regions known as Fair Market Rent Areas, or FMR Areas. Gardner is included in the “Fitchburg-Leominster MA HUD Metro FMR Area,” which includes many of the surrounding towns in northern Worcester County. An estimated 63 percent of Gardner households fall below the regional median income for their household size, and 52 percent are considered “low or moderate income”— meaning their incomes are at or below 80 percent of the area median income (80 percent AMI), the threshold for many affordable housing programs.<sup>65</sup> **Table HO.5** displays the HUD 2025 Income Limits that apply to Gardner and other communities within the Fitchburg-Leominster FMR Area.<sup>66</sup>

**Table HO.5, Federal FY 2025 Fitchburg-Leominster, MA HUD Metro FMR Area Income Limits**

	Persons in Family			
	1	2	3	4*
Extremely Low Income	\$26,200	\$29,950	\$33,700	\$37,400
Very Low (50%) Income	\$43,650	\$49,900	\$56,150	\$62,350
Low (80%) Income	\$69,850	\$79,800	\$89,800	\$99,750

*Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, “Income Limits”*

*\*For context, in 2013 and 2023, less than ten percent of households in Gardner had more than four residents.*

### Alternative Housing Options

Compounding the city’s housing affordability and quality issues, there are almost no transitional housing or shelter options within the city. The city has some substance use-related housing, and shelters dedicated to veterans, but no general overnight emergency shelter. Staff must direct those in need to cities further away, such as Worcester, Springfield, Brockton, and Boston, with no guarantee of finding shelter there either. Likely due to the lack of transitional and shelter housing options, Board of Health staff know of several unhoused encampments around the city, often in difficult-to-reach areas. City staff regularly work together, with the veteran’s agent, and with the community organization Gardner Community Action Committee to find housing for those in need. The Senior Center also hosts a representative from RCAP Solutions twice a month to provide housing counseling and assistance.

<sup>65</sup> U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, “Comprehensive Affordability Housing Strategy (CHAS),” 2017-2021 (most recent year available for this dataset)

<sup>66</sup> “Income Limits,” U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/il.html>.

Montachusett Veterans Outreach Center (MVOC) provides dedicated housing for veterans. MVOC manages fifty-six units of permanent and transitional housing in Gardner and Winchendon, including a shelter, all restricted to veterans.<sup>67</sup> In conversation, the Executive Director noted the organization does not currently maintain a waitlist as the need for veterans' housing is so great that the waitlist would be very long.<sup>68</sup> As MVOC has a shelter, they can direct veterans in need there and then work with them on more permanent housing options. To augment their housing options, the organization recently began rehabilitating two former elementary schools in Winchendon into forty-four low-income one-bedroom apartments.<sup>69</sup>

## Local Policies and Practices

### *Permitting Authorities*

The Building Department permits housing projects with approvals as needed from the Planning Board, Zoning Board of Appeals, Board of Health, and Conservation Commission.

### *Gardner Housing Authority*

Established in 1946, the Gardner Housing Authority's (GHA) first housing project opened in 1951, a series of single-family houses for veterans on Birch and Cypress streets.<sup>70</sup> Per its fiscal year 2025 annual plan, the GHA manages 349 units of housing, a majority of which (261) are set aside for elderly residents.<sup>71</sup> The units are mostly spread across seven developments, with a handful of scattered-site and other occupancy units. Housing options include a collection of detached single-family and duplex houses on Waterford Street, smaller multi-unit low-slung brick apartment buildings at Hillside Gardens, and a fifteen-story high-rise on Church Street, the tallest building in the city and a notable landmark on the landscape. The GHA's properties are primarily older, developed from the 1960s through the 1980s. In recent years the GHA has been working on updating and upgrading the properties, including sustainability upgrades such as heat pumps, new windows, and other weatherization efforts.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Stephanie Marchetti, "2024 Annual Report," Montachusett Veterans Outreach Center, Inc., <https://www.veterans-outreach.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Annual-Report-FY24.pdf>, 7.

<sup>68</sup> Stephanie Marchetti (Executive Director, Montachusett Veterans Outreach Center), conversation with Jennifer Doherty, June 24, 2025.

<sup>69</sup> Marchetti, "2024 Annual Report," 11.

<sup>70</sup> City of Gardner, Chapter A700, Acts and Resolves; Moore, *History of Gardner*, 311.

<sup>71</sup> *Annual Plan for Fiscal Year 2025 For State-Aided Public Housing*, City of Gardner, Gardner Housing Authority, [https://dhcdcms.intelligrants.com/Upload/MADHCD\\_PHRA/24840\\_5.pdf](https://dhcdcms.intelligrants.com/Upload/MADHCD_PHRA/24840_5.pdf), 2.

<sup>72</sup> Conversation with Erik Storm, Gardner resident and Worcester Housing Authority employee, June 24, 2025.

Outside of the GHA, the City does not provide housing or funding for housing to Gardner residents, such as through an affordable housing trust or by adopting the Community Preservation Act.

### *Other Community Organizations*

In addition to the GHA and the MVOC, several other community organizations are actively working to provide more housing for Gardner residents. Focusing on one family at a time, **Gardner Emergency Housing Mission** rents an apartment to provide temporary (three months) housing for families with children in the Gardner Public Schools system.<sup>73</sup> **NewVue Communities** is a non-profit community development corporation working to create new housing units in Gardner and surrounding north central Massachusetts communities. The organization also offers other housing assistance in the form of financial coaching, first time homebuyer classes, and counseling in the face of eviction or foreclosure.

### *Permitting Difficulties*

Conversations with community members and a review of recent Planning Board and ZBA cases indicate the City could do more to clarify the project permitting process. Planning Board and ZBA cases tell of recent efforts by local property owners to bring vacant and abandoned buildings back online, particularly for housing in the downtown area. However, as the zoning ordinance considers uses abandoned after two years (§675-420.D.), and as many small multi-family uses are not currently allowed by right, efforts to rehabilitate abandoned buildings back to their original use require a trip to the Planning Board or ZBA, adding an extra step to the permitting process and uncertainty for property owners. Additionally, in conversations with local organization leaders, they expressed struggles while going through permitting for projects, and knew others had as well, resulting in delays and unanticipated costs.<sup>74</sup> Others indicated strict interpretation of the City's zoning ordinance, particularly §675-770, "Design requirements for parking lots, facilities and drive-throughs," has hampered some projects.<sup>75</sup>

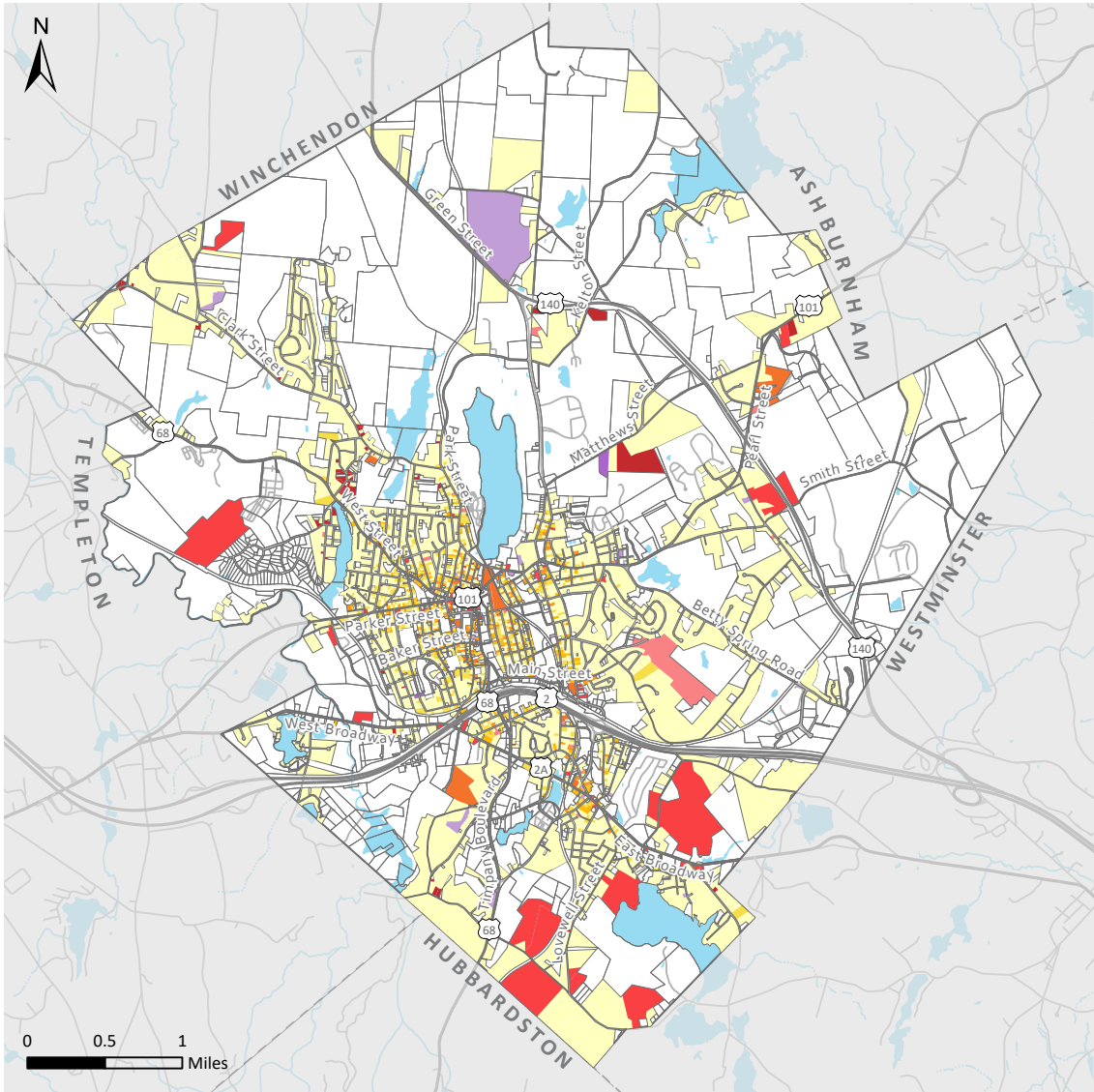
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<sup>73</sup> "About Us," Gardner Emergency Housing Mission, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://www.gehm.life/about-us/>.

<sup>74</sup> Conversation with Stephanie Marchetti, June 24, 2025.

<sup>75</sup> City of Gardner, Master Plan Subcommittee, initial meeting, April 8, 2025.

Map HO.1, Types of Housing



Map X. Types of Housing

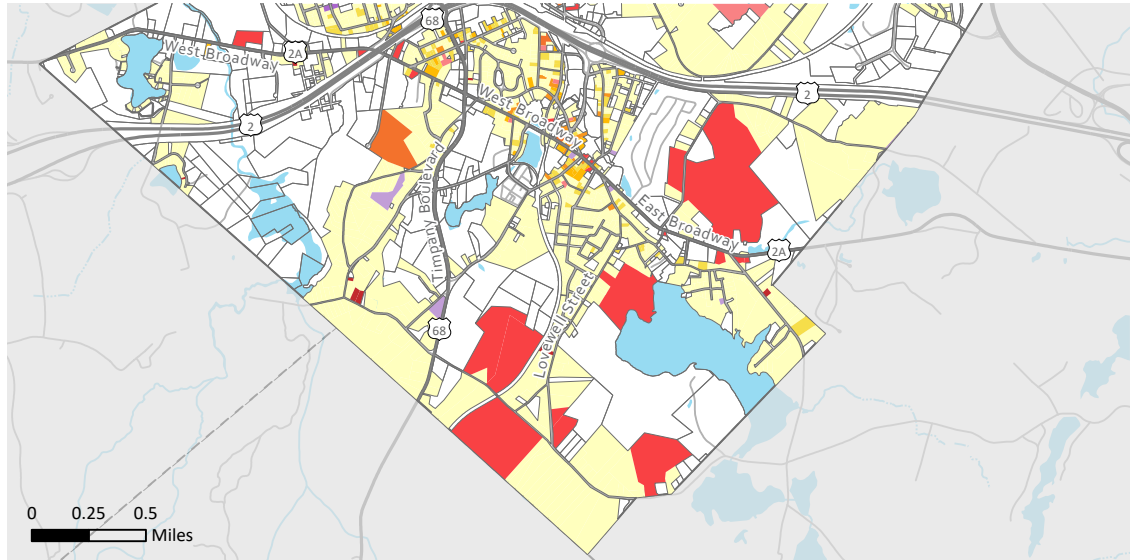
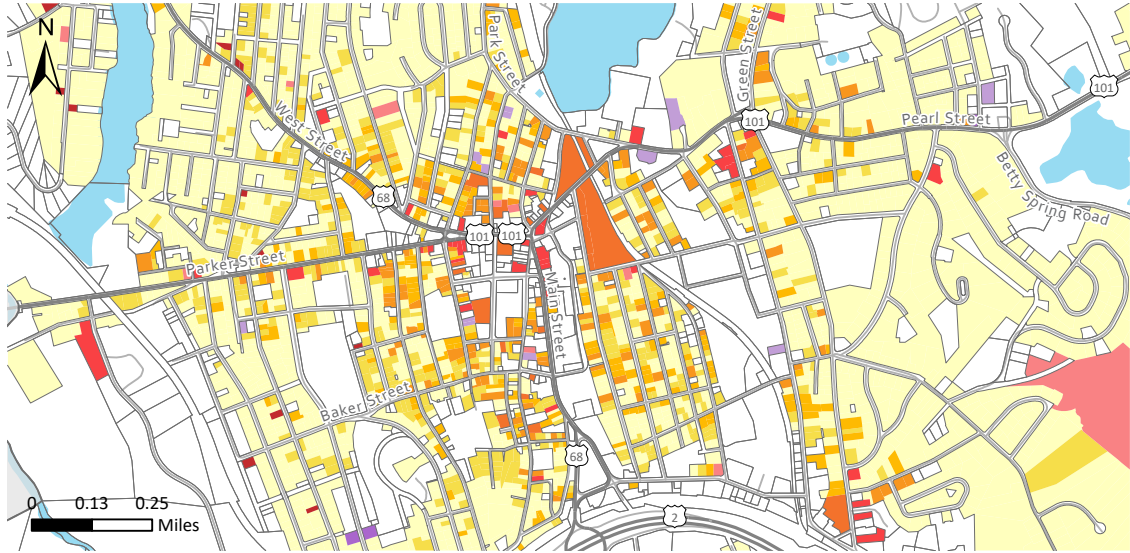
- Housing Types**
- Single Family Residential
  - Two-Family Residential
  - Three-Family Residential
  - Apartments with Four to Eight Units
  - Apartments with More than Eight Units
  - Mixed Use with Residential
  - Multiple Houses on one parcel
  - Mobile Home
  - Other Housing (Charitable, Religious)
  - Housing Authority
  - Not Housing
- MassDOT Roads**
- Interstate
  - U.S. Highway
  - State Route
  - Non-numbered Road
  - Water
  - Surrounding Towns



Date: May 2025  
 Source: Mass GIS and City of Gardner

*The information depicted on this map is for general planning purposes only. It is not adequate for legal boundary definition, regulatory interpretation, or parcel level analysis. Use caution when interpreting the information on this map.*

Map HO.2, Types of Housing, Downtown and South Gardner



Map X. Types of Housing  
 Downtown and South Gardner

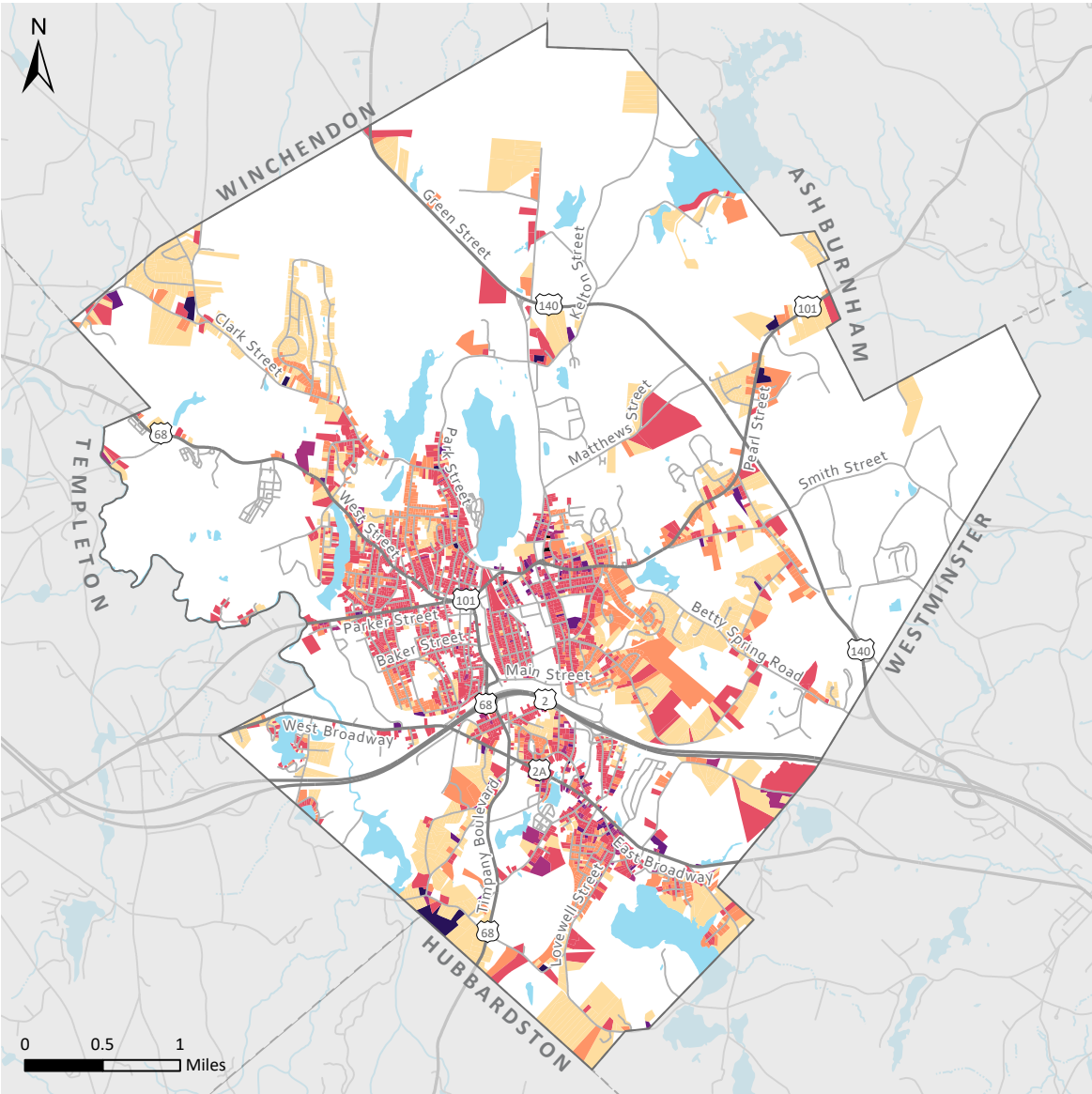
- Housing Types**
- Single Family Residential
  - Two-Family Residential
  - Three-Family Residential
  - Apartments with Four to Eight Units
  - Apartments with More than Eight Units
  - Mixed Use with Residential
  - Multiple Houses on one parcel
  - Mobile Home
  - Other Housing (Charitable, Religious)
  - Housing Authority
  - Not Housing
- MassDOT Roads**
- Interstate
  - U.S. Highway
  - State Route
  - Non-numbered Road
  - Water
  - Surrounding Towns



Date: May 2025  
 Source: Mass GIS and City of Gardner

*The information depicted on this map is for general planning purposes only. It is not adequate for legal boundary definition, regulatory interpretation, or parcel level analysis. Use caution when interpreting the information on this map.*

Map HO.3, Age of Housing Stock



Map X. Age of Housing Stock

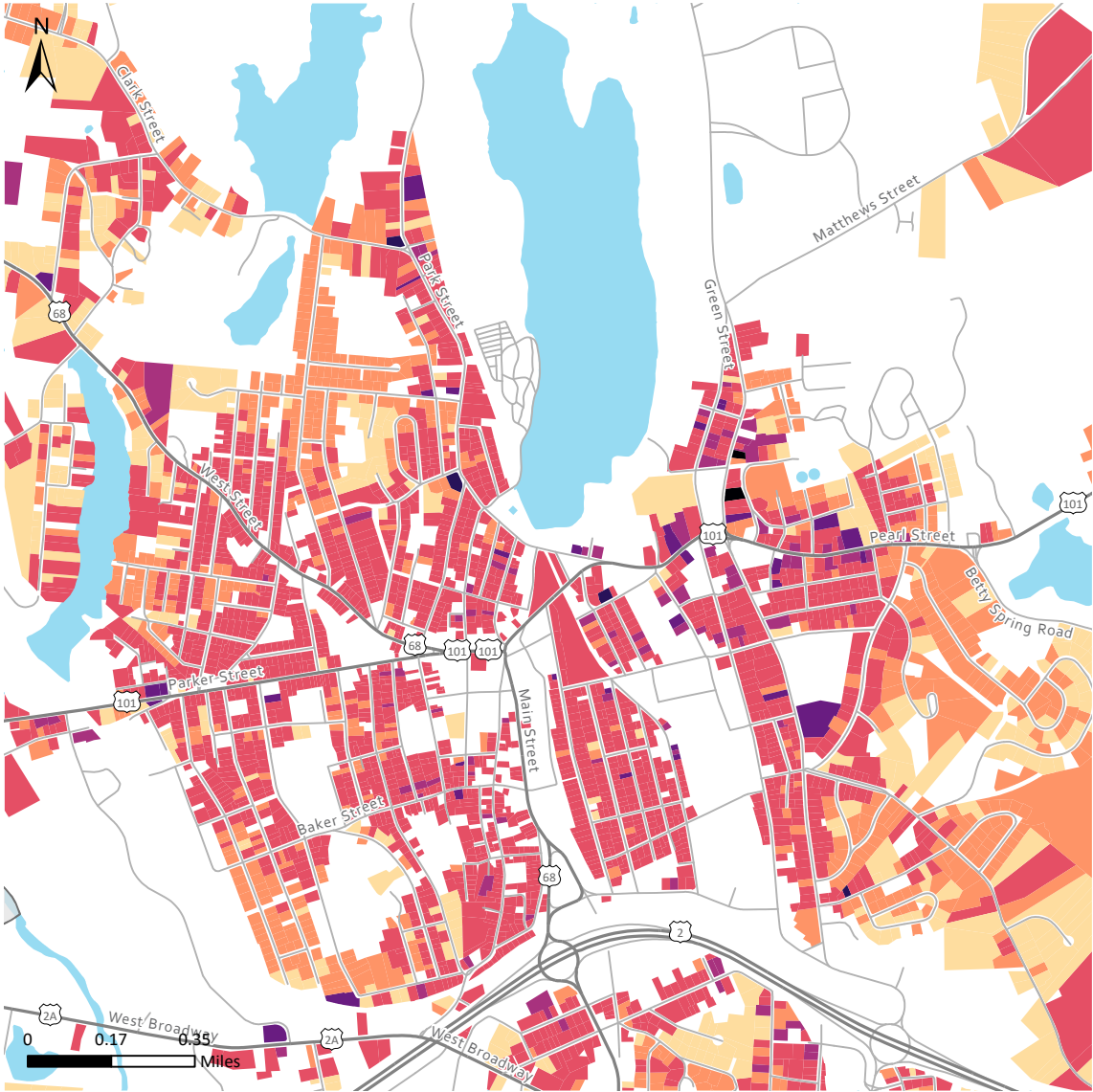
- Year Built**
- First Period (1620 - 1720)
  - Colonial (1721 - 1780)
  - Federal (1781 - 1830)
  - Early Industrial (1831 - 1870)
  - Late Industrial (1871 - 1945)
  - Postwar (1946 - 1975)
  - Modern (1976 - 2025)
- MassDOT Roads**
- Interstate
  - U.S. Highway
  - State Route
  - Non-numbered Road
  - Water
  - Surrounding Towns



Date: May 2025  
 Source: Mass GIS and City of Gardner

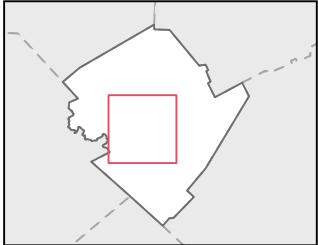
*The information depicted on this map is for general planning purposes only. It is not adequate for legal boundary definition, regulatory interpretation, or parcel level analysis. Use caution when interpreting the information on this map.*

Map HO.4, Age of Housing Stock in Downtown Gardner



Map X. Age of Housing Stock in Downtown Gardner

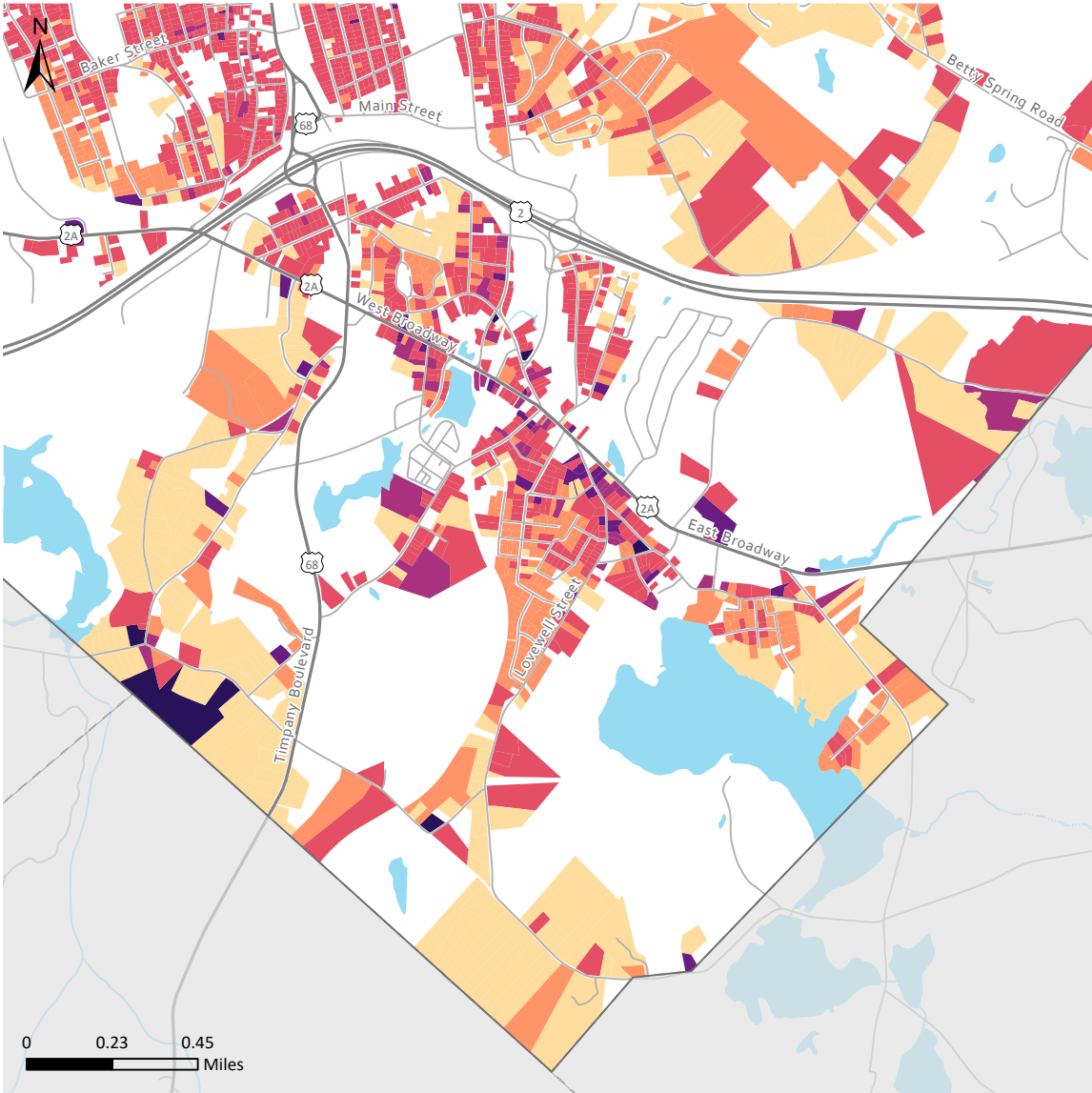
- Year Built**
- First Period (1620 - 1720)
  - Colonial (1721 - 1780)
  - Federal (1781 - 1830)
  - Early Industrial (1831 - 1870)
  - Late Industrial (1871 - 1945)
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- MassDOT Roads**
- Interstate
  - U.S. Highway
  - State Route
  - Non-numbered Road
  - Water
  - Surrounding Towns



Date: May 2025  
 Source: Mass GIS and City of Gardner

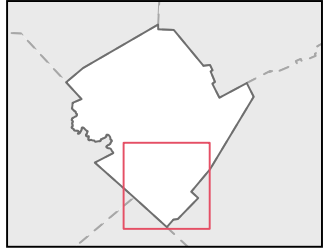
*The information depicted on this map is for general planning purposes only. It is not adequate for legal boundary definition, regulatory interpretation, or parcel level analysis. Use caution when interpreting the information on this map.*

Map HO.5, Age of Housing Stock in South Gardner



Map X. Age of Housing Stock in South Gardner

- Year Built**
- First Period (1620 - 1720)
  - Colonial (1721 - 1780)
  - Federal (1781 - 1830)
  - Early Industrial (1831 - 1870)
  - Late Industrial (1871 - 1945)
  - Postwar (1946 - 1975)
  - Modern (1976 - 2025)
- MassDOT Roads**
- Interstate
  - U.S. Highway
  - State Route
  - Non-numbered Road
- Water
- Surrounding Towns



Date: May 2025  
 Source: Mass GIS and City of Gardner

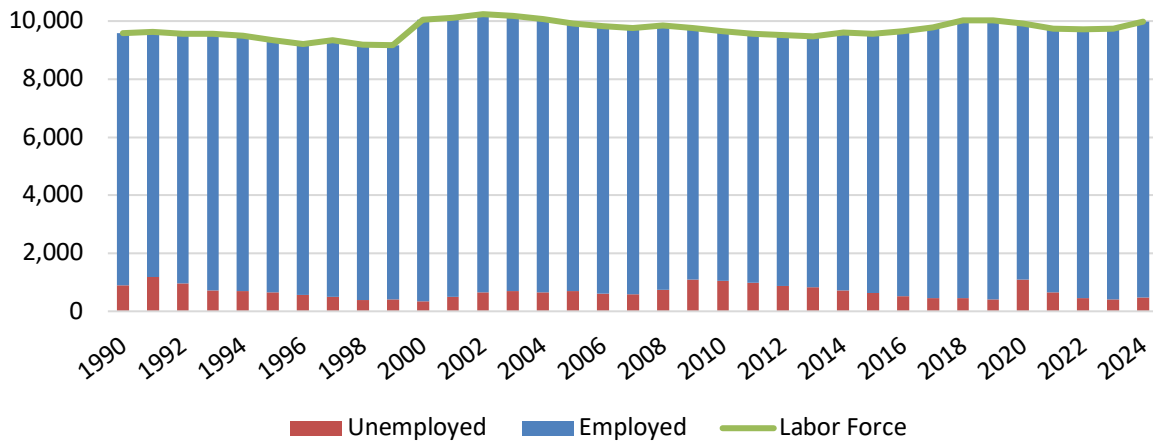
*The information depicted on this map is for general planning purposes only. It is not adequate for legal boundary definition, regulatory interpretation, or parcel level analysis. Use caution when interpreting the information on this map.*

## Economic Development

### Existing Conditions and Trends

Figure ED.1. Labor Force Trends in Gardner

Source: MA DER, LAUS, 1990-2024.



A variety of economic data can reveal how healthy – or not – a community’s local economy is. When compared to Worcester County and Massachusetts as a whole, there are several places where the data show a weaker economy in Gardner than the county and state. However, with major employers like Heywood Hospital and Mount Wachusett Community College (MWCC), the city is strong in some sectors such as healthcare and education.

### *Labor Force*

A community’s labor force includes all civilian residents over the age of sixteen who are either currently employed or are actively seeking employment. Gardner’s labor force of 10,083 people represents 57 percent of the city’s total population aged sixteen or older.<sup>76</sup> This is significantly lower than that of Worcester County and the state, both of which have labor force participation rates around 67 percent, and may be indicative of Gardner’s aging population.

While Gardner’s labor force has held relatively steady over the last forty years – hovering around approximately 10,000 residents with some exception – the City’s employment numbers have experienced periods of growth and decline (**Figure ED.1**).

<sup>76</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates, 2023. Table SE: A14001.

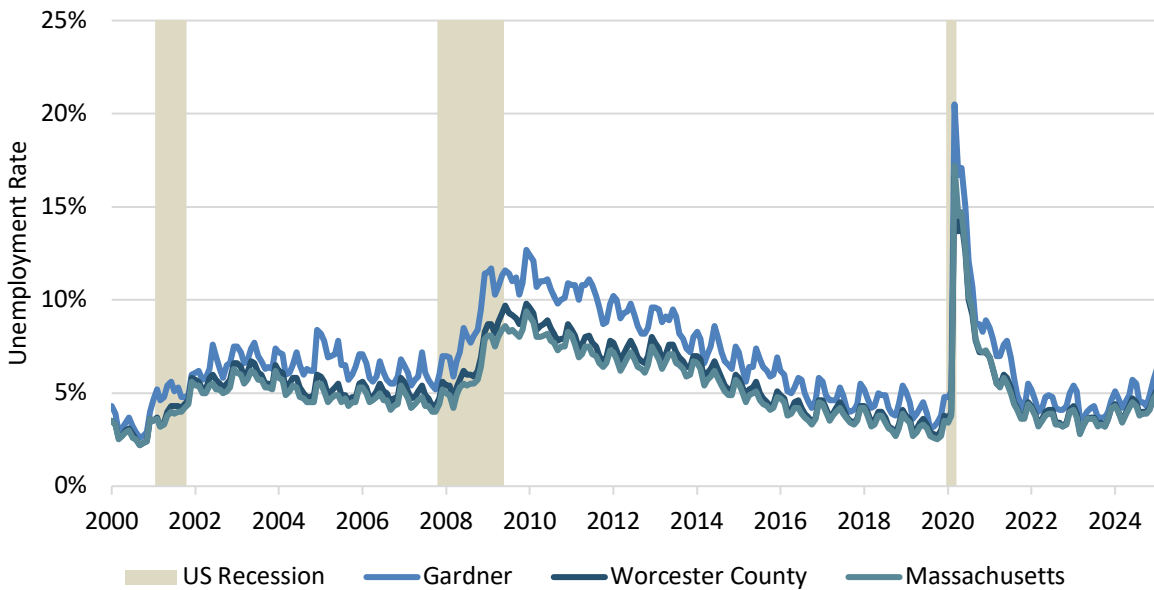
In 2000, Gardner had a large labor force and high levels of employment, both of which declined around the Great Recession. In 2019, the city once again saw high labor force participation and low unemployment. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, labor force participation fell and the unemployment rate skyrocketed.

### Unemployment

Along with other economic data, unemployment rates serve as indicators of the well-being of a community’s population and help to shed light on the condition of the economy over time. Periods of economic recovery and expansion, job growth, and job diversification lead to decreasing unemployment rates. By contrast, rising unemployment rates may signal a slowing of the economy and the beginning of a recession. In 2024, Gardner’s unemployment rate of 4.8 percent was slightly higher compared to Worcester County and Massachusetts as a whole, both around 4 percent.<sup>77</sup> However, the unemployment rate in Gardner has remained consistently above both Worcester County and Massachusetts for the last twenty-five years (Figure ED.2).

Figure ED.2, Unemployment Rate Comparison, January 2000 - May 2025

Source: MA DER, LAUS.



While the “Great Recession” unemployment rate for Massachusetts peaked at 9.1 percent in July 2010, Gardner’s peaked at 12.7 percent the month prior. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, while all communities experienced sharp increases in unemployment, the unemployment rate in Gardner reached 20.5 percent in April 2020. At times, Gardner’s

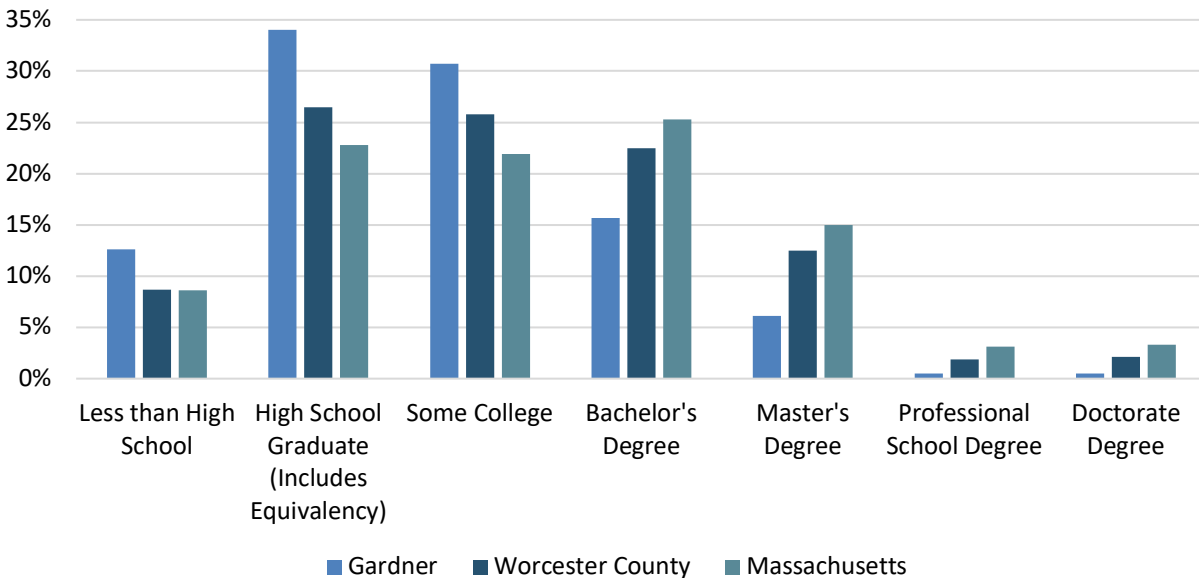
<sup>77</sup> Massachusetts Department of Economic Research (DER), Labor Force and Unemployment, Annual Report, 2024.

unemployment rates have been closer to those of the county and state. However, the city’s rate experiences more volatility and takes longer to recover post-recession.

### Education

A worker’s level of formal education serves as a good indicator of how much they can earn in wages. Gardner’s labor force has somewhat lower levels of education than that of the county or state as a whole: just 23 percent of residents twenty-five years and over have at least a bachelor’s degree, compared to 39 percent of Worcester County residents and 47 percent of Massachusetts residents. The highest proportion of residents in Gardner, 34 percent, have just a high school diploma (Figure ED.3). Correspondingly, Gardner residents’ earnings are slightly below those of the county and state. In 2023, the median earnings in Gardner were \$59,024 compared to \$72,134 for Worcester County and \$78,691 for Massachusetts.<sup>78</sup>

Figure ED.3, Highest Educational Attainment for Population  
 25 Years and Over  
 Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Five-Year  
 Estimates, 2023, Table A12002.



<sup>78</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Five-Year Estimates, 2023, Table B24041.

### Resident Industries

In terms of number of residents employed, the education and health care and social assistance industry is the largest employer of Gardner residents. In fact, nearly a third of residents work in this sector, likely due to the presence of major employers such as Heywood Hospital and Mount Wachusett Community College.

Beyond education and healthcare, the employed labor force is concentrated in four other industries: construction, manufacturing, transportation and warehousing, and public administration. **Table ED.1** illustrates these concentrations using industry quotients (IQ) that compare the percentage of Gardner residents employed in major industry sectors to the percentage of the employed labor force in both Worcester County and Massachusetts. A higher industry quotient (greater than 1.10) suggests that locally, an industry employs a greater share of residents than the industry does in a larger comparison area such as the county or the state. Industry quotients can help to illustrate the competitive employment strengths of a community’s residents and identify any gaps between the knowledge and skills of residents and the opportunities they have to work in their own community.

For example, a large percentage of residents are employed in manufacturing, and Gardner residents make up a large portion of this industry compared to the state. The construction and professional and management sectors each employ 8 percent of Gardner’s working residents. However, while the construction sector is well represented by Gardner residents (illustrated by an LQ of 1.28), the professional and management sector is not, meaning this industry also employs a large percentage of residents throughout the county and state as a whole.

**Table ED.1, Industries that Employ Gardner Residents**

Industry	Gardner	Worcester County IQ	MA IQ
Total Employed Civilian Population 16 Years and Over	9,512		
Educational Services, and Health Care and Social Assistance	31%	1.1	1.11
Manufacturing	13%	1.09	1.41
Retail Trade	11%	1.02	1.16
Construction	8%	1.11	1.28
Professional, Scientific, and Management, and Administrative and Waste Management Services	8%	0.62	0.49

Transportation and Warehousing, and Utilities	6%	1.28	1.4
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation, and Accommodation and Food Services	6%	0.93	0.86
Finance and Insurance, and Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	5%	0.89	0.74
Other Services, Except Public Administration	5%	1.05	1.09
Public Administration	4%	1.2	1.15
Wholesale Trade	2%	0.96	1.07
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting, and Mining	0%	0.36	0.44
Information	0%	0.3	0.22

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Five-Year Estimates, 2023, Tables A17004 and B24031.

Despite high concentrations of residents in these industries, Gardner residents generally earn less than their county and state counterparts working in the same industries. **Table ED.2** compares median earnings for residents of Gardner, Worcester County, and Massachusetts working in the industries with the highest IQs shown above: construction; manufacturing; education and health care; public administration; and transportation and warehousing. Of these industries, only Gardner residents working in construction earn more compared to the county and state, while residents working in transportation and warehousing earn slightly more than those in Worcester County.

**Table ED.2, Median Earnings for Selected Industries (Full-Time Year-Round Civilian Employed Population)**

	Gardner	Worcester County	Massachusetts
Total	\$59,024	\$72,134	\$78,691
Construction	\$73,185	\$70,796	\$72,982
Manufacturing	\$49,401	\$79,839	\$85,738
Educational Services, and Health Care and Social Assistance	\$56,518	\$69,000	\$72,794
Public Administration	\$83,603	\$89,153	\$90,586
Transportation and Warehousing	\$61,269	\$60,344	\$62,407

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Five-Year Estimates, 2023, Table B24041.

### **Journey to Work: Where do Gardner Residents Work?**

In 2022, of Gardner's 10,007 employed residents, just 1,701 worked within the city. Although the largest destination for Gardner residents, the small number indicates relatively modest retention of local workers. A larger portion of residents, approximately 83 percent, hold jobs in surrounding communities, indicating a strong outbound commuting trend. Overwhelmingly, Gardner's residents' travel east and southeast of the city to work.<sup>79</sup> The next largest destinations for Gardner residents in 2022 were the communities of Fitchburg (where an estimated 7.0 percent of employed Gardner residents work), Leominster (6.9 percent), and Worcester (5.6 percent), followed by Boston (4.9 percent).<sup>80</sup>

Gardner's highway connections to these locations are important for residents seeking employment outside of the city, and commuting patterns reflect the labor force's reliance on cars: approximately 70 percent of employed residents commute alone by car while carpooling accounts for just over 10 percent. Only a small fraction relied on public transit (2.2 percent), walking (2.3 percent), or biking (0.3 percent) to reach their jobs. Roughly 3.4 percent report using other means, and 12 percent work remotely.<sup>81</sup>

### *Employment Base*

A community's employment base includes its wage and salary jobs. Unlike labor force metrics, which pertain to the community's working-age residents, employment base metrics describe the kinds of employers that provide jobs in the community. According to the Massachusetts Department of Economic Research (DER), Gardner had approximately 593 employer establishments with a combined average monthly employment of 8,594 people in 2023. This was a drop off from 2022 figures that showed an estimated 602 employer establishments that hired an estimated 8,620 people.

### **Employment and Wages**

In 2023, Gardner's largest industries were health care and social assistance, retail, educational services, manufacturing, and accommodation and food services which, when combined, made up 80 percent of jobs in Gardner (**Table ED.3**). Location quotients (LQ) are helpful for evaluating the strength of an industry within a local economy relative to a larger geography; a ratio over

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<sup>79</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, OntheMap, Distance Direction Analysis, 2022.

<sup>80</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, OntheMap, Home Destination Analysis, 2022.

<sup>81</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. 2023. ACS 5-Year Estimates, Commuting Characteristics by Sex.

<https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2023.S0801?q=Gardner%20city,%20Worcester%20County,%20Massachusetts&t=Commuting>

1.10 indicates that a particular sector is more well-represented among local jobs than across a defined region, and therefore may be of particular economic importance to the community.

The LQ presented in **Table ED.3** indicate that the health care and social assistance, retail, and accommodation and food services sectors provide a large number of jobs in Gardner and generally make up a larger share of employment and the economy in Gardner compared to the county. For example, not only does the health care and social assistance sector account for the highest share of local jobs (33 percent), it holds more economic significance within Gardner than Worcester County as a whole (LQ 1.57). This is likely due to the presence of Heywood Hospital, the city’s largest employer. Employing over 1,300 individuals, this facility serves as a crucial anchor institution of Gardner’s employment base. Other major employers include businesses in the city’s strongest industries (**Table ED.4**). In contrast, while both educational services and manufacturing provide a large share of Gardner’s jobs, these industries are also strong throughout Worcester County (LQs of 1.00 and 1.06, respectively) making them not particularly strong industries for Gardner in the larger Worcester County economy.

**Table ED.3, Employment by Industry and Location Quotients**

Description	No. of Establishments	Average Monthly Employment	Percent of Jobs	LQ vs County
Total, All Industries	592	8,594	100%	1.00
Health Care and Social Assistance	241	2,797	33%	1.57
Retail Trade	65	1,199	14%	1.31
Educational Services	9	1,027	12%	1
Manufacturing	31	934	11%	1.06
Accommodation and Food Services	43	860	10%	1.32
Public Administration	13	546	6%	1.66
Construction	38	214	2%	0.47
Transportation and Warehousing	8	138	2%	0.49
Finance and Insurance	18	146	2%	0.5
Professional and Technical Services	37	150	2%	0.32
Administrative and Waste Services	24	142	2%	0.31

Other Services, Except Public Administration	36	188	2%	0.78
Information	7	67	1%	0.71
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	10	96	1%	0.71
Wholesale Trade	6	30	0%	0.11
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	7	38	0%	0.55

Source: MA DER, ES-202, 2023.

**Table ED.4, Major Employers in Gardner**

Company Name	Number of Employees	Industry
Heywood Hospital	1000-1499	Health Care and Social Assistance
Mt Wachusett Community College	250-499	Educational Services
North Central Corrections Inst	250-499	Administrative and Support and Waste Management and Remediation Services
Advanced Cable Ties	100-249	Manufacturing
Care Central VNA & Hospice Inc	100-249	Health Care and Social Assistance
GAAMHA	100-249	Health Care and Social Assistance
Gardner High School	100-249	Educational Services
Gardner Rehab Nursing Ctr	100-249	Health Care and Social Assistance
Price Chopper	100-249	Retail Trade
Seaman Paper Co	100-249	Manufacturing
Specialty Wholesale Supply	100-249	Retail Trade

Source: MA DER, Largest Employers, 2025.

Location quotients can also be used to compare wages in Gardner against the county’s, revealing that wages in Gardner are lower compared to the county average (**Table ED.5**). Across all industries, employees working in Gardner earn an average weekly wage of \$1,114, just 84 percent of Worcester County’s weekly wage. Even many of the highest wage industries in Gardner –finance and insurance, wholesale trade, and construction – fall below county wages. In addition, industries associated with the service sector are much lower. Wages for those who work

in arts, entertainment, and recreation, retail trade, accommodation and food services, and other services in Gardner are all under \$800 per week.

**Table ED.5, Wage by Industry and Location Quotient**

Description	Average Weekly Wages in Gardner	LQ vs County
Total, All Industries	\$1,114	0.84
Public Administration	\$1,734	1.08
Finance and Insurance	\$1,550	0.72
Wholesale Trade	\$1,425	0.77
Construction	\$1,339	0.81
Transportation and Warehousing	\$1,326	1.14
Health Care and Social Assistance	\$1,317	1.07
Professional and Technical Services	\$1,310	0.61
Manufacturing	\$1,258	0.75
Educational Services	\$1,009	0.80
Administrative and Waste Services	\$985	0.94
Information	\$980	0.49
Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	\$903	0.61
Retail Trade	\$774	0.99
Other Services, Except Public Administration	\$701	0.82
Accommodation and Food Services	\$496	0.91
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation	\$459	0.80

*Source: MA DER, ES-202, 2023.*

In Gardner, industry strength does not necessarily correlate with high wages. For example, despite strong presences in Gardner, the manufacturing, retail, and accommodation and food service sectors offer comparatively low wages in the city. Gardner’s strongest industries based on location quotient – health care and social assistance and public administration – provide wages more on par with those for Worcester County. **Figure ED.4** displays the relationship between industry prevalence and wages based on jobs in Gardner compared to Worcester County and can be understood as follows:

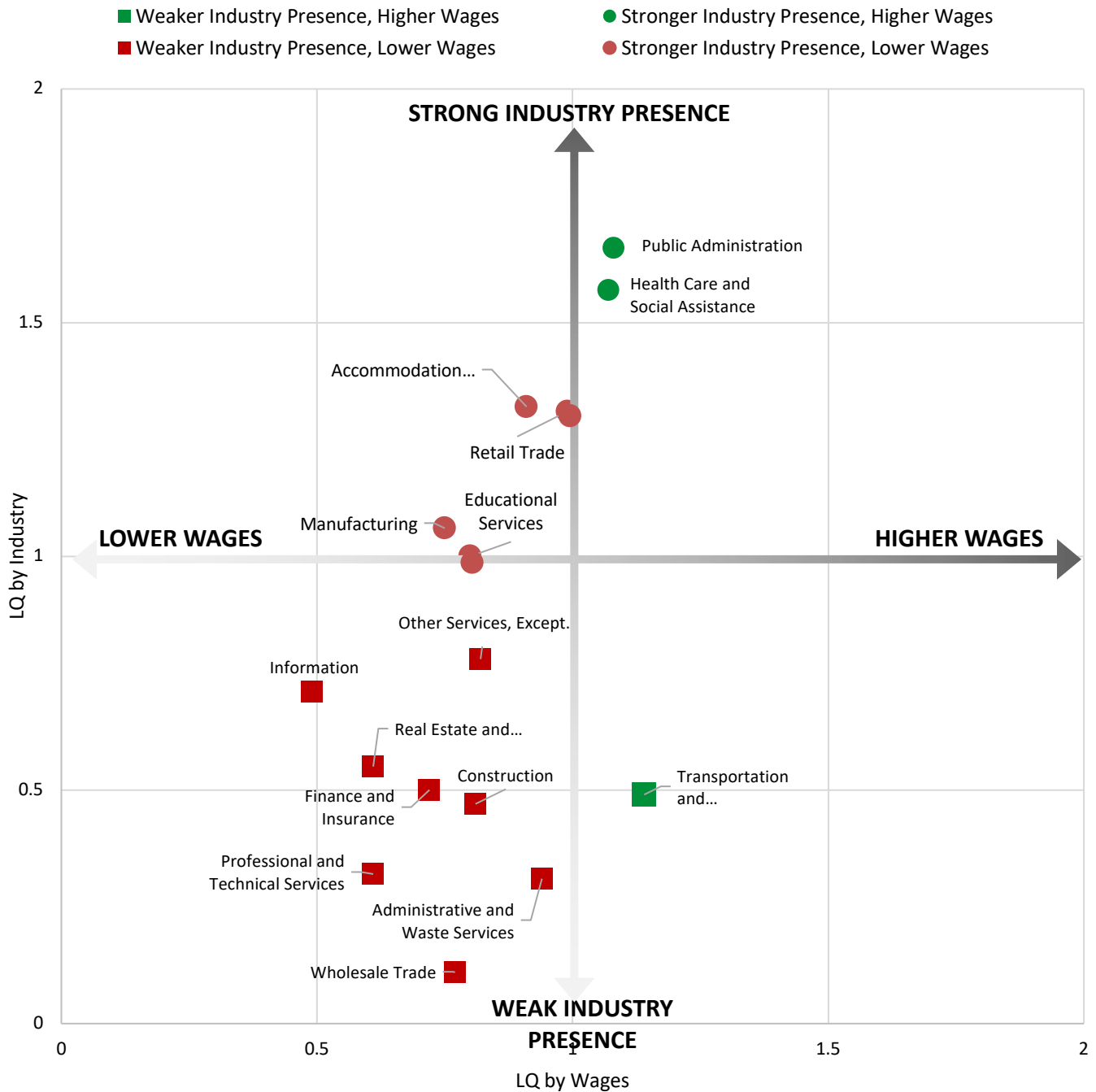
- Industries to the *left* of the y-axis produce lower-wage jobs in Gardner compared to Worcester County, while those to the *right* of the y-axis offer relatively higher wages. Greater distances from the y-axis reflect more significant wage gaps. Only three industries offer more competitive average wages within Gardner compared to Worcester County:

health care and social assistance; transportation and warehousing; and public administration.

- Industries *above* the x-axis offer a relatively higher share of jobs in Gardner compared to Worcester County while those below the x-axis are less prevalent.

**Figure ED.4 Matrix of Industry Strength and Wages, Gardner vs Worcester County**

Source: MA DER, ES-202, 2023.

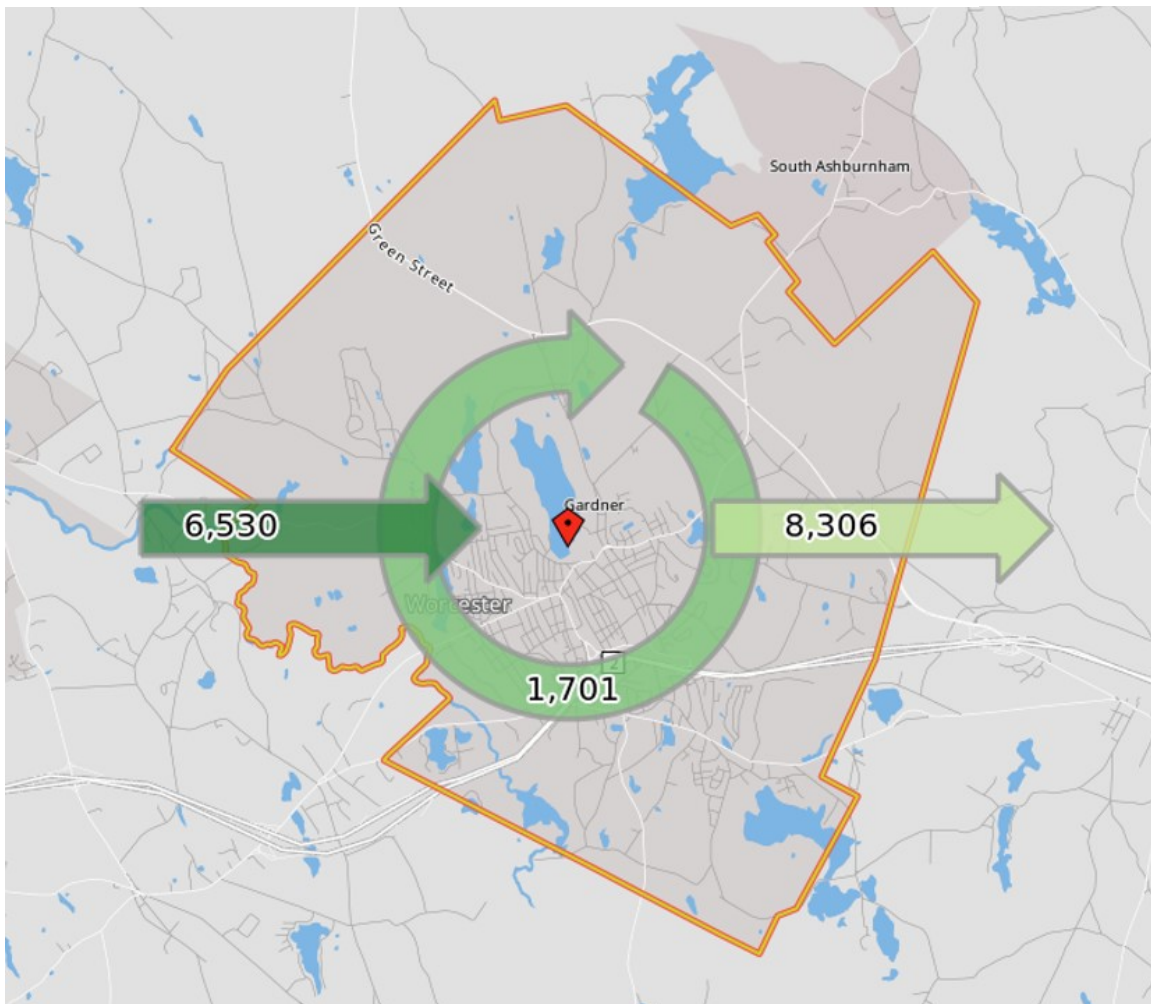


### Journey to Work: Who is Working in Gardner?

The discussion of relative industry and wage strength is incomplete without examining where those who work in Gardner are coming from. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s OnTheMap application can illustrate how easy it is for Gardner residents to find employment in the city, from where Gardner is drawing the most labor, and where the most significant labor imbalances are found. It is important to note that OnTheMap does not capture a community’s self-employed population. Approximately 8.1 percent of Gardner’s labor force is self-employed, a similar share to both Worcester County and the state as a whole.

In 2022, 8,306 workers lived in Gardner but worked elsewhere, indicating a strong outbound commuting trend (**Figure ED.5**). At the same time, 6,530 individuals commuted into Gardner from other communities, underscoring the city’s role as a regional employment center with prominent

**Figure ED.5, Gardner Inflow/Outflow Job Counts in 2022**



Source: “OnTheMap,” U.S. Census Bureau, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://onthemap.ces.census.gov/>

employers such as Heywood Hospital and MWCC. Winchendon, Fitchburg, and Templeton are among the top five labor sources for Gardner, with each contributing about 6 percent of workers to the city’s workforce.<sup>82</sup>

### Labor Force and Employment Base Relationship

Overall, Gardner is a net exporter of labor: more people commute from Gardner to work (8,306) than come to Gardner for work (6,530).<sup>83</sup> This is unsurprising as there are more employed residents than jobs offered in the city (**Table ED.6**). By calculating the ratio of local jobs to resident workers, it is possible to identify which industries are attracting those commuters and which are not. When an industry’s ratio is above 1.0, that sector is a net importer – drawing workers to the community from outside – and is generally quite strong, while a ratio beneath 1.0 indicates the opposite – Gardner residents are leaving the city to work in that industry elsewhere. **Table ED.6** shows that some of the major industries discussed in the previous section are importers, with education and healthcare, public administration, and arts/entertainment/accommodation/food services showing considerable strength. In contrast, construction, professional/management/administrative services, and transportation and warehousing are exporters of jobs.

**Table ED.6, Jobs to Resident Workers**

Industry	Number of Local Jobs	Number of Residents Working in Industry	Difference	Ratio
Educational Services, and Health Care and Social Assistance	3,824	2,937	(887)	1.30
Retail Trade	1,199	1,085	(114)	1.11
Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation, and Accommodation and Food Services	956	614	(342)	1.56
Manufacturing	934	1,207	273	0.77
Public Administration	546	426	(120)	1.28
Professional, Scientific, and Management, and Administrative and Waste Management Services	292	728	436	0.40
Construction	214	740	526	0.29

<sup>82</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, OntheMap, Work Destination Analysis, 2022.

<sup>83</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, OntheMap, Inflow/Outflow Analysis, 2022.

**Table ED.6, Jobs to Resident Workers**

Industry	Number of Local Jobs	Number of Residents Working in Industry	Difference	Ratio
Other Services, Except Public Administration	188	442	254	0.43
Finance and Insurance, and Real Estate and Rental and Leasing	184	516	332	0.36
Transportation and Warehousing, and Utilities	138	563	425	0.25
Information	67	43	(24)	1.56
Wholesale Trade	30	193	163	0.16
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing and Hunting, and Mining	-	18	-	-
<b>Total Employed Civilian Population 16 Years and Over</b>	<b>8,594</b>	<b>9,512</b>	<b>918</b>	<b>0.90</b>

Source: Massachusetts DER, ES-202, 2023; U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Five-Year Estimates, 2023, Table A17004.

“-” indicates the inability to verify the amount of jobs and/or workers of a certain industry due to their small size

### Tax Base

Underpinning Gardner’s tax base is a single uniform tax rate for residential, commercial, and industrial properties. In 2025, the tax rate was \$14.36 per \$1,000, the lowest in over fifteen years (**Figure ED.6**).

Residential property accounts for 83.8 percent of the City’s tax levy. This makes residential property values incredibly important for Gardner’s fiscal health, especially as property values have risen across the board both in Gardner and in its neighboring communities. However, compared to other communities, the percentage of the tax level generated from residential property in Gardner is on the lower end, meaning commercial and industrial properties contribute relatively more to the tax base (**Table ED.7**).

Figure ED.6, Historic Tax Rate In Gardner  
Source: MA DOR, Municipal Databank, Tax Rate By Class.

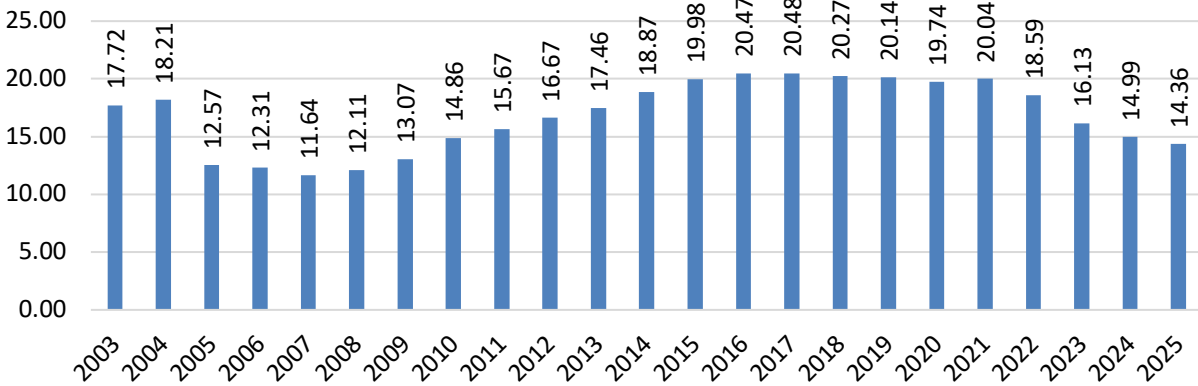


Table ED.7, Tax Base Comparison with Surrounding Towns

Municipality	Tax Rate*	Average Single-Family Value	Single-Family Tax Bill	Total Levy	RO Levy as a % of Total	CIP Levy as a % of Total
Ashburnham	\$14.87	\$405,438	\$6,029	\$17,131,952	96.8%	3.2%
Fitchburg	\$13.51	\$372,958	\$5,039	\$68,628,236	81.5%	18.5%
Gardner	\$14.36	\$340,779	\$4,894	\$33,910,666	83.8%	16.2%
Hubbardston	\$11.68	\$412,176	\$4,814	\$8,842,434	93.2%	6.8%
Leominster	\$14.03	\$442,260	\$6,205	\$90,834,284	82.3%	17.7%
Templeton	\$12.12	\$366,106	\$4,437	\$14,086,053	92.1%	7.9%
Westminster	\$12.30	\$469,604	\$5,776	\$20,963,748	89.1%	10.9%
Winchendon	\$11.75	\$340,978	\$4,006	\$14,961,849	91.0%	9.0%

\*Per \$1,000 of valuation. All communities in this table have a uniform tax rate, with the exception of Leominster which taxes open space at \$14.03 per \$1,000 of valuation.

Sources: MA Department of Revenue, Municipal Data Bank, Assessed Valuation, Tax Rates by Class, and Average Single-Family Tax Bill, 2025.

In 2025, the average single family tax bill in Gardner was \$4,894. This is relatively low compared to neighboring communities, with only a few having lower average single-family tax bills. Generally speaking, the tax bill for an average single-family home in Gardner is so low because of lower average values for homes in the city. The average valuation for single family homes in Gardner is \$340,779, the lowest amongst its comparison communities (Table ED.7).

As noted in the Land Use section, Gardner cannot collect property taxes on a large portion of the land in the city, as much of it is exempt from taxes – the state, City, and private non-profit organizations own over 17 percent of the city’s land area. An additional portion, classified as “vacant” land, is owned by the City to protect the water supply, which also does not generate revenue.

### Local Policies and Practices

Gardner’s approach to economic development is guided by a combination of local initiatives, strategic investments, and long-range planning. The City has prioritized the growth of business and industry through efforts such as the development of industrial parks and incentives for existing and new businesses. These efforts are led by the Department of Community Development & Planning and the Gardner Redevelopment Authority.

For more information on the City’s economic development planning efforts, see Chapter V. City Administration.

Outside of the municipality, several local organizations support the development of the workforce. Workers seeking job skills training or retraining have access to workforce development services at the **MassHire North Central Career Center**, **Greater Gardner Chamber of Commerce**, and **MWCC**. Located in downtown Gardner, the **Wachusett Business Incubator** provides support for Gardner residents with new business ideas.

### **Department of Community Development & Planning**

The Department of Community Development & Planning plays a pivotal role in guiding Gardner’s growth and enhancing residents’ quality of life through initiatives that improve housing, upgrade public facilities, promote sustainable development, and protect the natural and built environment. Working closely with other municipal departments, regional and local nonprofits, and serving as a resource for boards and commissions such as the Planning Board, Conservation Commission, and the Gardner Redevelopment Authority, the department also secures funding from federal, state, and private sources to support community needs.

Within the department, the Economic Development Office fosters the local economy by assisting businesses with site selection, financing strategies, tax incentives, workforce development, business planning, and navigating permitting processes.

### **Gardner Redevelopment Authority**

The Gardner Redevelopment Authority (GRA), established in 1966 under G.L. c. 121, supports the redevelopment of sites around the city that need additional assistance beyond what the private market can provide. The GRA collaborates with public and private partners to implement redevelopment plans, attract investment, and align projects with the City's broader planning goals, serving as a bridge between municipal departments, developers, and funding sources.

Among its core responsibilities, the GRA plans for, acquires, and disposes of real estate in designated urban renewal areas including the development of the Summit Industrial Park, which has brought manufacturing and industrial employers to Gardner. The GRA also partners with the Department of Community Development & Planning on initiatives such as feasibility studies for new business parks and downtown revitalization, using strategic land assembly, infrastructure improvements, and public-private partnerships to drive economic transformation.

### **43D Priority Development Areas**

In 2008, Gardner designated three locations – the Summit Industrial Park, S. Bent Mill Site, and Rear Main Street Downtown Corridor – as Priority Development Sites under G.L. c. 43D. This designation allows for an accelerated permitting timeline, requiring decisions within 180 days of receipt of a completed application. Covering nearly 160 acres across eleven parcels, these sites are a focal point in Gardner's efforts to attract investment and redevelopment. They also receive preferential access to state funding opportunities and promotional support.

Redevelopment work is ongoing at all three sites. The Summit Industrial Park is nearly built out, with only a few parcels still available. A solar array was installed on Mill Street in 2014. Most recently, work commenced on the Rear Main Street redevelopment in 2024. Guided by smart growth principles and local planning priorities, these initiatives are reshaping key areas of the city to support sustainable growth and reflect the evolving needs of Gardner's economy and community.

### **Economic Development Tax Incentive Program**

The Economic Development Tax Incentive Program is a tax incentive program designed to stimulate business growth and foster job creation throughout the Commonwealth. Through this incentive program, participating properties may receive state and/or local tax incentives in exchange for job creation, private investment, and generation of substantial sales outside of Massachusetts.

The City is an Economic Target Area (ETA) and has created six Economic Opportunity Areas (EOA) where certified projects can be located: Colony Road, East Gardner Industrial Park, Fredette Street, Lower Main Street, Pearson Boulevard to East Broadway, and Summit Industrial Park.

### **Opportunity Zones**

The City has also designated two federal Opportunity Zones in the urban renewal area, allowing individuals favorable tax treatment on their capital gains by investing those funds (through a privately created Opportunity Fund) into economic activities in the area. However, it is not clear that anyone has taken advantage of this opportunity.

### **District Improvement Financing (DIF) Districts**

Gardner has utilized District Improvement Financing (DIF), enabled under G.L. c. 40Q, to support targeted economic development within key areas of the city. Two DIF districts – the Downtown District and the Mill Street District – have been established, each with a corresponding Development Program and Invested Revenue District. These tools allow the City to capture future tax revenues generated by private investment within the districts and reinvest them into public projects that enhance infrastructure, support business growth, and improve overall quality of life.

The primary goal of these districts is to create a positive feedback loop where reinvested funds spur further development. By using projected tax increments to fund strategic improvements, Gardner aims to attract new businesses, signal its commitment to economic revitalization, and foster an environment that benefits residents, workers, and visitors alike. Each development plan is structured to operate over a 30-year period following project stabilization, ensuring a long-term, sustainable approach to downtown investment.

### **Additional Business Incentives**

The City has utilized a number of other incentives to support new and existing businesses in Gardner. These include a vacant storefront program, a sign program, and business sponsorship opportunities.

## Transportation

### Existing Conditions and Trends

#### *Regional Connectivity and Access*

Like many municipalities in the Montachusett region, Gardner residents rely heavily on automobile travel as their primary mode of transportation. The major transportation corridor through the city is Route 2, also known as George W. Stanton Highway (**Map TR.1**). This limited-access highway serves as the principal east-west corridor connecting Boston with upstate New York, bisecting the city and accessed via two exit rotary ramps in South Gardner.

Route 2 links the region to Interstate 91 in Greenfield to the west, and Interstates 190 and 495 to the east. Interstate 190 lies approximately fifteen miles to the east and connects to the Massachusetts Turnpike in Worcester, with Interstate 495 about thirty minutes away, offering additional connectivity to Interstates 95 and 93 in the Boston metropolitan area. Other key arterial roads in the city providing regional connectivity include Routes 140, 68, 101, and 2A.

#### *Air Travel*

Gardner residents also have access to several air travel services in the region. Options include major commercial airports such as Logan International Airport in Boston, T.F. Green in Providence, Rhode Island, Manchester-Boston Regional Airport in New Hampshire, and Bradley International Airport in Connecticut. Worcester Municipal Airport also offers limited commercial service.

The Gardner Municipal Airport, located in Templeton but owned by the City of Gardner, serves general aviation needs, including recreational aircraft activity and some business flights, but no commercial service. The airport has undergone significant infrastructure improvements since its last master plan in 2008 including reconstruction of its 3,000-foot asphalt runway, upgraded taxiways and lighting, and construction of a new hangar. Additional improvements outlined in the 2025 master plan include the construction of new buildings, expanded taxiways, and installation of advanced navigation systems.<sup>84</sup>

#### *Roadway System and Traffic Conditions*

The City's DPW maintains approximately 117 miles of roadways, with road maintenance one of the city's most significant transportation challenges. Approximately 30 to 40 percent of local

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<sup>84</sup> Gale Associates, Inc, *Airport Master Plan Update - February 2025*, February 2025, <https://www.gardnerk12.org/DocumentCenter/View/11300/GDM-AMPU---February-2025?bidId=>.

roadways need resurfacing due to aging infrastructure and constrained funding (**Figure TR.1**). Annual Chapter 90 funding, historically around \$600,000, has not kept pace with escalating asphalt and construction costs, limiting the DPW in its ability to conduct comprehensive repairs and resurfacing projects.

While the city generally does not experience widespread congestion, localized traffic issues are persistent at several intersections at certain times of the day.<sup>85</sup> The most problematic is the intersection of routes 2A and 68 (Timpany Boulevard and West Broadway), which presents challenges due to its poor configuration and visibility. Tractor trailers turning onto Route 2A must encroach into opposing traffic lanes due to inadequate turning space at the intersection. Another problematic area is the intersection of Pearson Boulevard, Elm Street, and Union Square, where outdated traffic signals, poor sightlines, and infrastructure deficiencies contribute to operational inefficiencies.

Downtown Gardner, which has undergone multiple reconfigurations of its traffic layout over the past decade, also experiences regular congestion due to its complex and often confusing traffic layout. While the recent changes have reduced high-speed collisions, they have also led to driver frustration and slower travel times. The two state-owned rotaries under Route 2 were also recently upgraded, but they continue to back up during peak hours, especially during the evening commute.<sup>86</sup>

### *Safety and Crash Data*

According to 2024 MassDOT traffic counts, the recorded Annual Average Daily Trips (AADT), which include trips in each direction on a roadway, are the heaviest in the downtown area, at the Timpany Boulevard–West Broadway intersection, and at the two rotaries underneath Route 2. The Main Street–Pleasant Street–Parker Street–Central Street intersection at the north end of downtown experienced 10,359 AADT. Just north of the Timpany Boulevard rotary, traffic was even heavier, handling on/off traffic from Route 2 with 19,257 AADT. In South Gardner, the Timpany Boulevard–West Broadway intersection carried around 10,000 AADT, with some variation depending upon the direction of traffic. Additionally in 2024, there were approximately 18,000 AADT that traveled through Gardner along Route 2.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Dane Arnold (Department of Public Works Director, City of Gardner, MA) and Rob Oliva (City Engineer, City of Gardner, MA), interview by Jennifer Doherty and Adam Duchesneau, Thursday, May 8, 2025.

<sup>86</sup> Dane Arnold (Department of Public Works Director, City of Gardner, MA) and Rob Oliva (City Engineer, City of Gardner, MA), interview by Jennifer Doherty and Adam Duchesneau, Thursday, May 8, 2025.

<sup>87</sup> “Traffic Volume and Classification in Massachusetts,” Department of Transportation, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://www.mass.gov/traffic-volume-and-classification-in-massachusetts>.

While there is not a single, rigid AADT threshold for each functional classification category of streets and highways across all locations, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and MassDOT functional classification guidance provide typical ranges that can serve as benchmarks. Gardner is classified as a small urban area based on its population. As such, its Other Principal Arterials, such as the Timpany Boulevard–West Broadway intersection, fall on the lower end of the urban range, often 10,000 to 18,000 AADT, putting this intersection within range at around 10,000 AADT. Gardner’s Minor Arterials should operate between 5,000 and 10,000 AADT. Intersections such the Main Street–Pleasant Street–Parker Street–Central Street intersection and just north of the Timpany Boulevard rotary exceed this range at 10,359 AADT and 19,257 AADT respectively.

Please keep in mind these AADT ranges for each functional classification are guidelines for roadway type classification and planning, not strict capacity thresholds. They reflect typical demand, not maximum capacity, for roads of that type. Roads or intersections can operate well even if their AADT is higher than the range. Conversely, a roadway or intersection can fail at volumes within the range if there are bottlenecks, poor signal timing, or insufficient turn lanes.

Since 2016, Gardner averaged 521 vehicular crashes per year (**Figure TR.3**). Crash rates peaked in 2017 at 595 and declined to 391 in 2020, largely due to reduced travel during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most crash-prone areas between 2016 and early 2025 include:

- Main Street-Pleasant Street-Parker Street-Central Street intersection south to the Timpany Boulevard rotary: 945 crashes
- Chestnut Street-Union Square-Pearson Boulevard from the Main Street intersection southeast to the VFW Circle rotary: 426 crashes
- Timpany Boulevard from just south of the rotary to around the Dyer Street intersection: 362 crashes
- Parker Street-West Street-Oak Street intersection area: 220 crashes<sup>88</sup>

### *Public Parking and EV Charging*

Downtown offers a variety of metered and off-street public parking options. Metered parking is enforced Monday through Saturday, from 9:00 AM to 6:00 PM, with a maximum duration of two hours. On-street parking zones (**Figure TR.2**) are clearly marked with 30-minute and metered areas. Public parking lots are located on West Street, Knowlton Street, Nichols Street, Connors Street, and West Lynde Street, as well as at George Sweeney Park. These facilities provide

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<sup>88</sup> “IMPACT Home,” Department of Transportation, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://apps.crashdata.dot.mass.gov/cdp/home>.

essential access to downtown businesses, City Hall, the Post Office, Fire Department, and the Levi Heywood Memorial Library.

Parking regulations in Gardner are relatively flexible, with overnight on-street parking permitted except during snow emergencies and in designated metered areas within the downtown core.<sup>89</sup> During snow parking bans, no vehicles are allowed to park on public streets and vehicles need to be out of municipal lots once roads are cleared. Most overnight parking is in the downtown area, but there are also some spaces at the Gardner Community Action Center (CAC) and behind the South Gardner Fire Station.

As part of Gardner's commitment to sustainability through its Green Communities designation, the City has introduced several free publicly-accessible EV charging stations:

- Knowlton Street Parking Lot behind City Hall (Clipper Creek)
- Connors Street Parking Lot (ChargePoint)
- Gardner Municipal Golf Course Driving Range Lot (JuiceBar)

These installations support the City's environmental goals and promote EV usage among residents and visitors alike.

### *Pedestrian Infrastructure and Walkability*

As indicated in Gardner's FY2022-FY2025 Community Development Strategy, the City's goals include increasing access to transportation options and ensuring safe, accessible options for all travel modes – walking, biking, transit, and vehicles – for people of all ages and abilities.

While the City's sidewalk network is extensive, it faces many of the same maintenance issues as the roadway system, and the sidewalks are in varying states of repair. However, Gardner has made significant progress over the last decade, improving or replacing approximately nine miles of sidewalk – primarily in the downtown area – through a combination of local and grant funding.<sup>90</sup>

Pedestrian safety remains a priority, especially around schools and in Environmental Justice neighborhoods. The DPW is in the process of finalizing a federal grant for Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A) to look city-wide at developing a Vision Zero plan, aiming to eliminate all traffic

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<sup>89</sup> City of Gardner Ordinances, Chapter 512, Parking.

<sup>90</sup> Leedy, *Open Space and Recreation Plan*, 7-2.

fatalities and severe injuries on roadways while also improving safe, healthy, and equitable mobility for all.<sup>91</sup>

Recent projects, such as the Safe Routes to School initiative on Elm Street and the development of a sidewalk prioritization program under the Complete Streets Prioritization Plan finalized in 2017, illustrate the City's commitment to improving walkability (**Figure TR.4**). However, sidewalks citywide remain in variable condition and continued investment is needed to enhance pedestrian mobility and accessibility.

### *Bicycle Facilities and Trails*

Gardner's limited bicycle infrastructure includes bike lanes along Timpany and Pearson boulevards, sharrows on a few streets, and the North Central Pathway connecting downtown Gardner to Winchendon (**Figure NR.1**). Combined grants from MassDOT and MassTrails recently helped to construct part of the North Central Pathway Connector, while a past grant upgraded sidewalk infrastructure and incorporated a bike lane connecting downtown to the City's southern border with Hubbardston.<sup>92</sup> Plans are well underway to expand the North Central Pathway trail network with a new connector path from Park Street to Route 140, including the construction of a multi-use bridge over Route 140 to make crossing the busy roadway safer. These efforts aim to add roughly two additional miles to the city's trail network.<sup>93</sup>

While Complete Streets funding has supported these efforts, there is no organized community advocacy for bike infrastructure, and citywide bicycle planning remains ad hoc with no dedicated bicycle and pedestrian committee.

### *Public and Specialized Transportation Services*

MART provides regional and local transit services in Gardner. MART offers fare-free fixed-route bus service throughout Gardner and to adjacent communities such as Athol, Templeton, and Phillipston (**Figure TR.5**). In addition to scheduled service, MART offers dial-a-ride and door-to-door transportation for elderly and disabled residents. Gardner is also indirectly served by intercity bus providers, including Peter Pan and Greyhound, which have stops in Leominster, enabling travel to cities such as Worcester, Boston, Hartford, and New York.

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<sup>91</sup> Dane Arnold (Department of Public Works Director, City of Gardner, MA) and Rob Oliva (City Engineer, City of Gardner, MA), interview by Jennifer Doherty and Adam Duchesneau, Thursday, May 8, 2025.

<sup>92</sup> *FY2022-FY2025 Community Development Strategy*, City of Gardner, accessed July 10, 2025,

<https://gardner-ma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/10402/FY2022-FY25-Community-Development-Strategy>.

<sup>93</sup> Dane Arnold (Department of Public Works Director, City of Gardner, MA) and Rob Oliva (City Engineer, City of Gardner, MA), interview by Jennifer Doherty and Adam Duchesneau, Thursday, May 8, 2025.

The Gardner Senior Center, in partnership with MART, coordinates local rides for residents aged 60 and over or those with disabilities. Additional services include medical transportation through the Gardner CAC, 24/7 door-to-door transportation from GAAMHA for various populations, and veterans' transport to medical facilities via MVOC.<sup>94</sup> Wood's Plus SWIFT RIDE provides limited taxi service, although this requires call-ahead scheduling and is limited to Gardner city limits.<sup>95</sup>

In conversations and public outreach, Gardner residents frequently mentioned difficulty in accessing transportation via rideshare applications such as Uber and Lyft. Annually since 2017, the Commonwealth's Transportation Network Company (TNC) Division of the Department of Public Utilities (DPU) has produced a report on rideshare usage by community. Gardner's rideshare usage has increased dramatically since pre-pandemic levels, riding from 7,769 rides started within the city in 2019 to 18,318 rides started within the city in 2024.<sup>96</sup> However, when adjusted for population, the number of rides started per person in 2024 ranked Gardner 225 out of 351 cities and towns in Massachusetts. Rideshare applications are often most successful in areas with a higher population, as that creates more demand and more incentive for drivers to use the app. With Gardner's low population and more rural location, although there may be interest from residents in using the apps, there is not enough demand to generate more drivers in the city. Notably, though, 34 percent of rides started and ended within Gardner, ranking Gardner forty-ninth out of all 351 cities and towns. This indicates that almost a third of rideshare app users in Gardner are using the apps simply to get around the city, rather than traveling longer distances to other places. This could suggest opportunities for improvement in MART routes to provide more public transportation options for Gardner residents and visitors who are now using rideshare apps.

Although commuter rail service to Gardner was discontinued in 1987, residents can still access the MBTA commuter rail via the Wachusett Station in Fitchburg, with connecting MART and Greyhound bus services. Additionally, there is still interest from those in Gardner to have a commuter rail stop re-established within the city. In November of 2024, MassDOT released the *Northern Tier Passenger Rail Study Final Report*, which examined the benefits, costs, and investments necessary to implement passenger rail service from North Adams east to Greenfield

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<sup>94</sup> "Transportation," Senior Center, City of Gardner, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://www.gardner-ma.gov/677/Transportation>.

<sup>95</sup> "Wood's Plus SWIFT RIDE," Montachusett Regional Transit Authority, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://www.mrta.us/services/woods-plus-swift-ride/>.

<sup>96</sup> "2024 Rideshare Data Report," Transportation Network Company Division, Department of Public Utilities, accessed September 26, 2025, <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/2024-rideshare-data-report>.

and Boston. As part of this study, six route alternatives were examined and one, the Full Local Service alternative, included a stop in Gardner.<sup>97</sup>

### *Commuting Patterns and Mode Share*

Commuting patterns in Gardner reflect the city's car dependency. Of Gardner's 9,373 workers over the age of 16, about 69.5% drive alone to work, 10.3% carpool, and only 2.2% use public transportation. A modest 2.3% walk and 0.3% cycle to work. The remainder of workers use other modes of transportation (3.4 percent) or work from home (12.0 percent).<sup>98</sup> The average commute time is thirty-one minutes, with more than half of workers commuting less than thirty minutes (**Figure TR.6**). The largest share of workers depart for work between 6:30 AM and 8:00 AM. As described in the previous Economic Development section, Gardner experiences a dynamic flow of workers in and out of the city, with the majority of employed residents commuting to jobs outside the city.

### Local Policies and Practices

Road and other related infrastructure improvements in the city are handled by the City's DPW, while the Traffic Commission advises City Council on transportation-related issues. Notably, the Traffic Commission is composed of professional City staff rather than appointed residents. The City does not have a bicycle and pedestrian committee, or any other appointed committee of residents to advocate for transportation-related improvements in the city.

Overall, the City has demonstrated a proactive approach to transportation planning through its adoption and implementation of progressive policies that prioritize safety, accessibility, and multimodal mobility. Efforts to acquire grant funds have led to the adoption of many of these policies, allowing the City to access state and federal funding for needed infrastructure projects. At the forefront of this effort is Gardner's Complete Streets Policy. This policy, grounded in MassDOT's framework, commits the City to designing and maintaining roadways that accommodate all users—pedestrians, cyclists, transit riders, and motorists—regardless of age or ability. The policy also supports the state's Sustainable Development Principles, with particular emphasis on increasing transportation choice and promoting equitable access.

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<sup>97</sup> *Northern Tier Passenger Rail Study – Final Report*, Department of Transportation, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, November 2024, <https://www.mass.gov/doc/northern-tier-passenger-rail-study-final-report/download>.

<sup>98</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. American Community Survey Five-Year Estimates, 2013-2023, Table S0801, S0802.

Since adopting the policy, Gardner has secured two MassDOT Complete Streets grants, which have supported critical infrastructure enhancements such as sidewalk upgrades and the development of shared-use paths. Notably, these funds have helped advance projects along the North Central Pathway, a regionally significant corridor that connects key recreational and community destinations. The pathway not only serves residents but also functions as a tourism and economic development asset, encouraging outdoor activity and non-motorized travel.

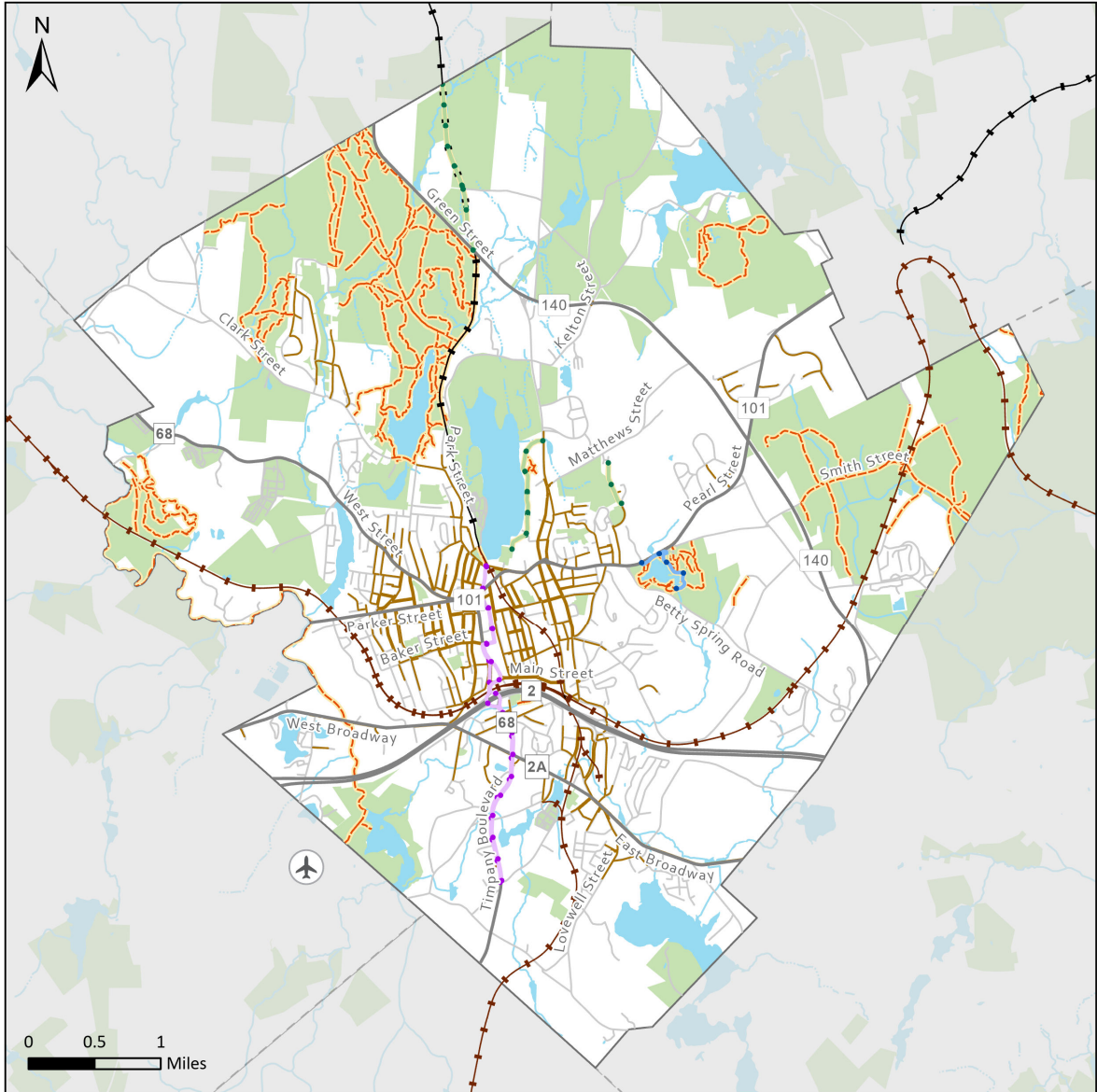
Despite these successes, Gardner faces ongoing challenges. The City continues to pursue funding through the federal TIP, a critical source for major capital investments. However, the process of getting projects to the TIP stage is hindered by steep upfront design costs, which can exceed \$1 million. This presents a substantial challenge for Gardner, as it often lacks the internal resources to fund preliminary engineering and environmental permitting phases.<sup>99</sup> As a result, the City must strategically prioritize which projects to advance, frequently seeking regional collaboration or state assistance to move them forward.

Gardner has also worked to integrate ADA upgrades into its regular paving program, ensuring infrastructure investments contribute to a more inclusive and accessible environment. The City has identified improving public transit as another key priority. In partnership with MART, Gardner continues to advocate for expanded bus routes, increased service frequency, and improved connections to surrounding communities. These enhancements are critical for residents who rely on transit for employment, healthcare, and education.

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<sup>99</sup> Dane Arnold (Department of Public Works Director, City of Gardner, MA) and Rob Oliva (City Engineer, City of Gardner, MA), interview by Jennifer Doherty and Adam Duchesneau, Thursday, May 8, 2025.

Map TR.1, Transportation Routes



Transportation Map

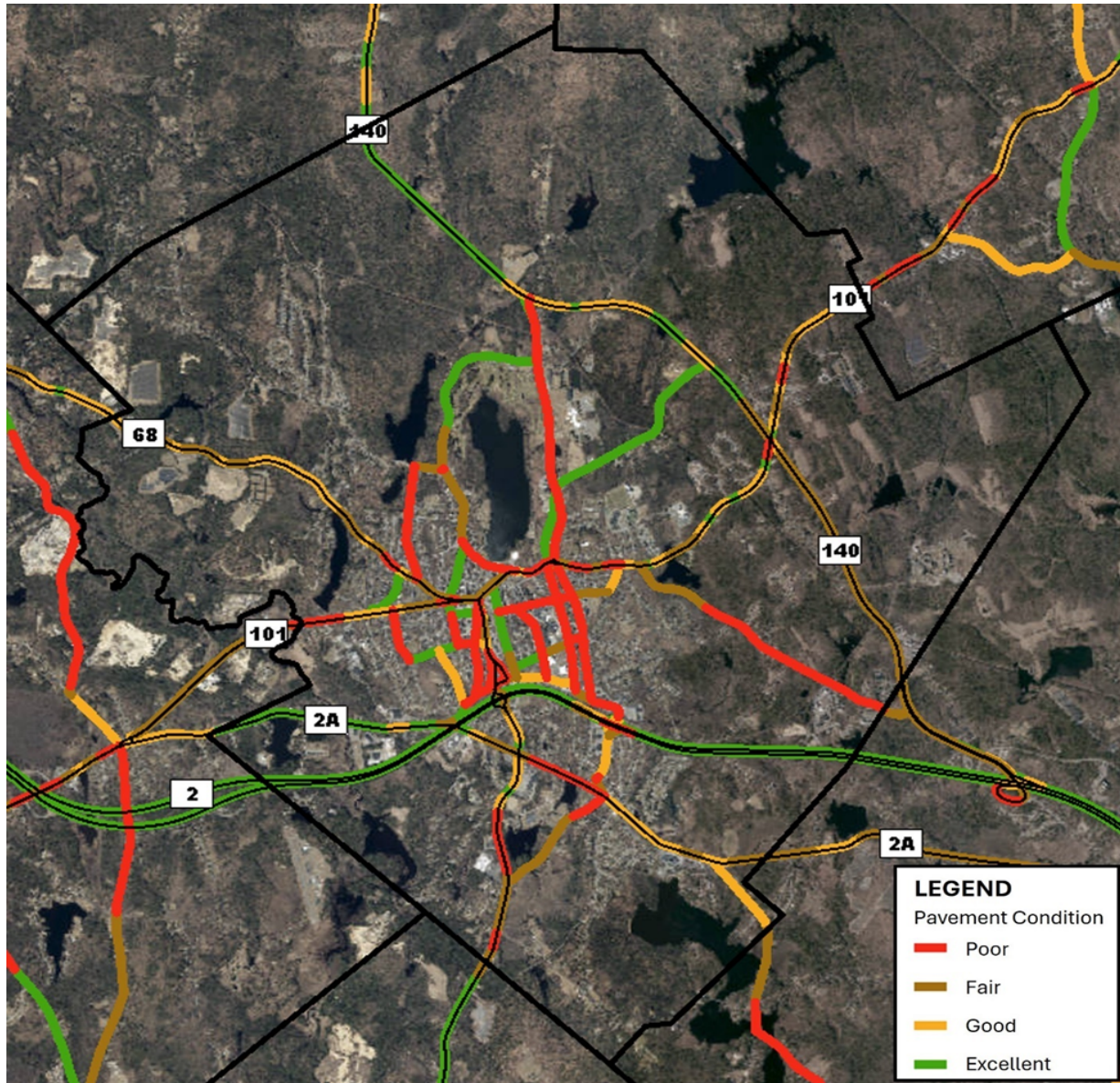
- State Route
- Local Roads
- Sidewalks
- Active Rail Service
- Abandoned or Out of Service
- ✈ Gardner Municipal Airport
- North Central Pathway Bike Trail
- Proposed Bike Path
- Shared Use Path
- Trails
- Water
- Surrounding Towns
- Open Space



Date: July 2025  
 Source: Mass GIS and City of Gardner

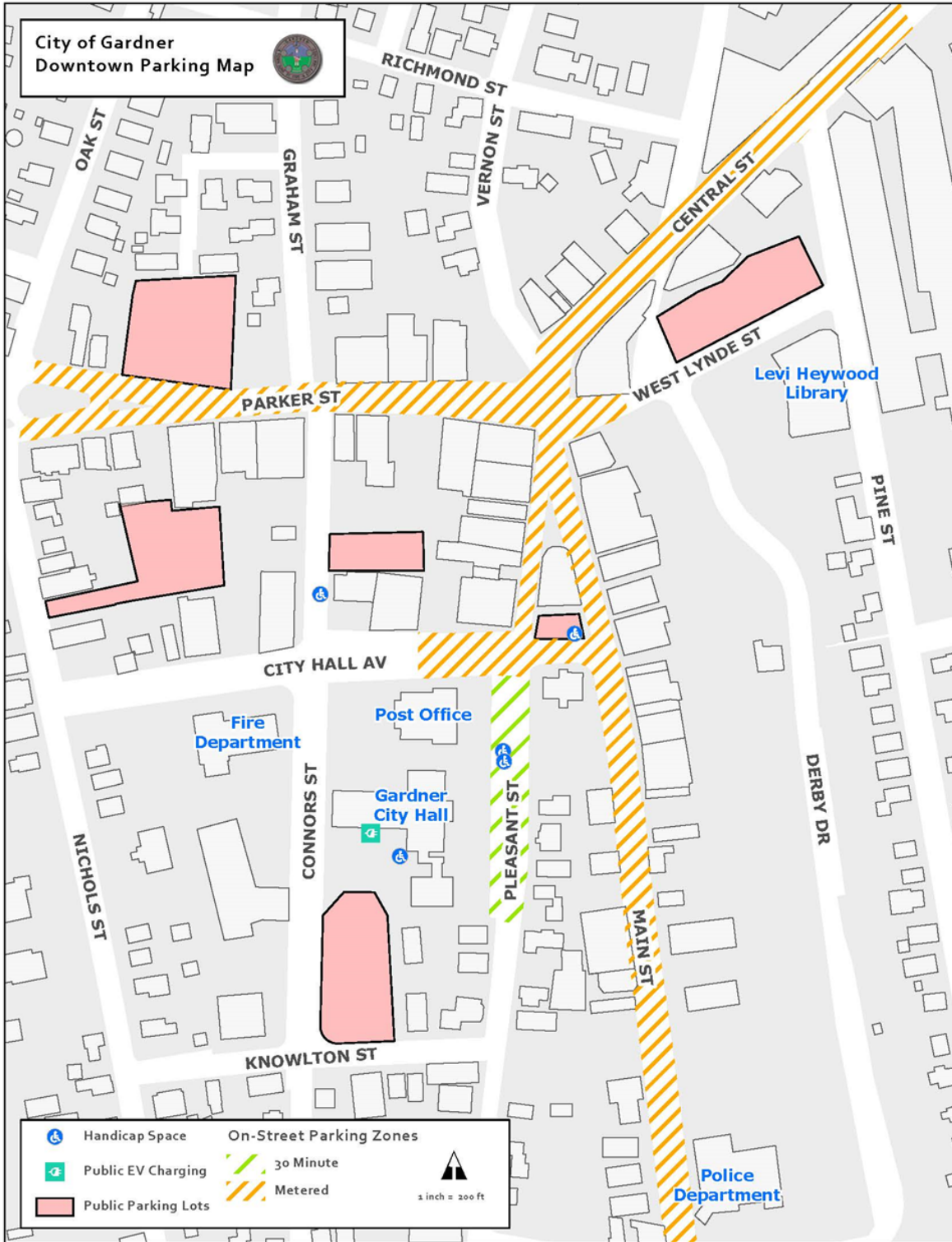
*The information depicted on this map is for general planning purposes only. It is not adequate for legal boundary definition, regulatory interpretation, or parcel level analysis. Use caution when interpreting the information on this map.*

Figure TR.1, Pavement Conditions in Gardner



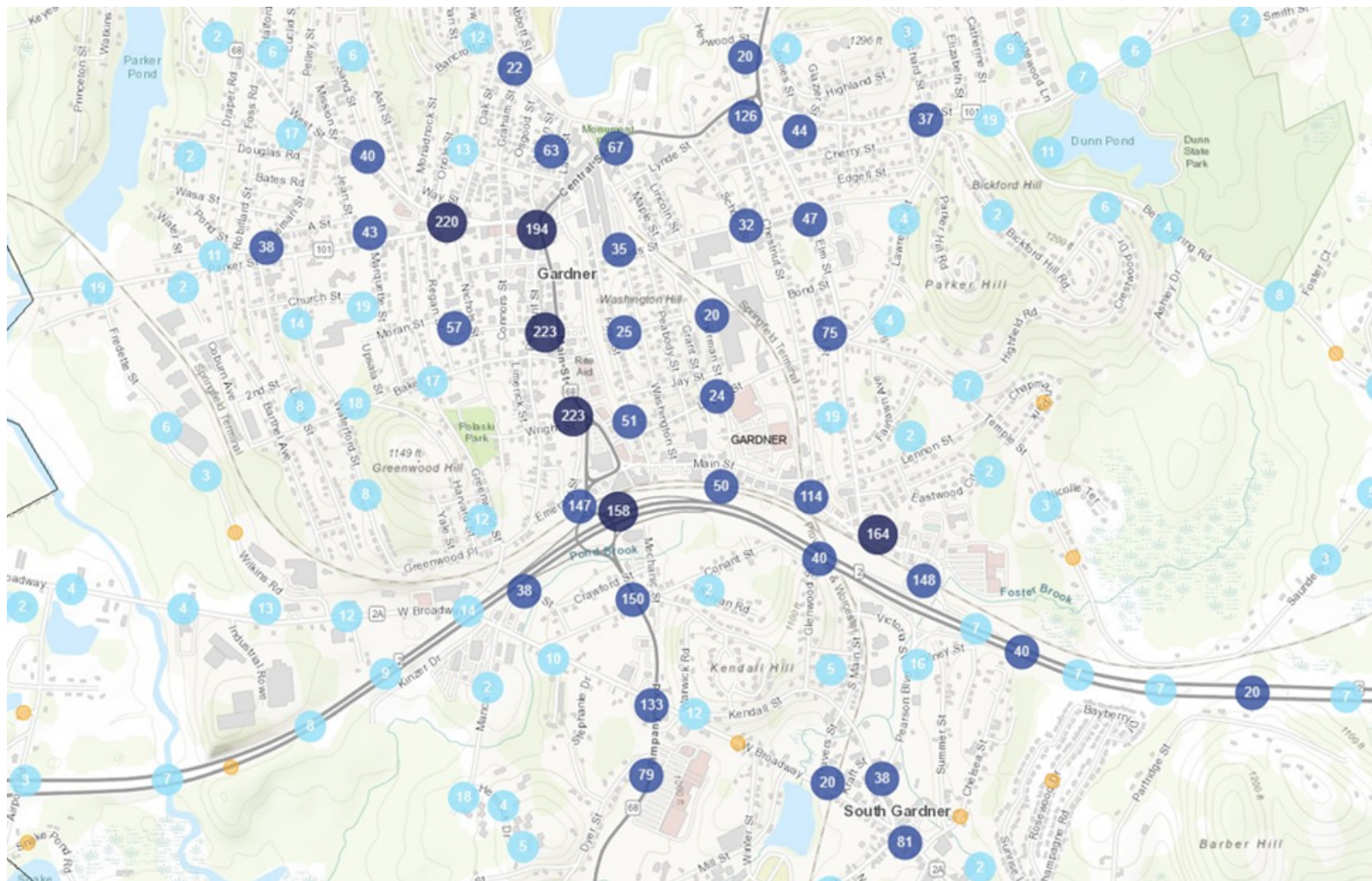
Source: "MrMapper Pavement Conditions," Montachusett Regional Planning Commission, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://mrmapper.mrpc.org/WebApps/v2.27/v2/PavementConditions/>.

Figure TR.2, Downtown Gardner Public Parking Map



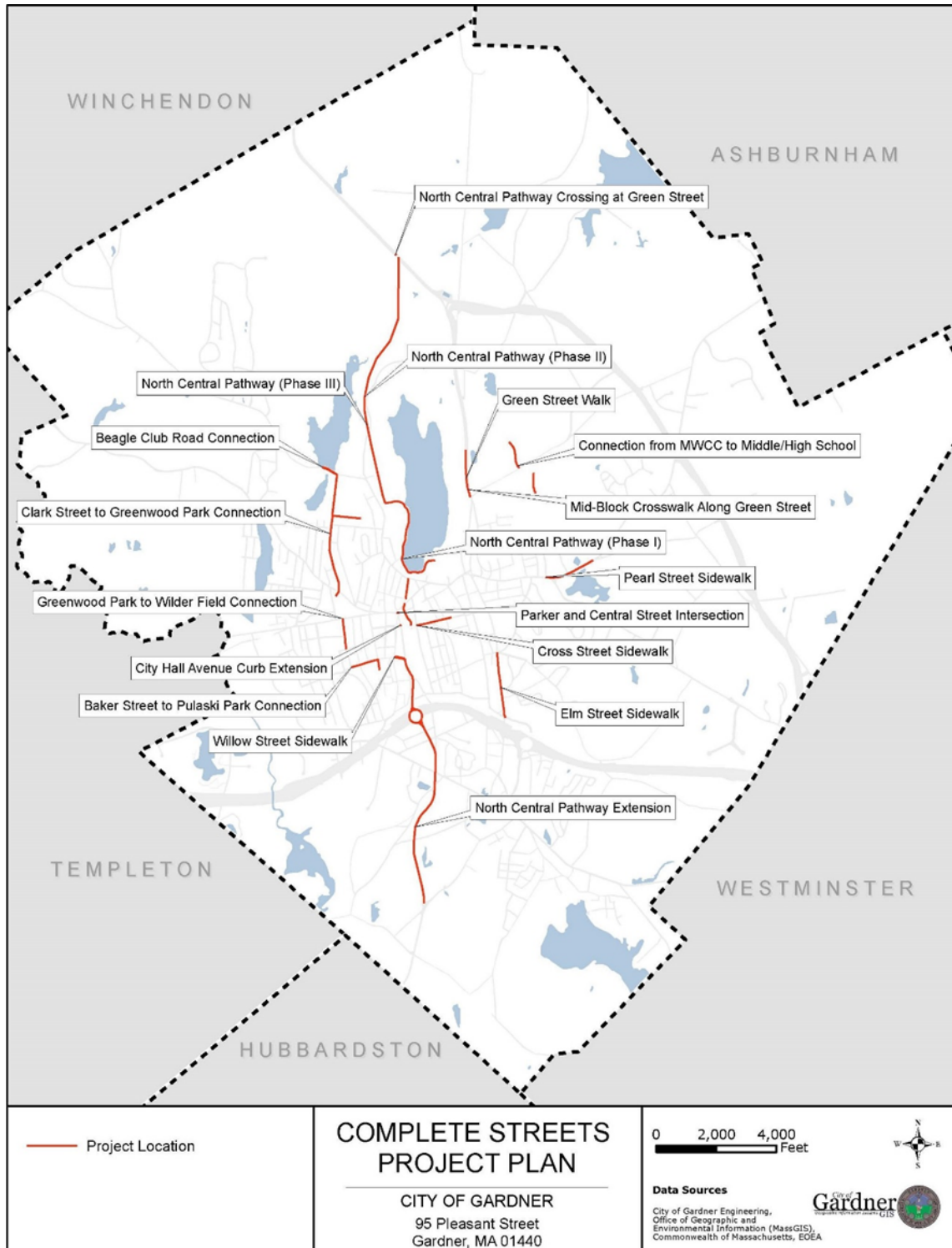
Source: "Downtown Parking Map," Parking & Civil Enforcement, Public Parking, City of Gardner, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://www.gardner-ma.gov/268/Public-Parking>.

Figure TR.3, MassDOT IMPACT Crash Data, 2016-2025



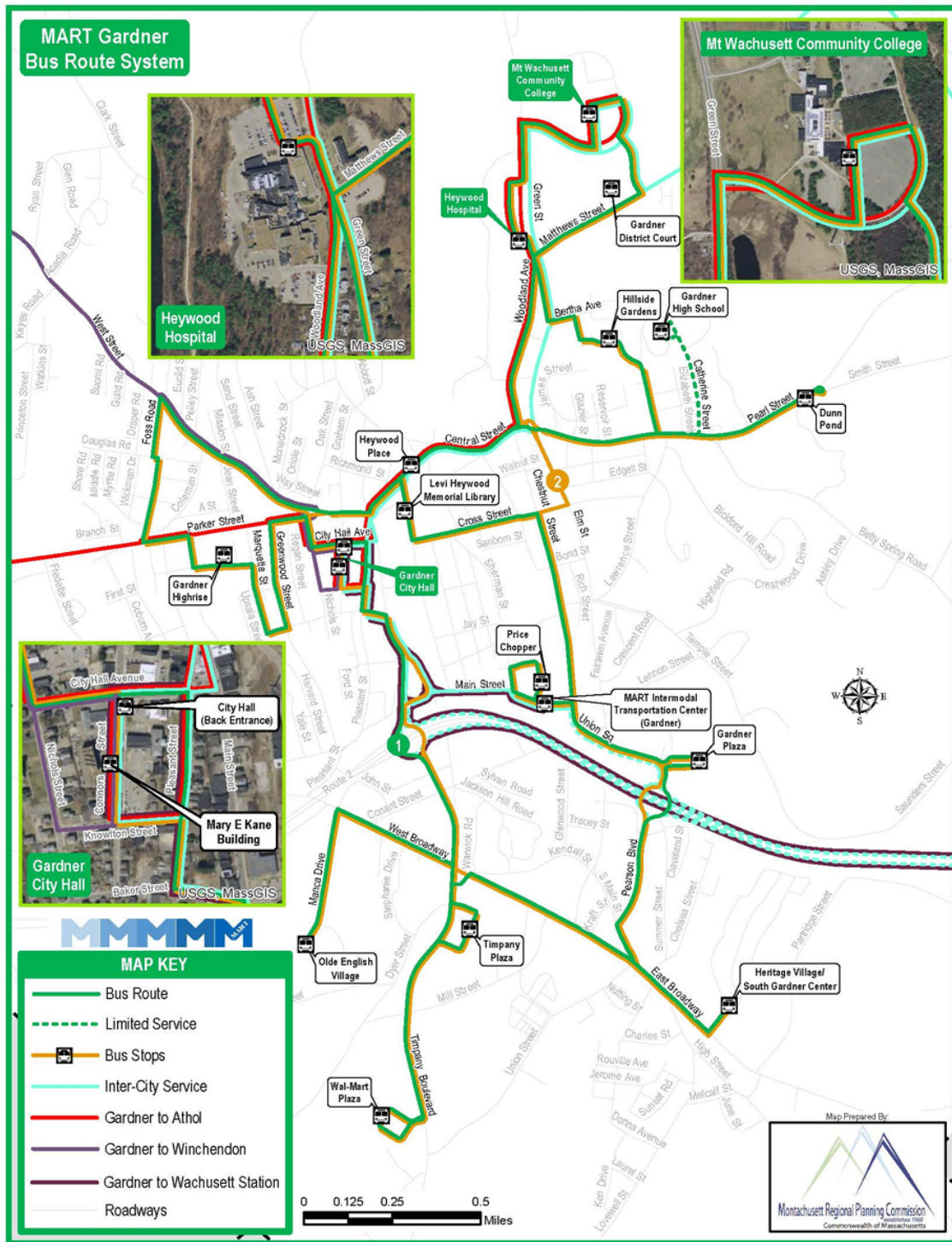
Source: "IMPACT Home," Department of Transportation, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://apps.crashdata.dot.mass.gov/cdp/home>.

Figure TR.4, Complete Streets Project Plan



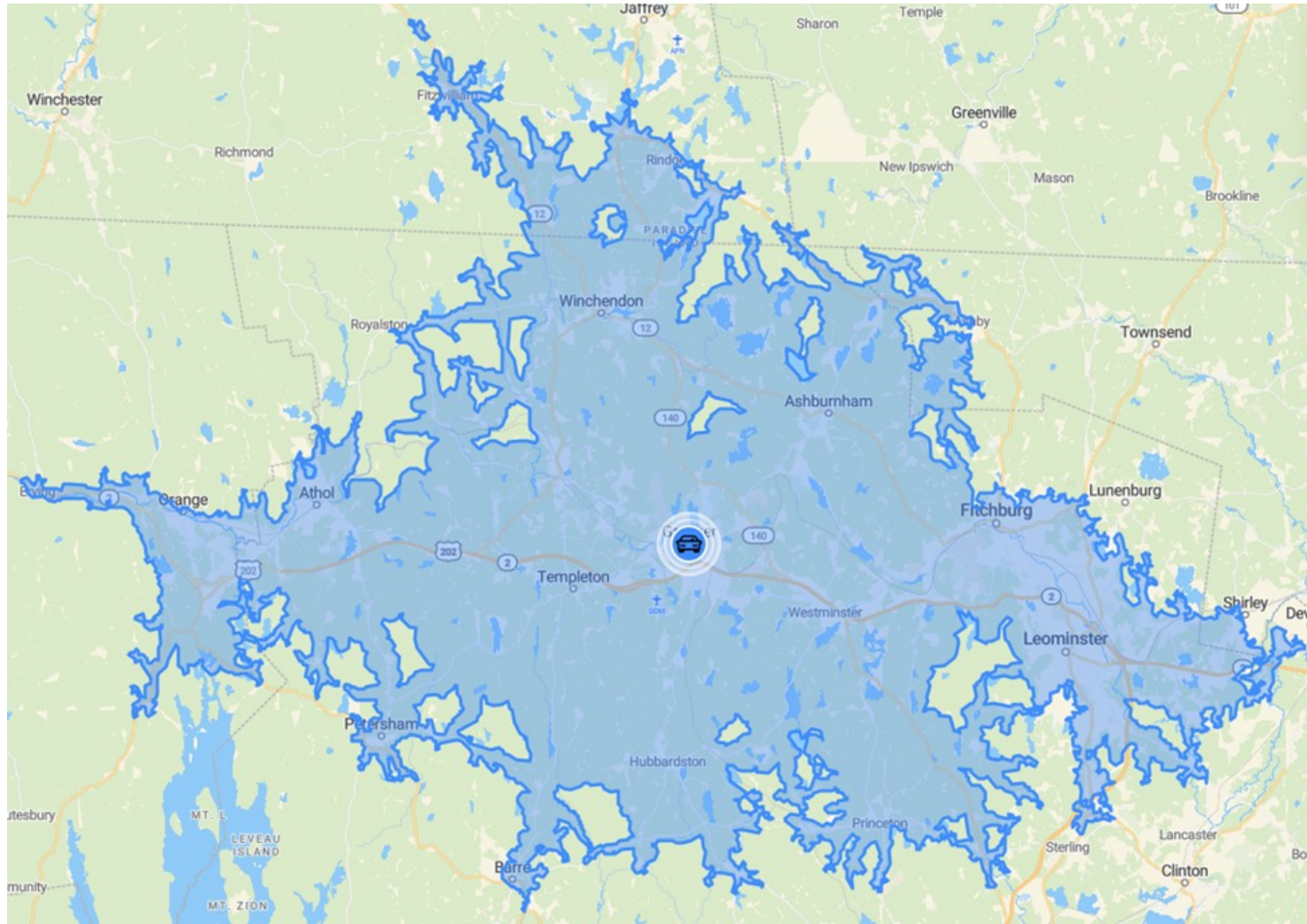
Source: "Complete Streets Project Plan," Community Development & Planning, City of Gardner, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://www.gardner-ma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/2505/Citywide-Projects-Map>.

Figure TR.5, MART Gardner Bus Route System



Source: "MART Gardner Bus Route System," Montachusett Regional Planning Commission, accessed July 10, 2025, [https://www.mrpc.org/sites/g/files/vyhliif3491/f/file/file/mart\\_gardnersystem\\_2017.pdf](https://www.mrpc.org/sites/g/files/vyhliif3491/f/file/file/mart_gardnersystem_2017.pdf).

Figure TR.6, Gardner 30 Minute Commute Radius Map



Source: "Gardner, Massachusetts," TravelTime, accessed July 10, 2025, <https://app.traveltime.com/>.

## Appendix II – Community Outreach and Engagement

To support the development of this Master Plan, the project team utilized a number of different methods of community outreach. While community engagement provided some information for the existing conditions portion of the Master Plan, it primarily helped to develop the plan’s vision and values, final recommendations, and implementation plan.

The primary goal of community engagement was to reach a cross-section of community members to understand how they view Gardner today and what they would like to see in the future.

More specifically, the project team sought to:

1. Reach a wide cross-section of community members diverse in age, gender, race, income, and geographic location within the city
2. Develop a clear vision for the community’s future
3. Understand current issues and needs
4. Highlight Gardner’s strengths and opportunities
5. Gather feedback on proposed recommendations and implementation plans

### Project Website

A Social Pinpoint website launched in April, 2025 to serve as a landing page for the project. The site provided basic information about the project, updates regarding public participation opportunities, and “quick hit” polls and open-ended questions that rotated every few weeks. One popular form of engagement was a map where community members could add points to describe different features around the site, such as favorite places or locations needing improvement. As of February, 2026, website visitors have added 31 points around the community highlighting major community assets, spots the City could improve upon, and areas where community members wanted to see more connectivity. Many of the comments related to transportation, such as road condition issues, pedestrian crossings, and bicycle infrastructure improvements. The other activities on the project website generated only a handful of responses.

### Community Survey

To gather some general input from the community, a survey was available for the month of May, 2025. The survey was available online with hard copies available at City Hall and the Senior Center. A total of 200 responses were received.

The survey was advertised on the City’s website and Facebook page several times, was sent to a contact list of City officials and community organizations, and was promoted at events when possible.

Unfortunately, the small number of responses renders the survey statistically insignificant. However, some of the responses and issues raised echoed comments heard by others who participated in the Master Plan process, helping to highlight some of the major issues impacting the city currently and in the coming years. The full survey results are included in Appendix II.

## Community Visioning Workshop

The Master Plan’s first community workshop was held the evening of Thursday, May 22, 2025 in Perry Auditorium at City Hall. The goal of the workshop was to gather information from the community that would help the project team develop a vision statement for the project. After a brief presentation about the Master Plan, approximately fifteen community members participated in two activities: a series of boards with open-ended questions about Gardner where attendees could leave comments on post-it notes; and two fill-in-the-blank vision statements. The activities were designed to prompt attendees to think about Gardner’s community values and what they want the community to look like in the future. Following the visioning workshop, the project team assembled the comments received into a vision of Gardner’s future and a set of values for the community that were approved by the Master Plan Steering Committee.

## Open House

On October 30, 2025, the project team hosted another public event at Perry Auditorium in City Hall attended by sixteen community members. This open house presented information gathered during the inventory and assessment, a draft of the key issues, and the values and vision statement as finalized by the Master Plan Steering Committee. All of the information was presented on boards around the room, with attendees reading and reacting to the information on their own. Only a few comments were received on each of the Master Plan topic areas presented on the boards.

Attendees were also given three coins and asked to spend their “money” among nine pre-selected topics. The voting activity was replicated on the project website as well. Between the workshop and the project website, the vote tallies were as follows:

- Connectivity between different sections of the city and different modes of transportation, eight votes
- Affordable housing, seven votes
- More mixed-use developments of housing, shops, and restaurants, five votes

- Roads and sidewalk repairs, five votes
- More places to shop, dine, and play, four votes
- Protection of natural resources and open space, four votes
- Protect historic buildings and sites, three votes
- Different types of housing, two votes
- Safe housing for all, no votes

Following the open house, the topic-specific boards were placed around the city with a QR code linking to the project website, encouraging community members to react to the information. Boards were hosted at City Hall, the public library, the Gardner Ale House, and the Gardner Museum. The boards were up from late November, 2025 until the end of December, 2025. No additional comments were received about the boards via the project website.

## Other Events

The project team also attended several other events throughout the course of the project.

### Drop-in Coffee Hour

Victoria Coffee hosted a drop-in coffee hour the morning of Tuesday, June 24, 2025. The event was targeted towards local organization leaders and business owners. About twelve attendees spoke with the project team regarding their organization or business's experience with the City.

### Levi Heywood Memorial Library Summer Reading Kick Off Party

The project team had a table at the Levi Heywood Memorial Library's summer reading kickoff party on Wednesday, June 25, 2025. Activities available for engagement included a book cover children could color, titled "My Story of Gardner," and a large board participants could write on with the prompt, "I hope the next chapter in Gardner's history includes..." Held on a very hot day, the event had lower attendance than usual, and only a few responses were received from community members.

### National Night Out

In August, 2025, the project team attended Gardner's National Night Out, a popular event in the community; the organizers estimated over 1,000 people were in attendance. The event did draw both Gardner residents and others from outside the city, though. The project team asked attendees who approached the table if they were Gardner residents, and if so, encouraged them to participate. Two boards were available for responses: "As a community, Gardner values \_\_\_\_." and "In 10 years, I hope Gardner will be \_\_\_\_." Both boards were used to help develop the values

and vision statement. As a family-oriented event, several responses were gathered from younger residents, increasing the age diversity of community outreach participants.

Many of the responses were similar to those seen in other forms of engagement. Attendees could write their own response or vote for one someone else wrote with a dot sticker. The values board generated two written responses for “less homelessness,” with one receiving four dot sticker votes. “Affordable housing” was written and received two dot sticker votes, and “different housing options” received one dot sticker vote. Other topics mentioned included “recovery from addiction” (three votes), “families” (two votes), “safety” (two votes), and “community events” (one vote).

Reflective of the family-oriented nature of the National Night Out event, the “In 10 years, I hope Gardner will \_\_\_” board generated several responses requesting more activities for children and families. Other broader responses included “diversity,” “downtown flourishing with businesses,” “more homeless housing,” and “community centered.”

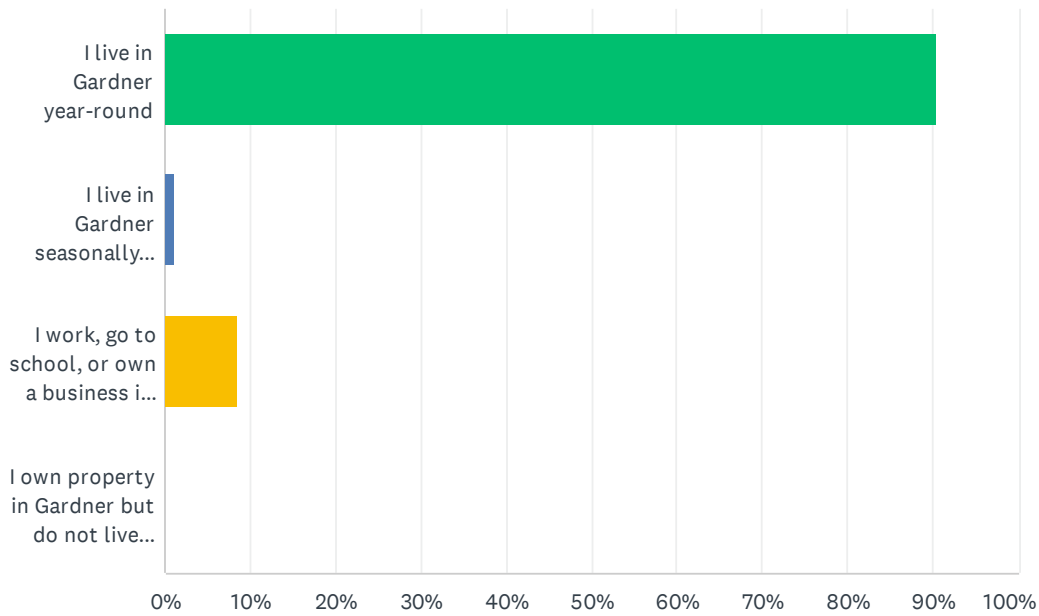
#### Office Hours for City Staff and Boards

The afternoon of December 9, 2025, the project team was available in a conference room at City Hall for City department heads and boards and commissions to stop by and discuss the planning efforts. Over the course of three hours the project team had two attendees.

## **Appendix III – Community Survey Results**

## Q1 What best describes your relationship with Gardner?

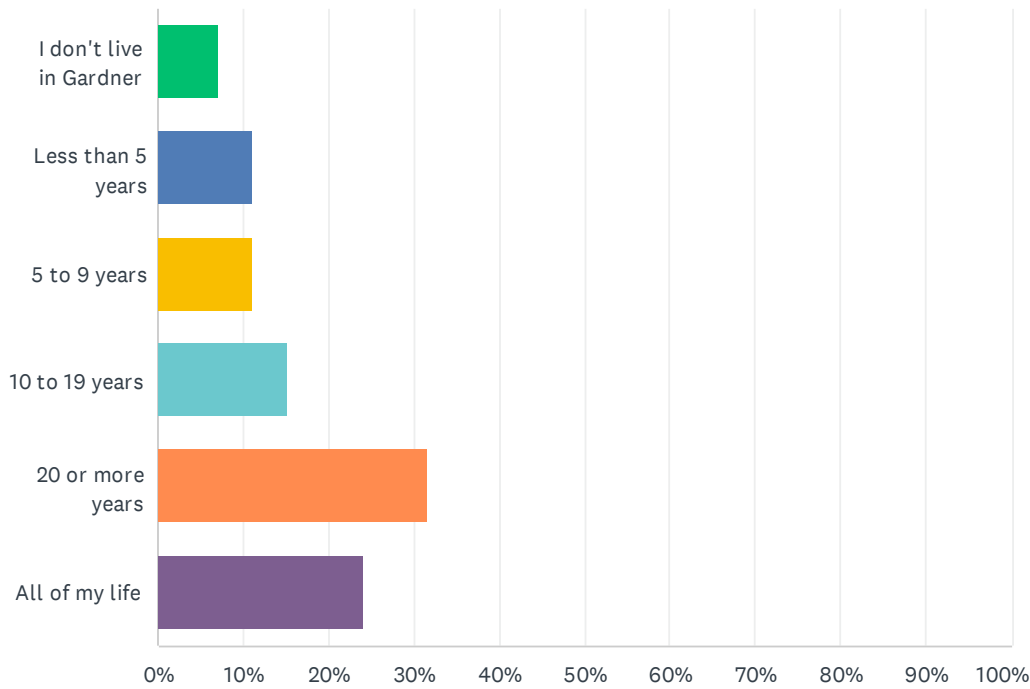
Answered: 198 Skipped: 1



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
I live in Gardner year-round	90.40%	179
I live in Gardner seasonally (less than nine months of the year)	1.01%	2
I work, go to school, or own a business in Gardner but do not live there	8.59%	17
I own property in Gardner but do not live there	0.00%	0
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>198</b>

## Q2 How long have you lived in Gardner?

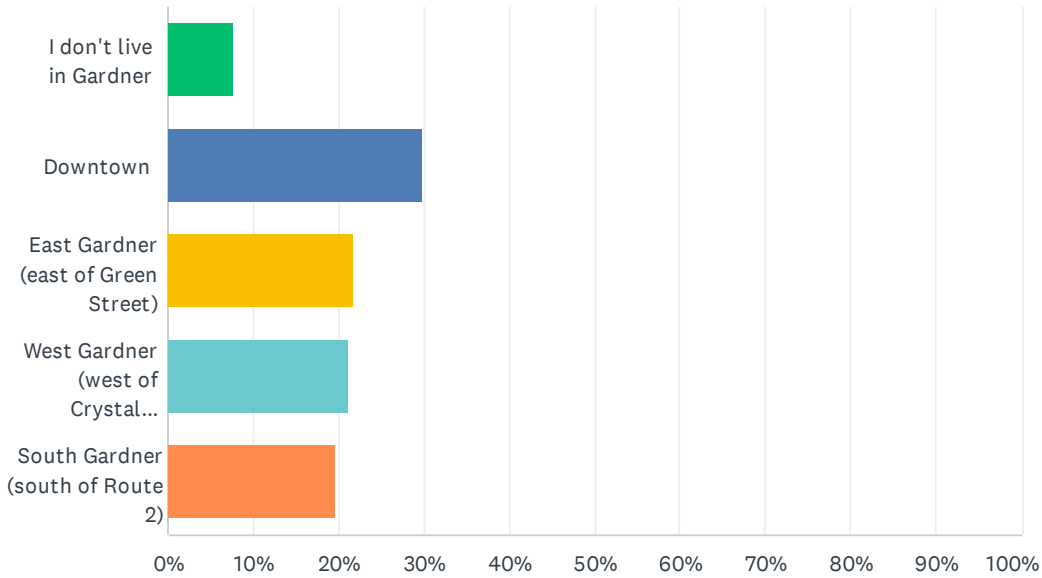
Answered: 199 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
I don't live in Gardner	7.04%	14
Less than 5 years	11.06%	22
5 to 9 years	11.06%	22
10 to 19 years	15.08%	30
20 or more years	31.66%	63
All of my life	24.12%	48
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>199</b>

### Q3 What part of Gardner you live in?

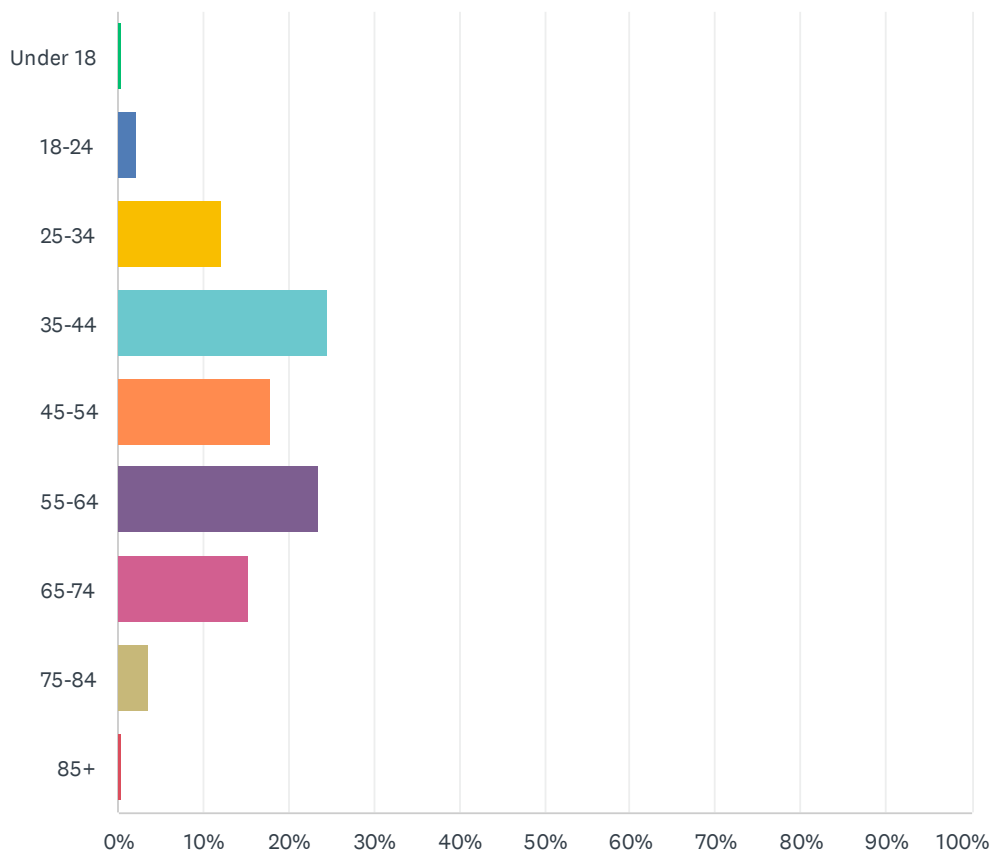
Answered: 198 Skipped: 1



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
I don't live in Gardner	7.58%	15
Downtown	29.80%	59
East Gardner (east of Green Street)	21.72%	43
West Gardner (west of Crystal Lake/ Green Street)	21.21%	42
South Gardner (south of Route 2)	19.70%	39
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>198</b>

## Q4 What is your age?

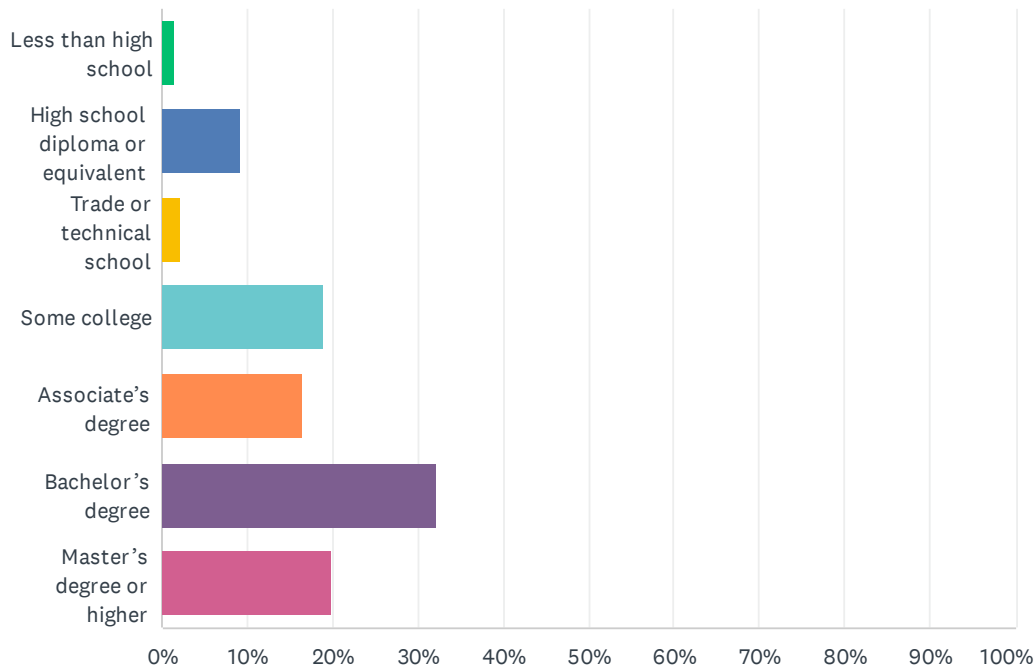
Answered: 196 Skipped: 3



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Under 18	0.51%	1
18-24	2.04%	4
25-34	12.24%	24
35-44	24.49%	48
45-54	17.86%	35
55-64	23.47%	46
65-74	15.31%	30
75-84	3.57%	7
85+	0.51%	1
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>196</b>

## Q5 What is the highest level of schooling you have completed?

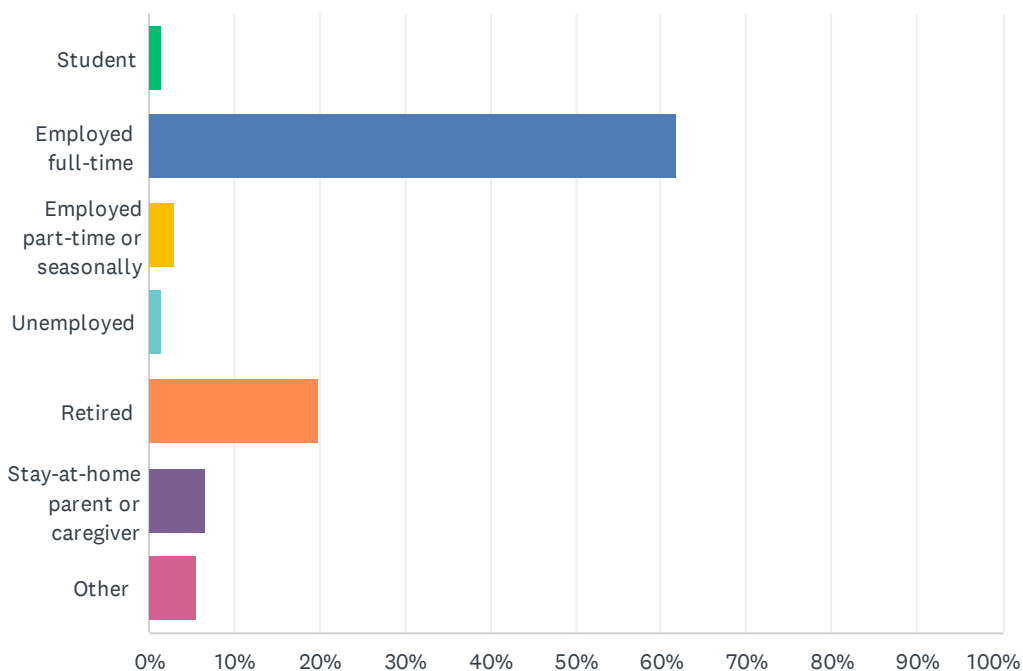
Answered: 196 Skipped: 3



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Less than high school	1.53%	3
High school diploma or equivalent	9.18%	18
Trade or technical school	2.04%	4
Some college	18.88%	37
Associate's degree	16.33%	32
Bachelor's degree	32.14%	63
Master's degree or higher	19.90%	39
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>196</b>

## Q6 What best describes your employment status?

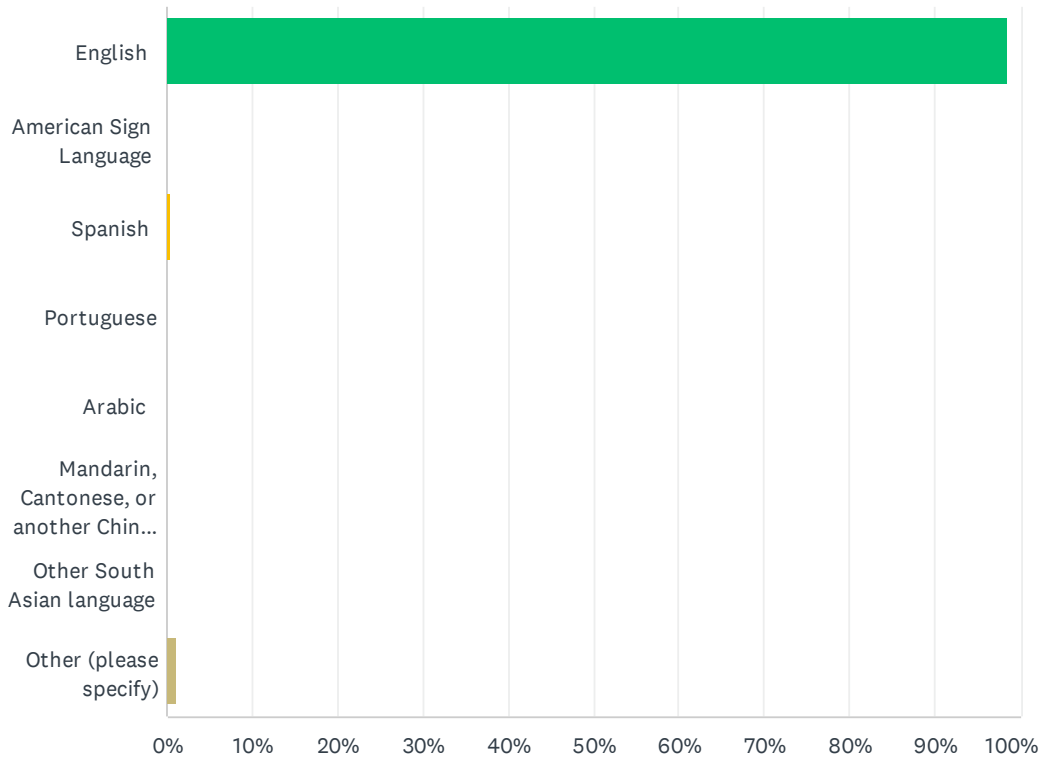
Answered: 196 Skipped: 3



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Student	1.53%	3
Employed full-time	61.73%	121
Employed part-time or seasonally	3.06%	6
Unemployed	1.53%	3
Retired	19.90%	39
Stay-at-home parent or caregiver	6.63%	13
Other	5.61%	11
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>196</b>

## Q7 What language do you use most often at home?

Answered: 196 Skipped: 3

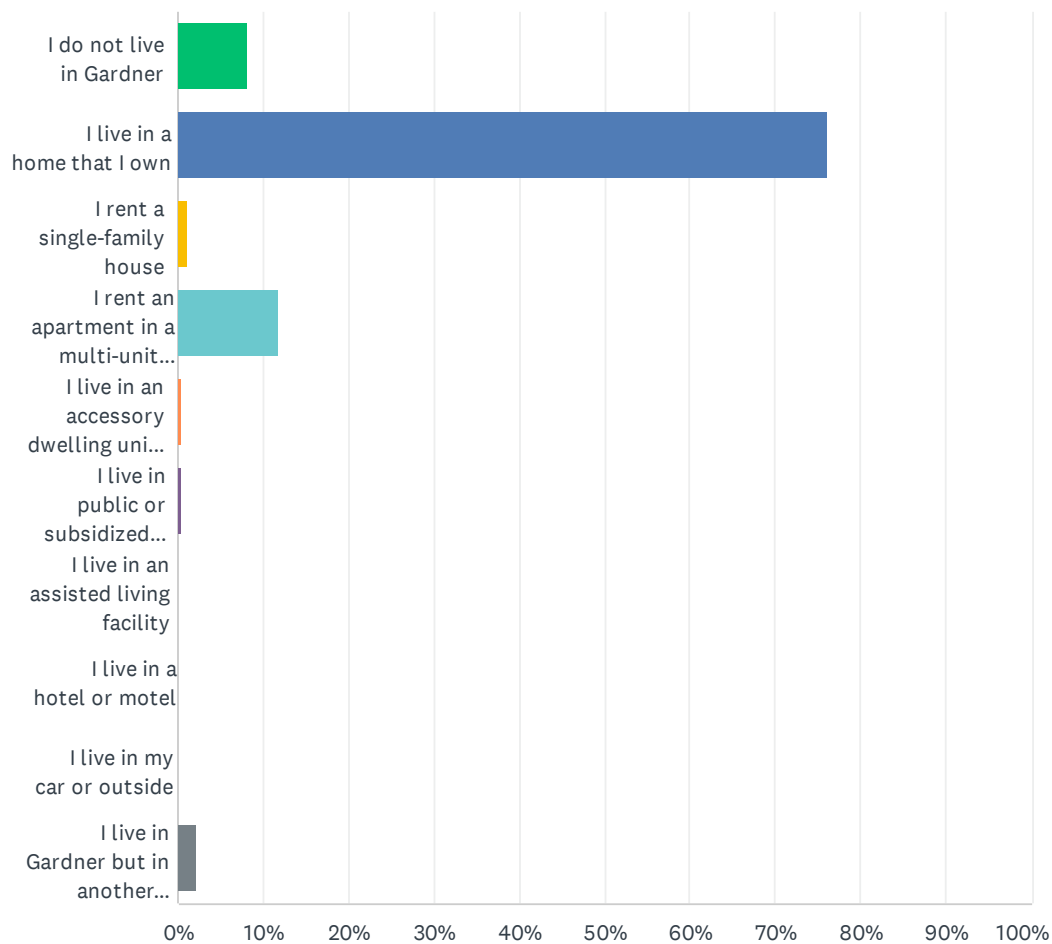


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
English	98.47%	193
American Sign Language	0.00%	0
Spanish	0.51%	1
Portuguese	0.00%	0
Arabic	0.00%	0
Mandarin, Cantonese, or another Chinese dialect	0.00%	0
Other South Asian language	0.00%	0
Other (please specify)	1.02%	2
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>196</b>

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	English, Spanish, understand portuguese.	5/19/2025 12:36 PM
2	Bilingual Spanish and English	5/10/2025 7:29 PM

## Q8 What best describes your current living situation in Gardner?

Answered: 196 Skipped: 3

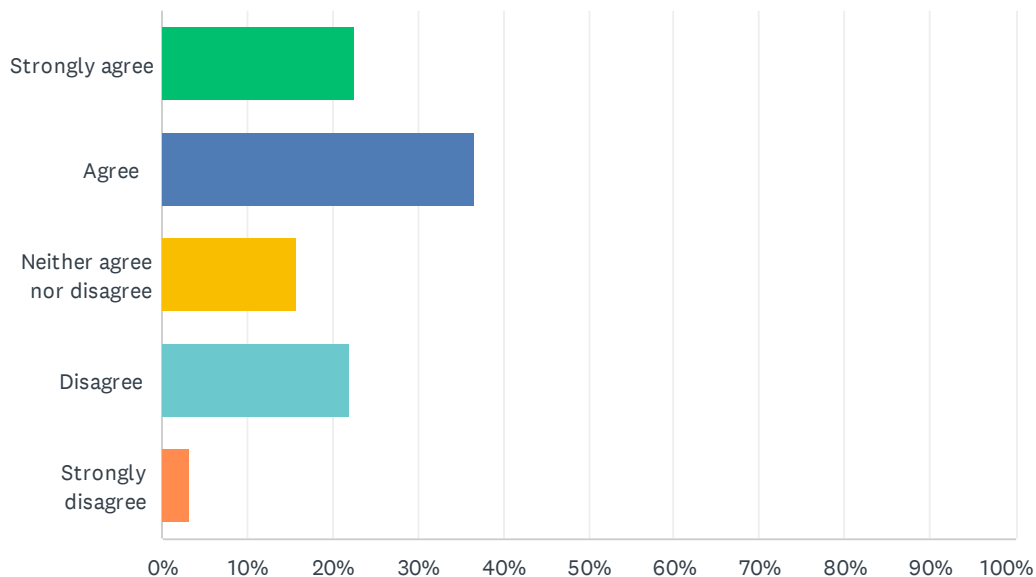


## Gardner Master Plan Community Survey

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
I do not live in Gardner	8.16%	16
I live in a home that I own	76.02%	149
I rent a single-family house	1.02%	2
I rent an apartment in a multi-unit building	11.73%	23
I live in an accessory dwelling unit that I rent or own	0.51%	1
I live in public or subsidized housing	0.51%	1
I live in an assisted living facility	0.00%	0
I live in a hotel or motel	0.00%	0
I live in my car or outside	0.00%	0
I live in Gardner but in another dwelling type not listed here	2.04%	4
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>196</b>

### Q9 I can easily meet all of my basic needs in Gardner (housing, employment, food, clothing).

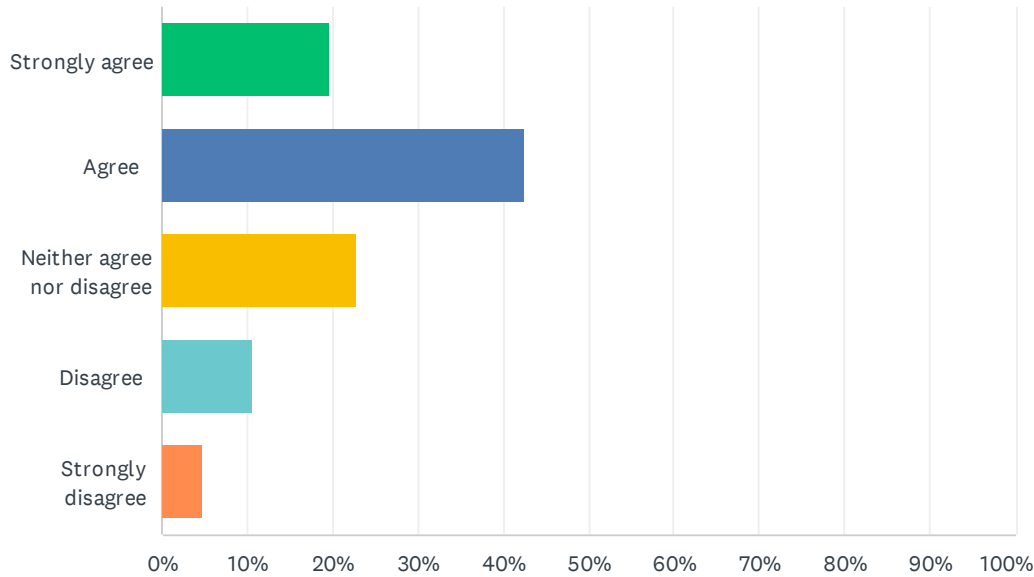
Answered: 191 Skipped: 8



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly agree	22.51%	43
Agree	36.65%	70
Neither agree nor disagree	15.71%	30
Disagree	21.99%	42
Strongly disagree	3.14%	6
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>191</b>

### Q10 I was able to easily find housing in Gardner that was safe, affordable, and meets the size and location needs of my household.

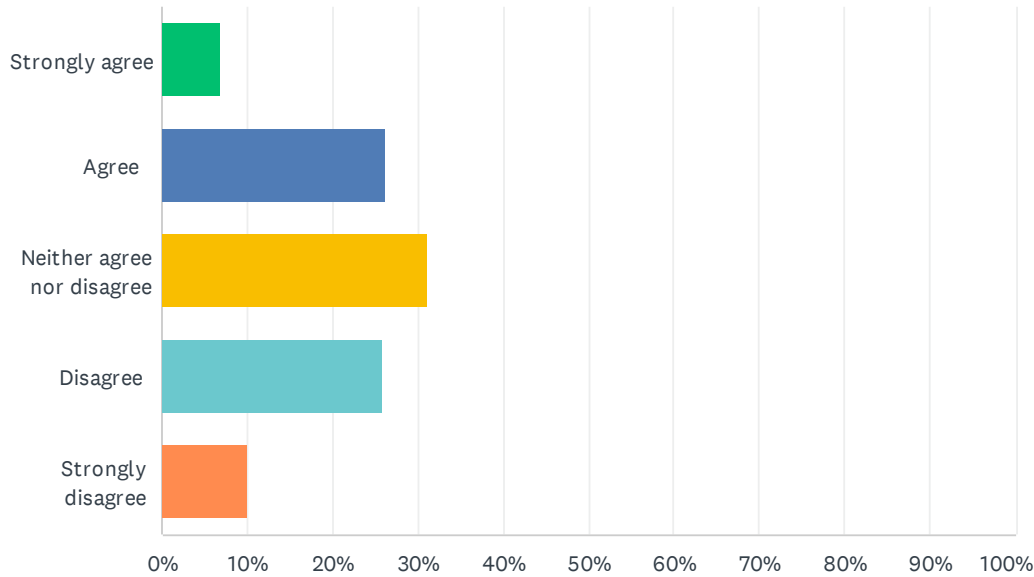
Answered: 189 Skipped: 10



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly agree	19.58%	37
Agree	42.33%	80
Neither agree nor disagree	22.75%	43
Disagree	10.58%	20
Strongly disagree	4.76%	9
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>189</b>

## Q11 Many of my recreational activities, fun times, and hobby events are within Gardner.

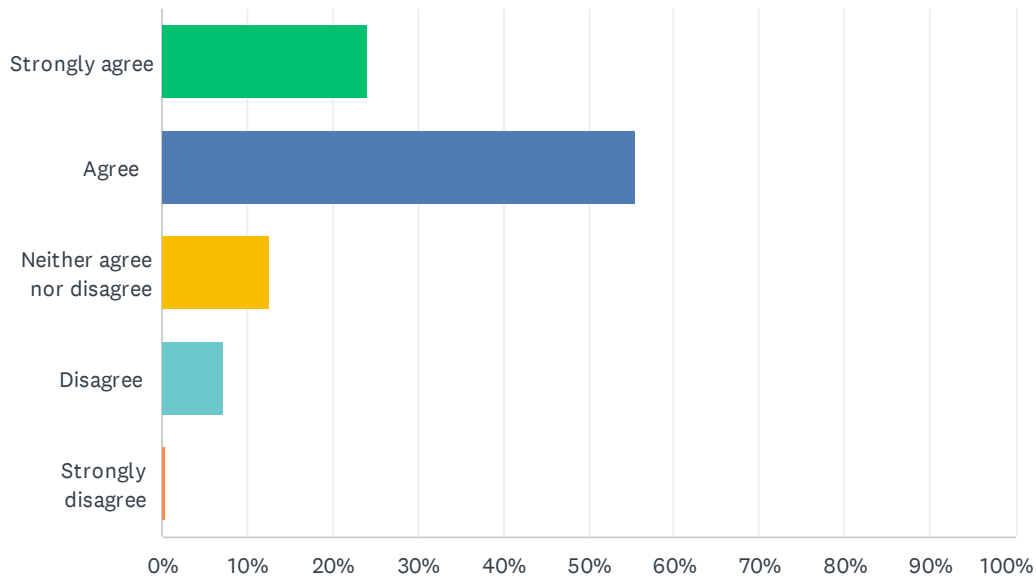
Answered: 190 Skipped: 9



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly agree	6.84%	13
Agree	26.32%	50
Neither agree nor disagree	31.05%	59
Disagree	25.79%	49
Strongly disagree	10.00%	19
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>190</b>

## Q12 I can easily move around Gardner to get to the places I need to be.

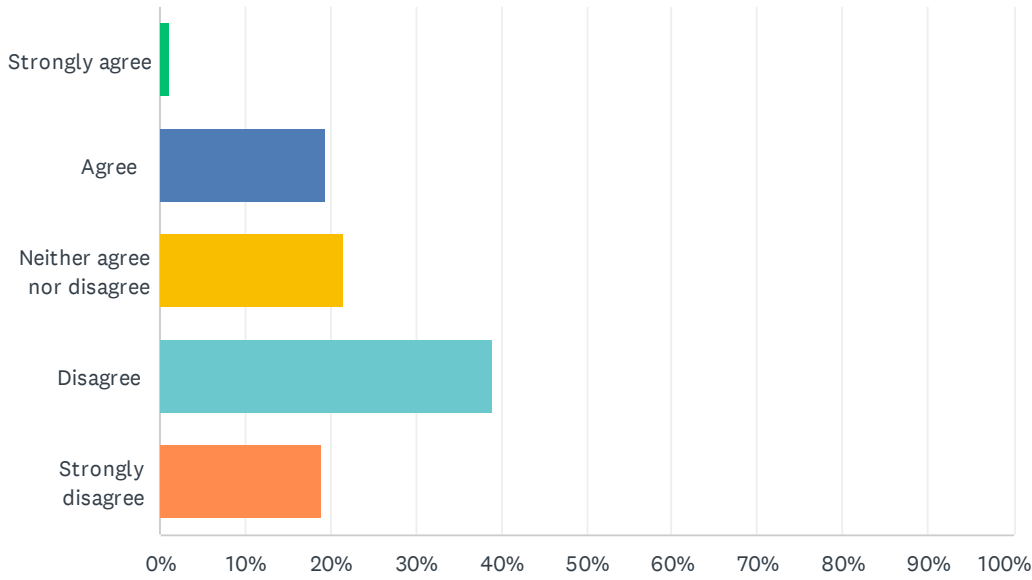
Answered: 191 Skipped: 8



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly agree	24.08%	46
Agree	55.50%	106
Neither agree nor disagree	12.57%	24
Disagree	7.33%	14
Strongly disagree	0.52%	1
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>191</b>

### Q13 I am satisfied with the condition of roads in Gardner.

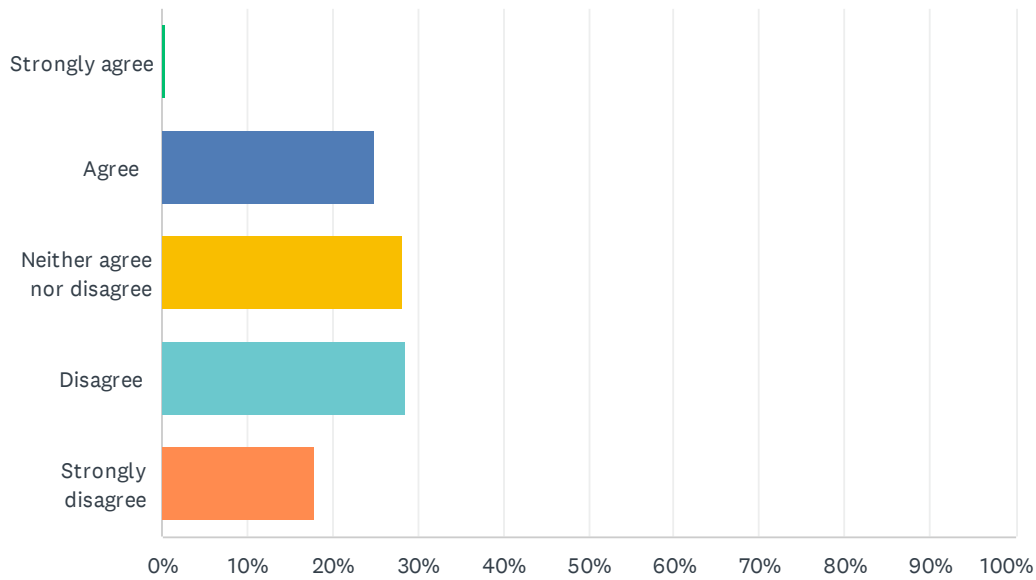
Answered: 190 Skipped: 9



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly agree	1.05%	2
Agree	19.47%	37
Neither agree nor disagree	21.58%	41
Disagree	38.95%	74
Strongly disagree	18.95%	36
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>190</b>

## Q14 I am satisfied with the condition of sidewalks in Gardner.

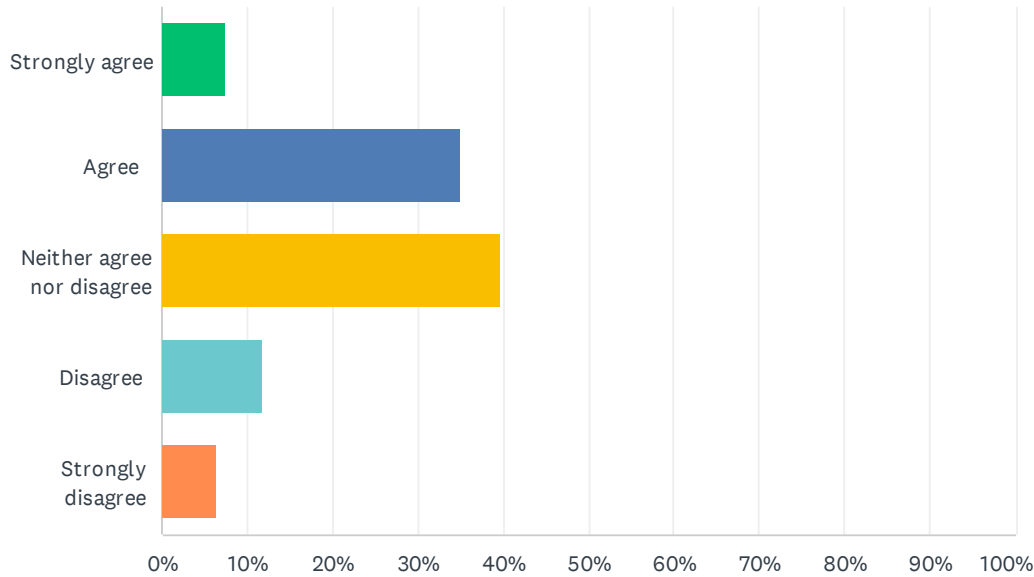
Answered: 189 Skipped: 10



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly agree	0.53%	1
Agree	24.87%	47
Neither agree nor disagree	28.04%	53
Disagree	28.57%	54
Strongly disagree	17.99%	34
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>189</b>

## Q15 I am satisfied with the condition of bicycle paths and routes in Gardner.

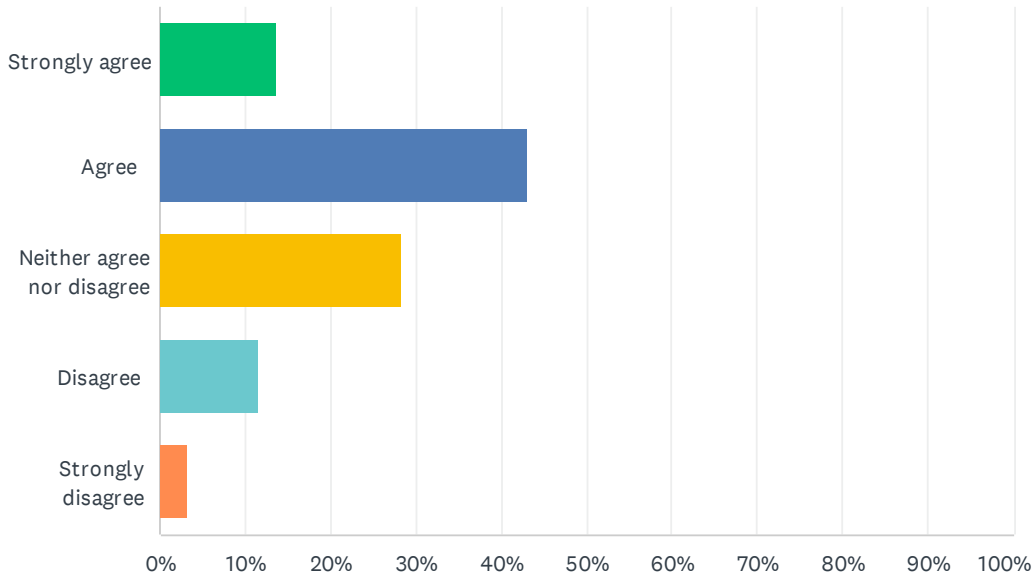
Answered: 189 Skipped: 10



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly agree	7.41%	14
Agree	34.92%	66
Neither agree nor disagree	39.68%	75
Disagree	11.64%	22
Strongly disagree	6.35%	12
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>189</b>

## Q16 I love Gardner and encourage others to move to the city.

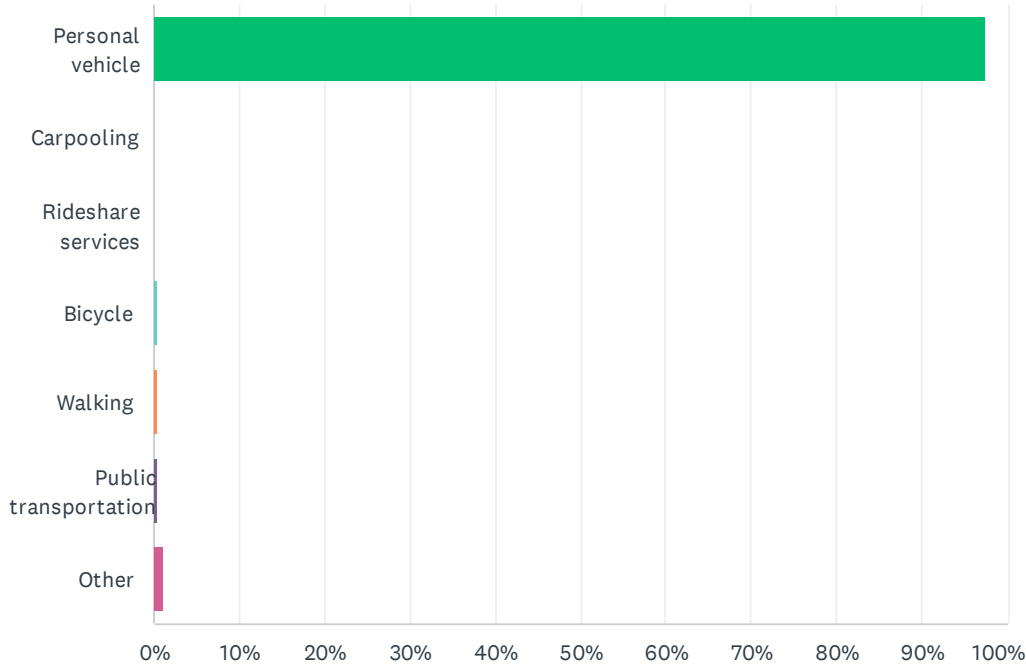
Answered: 190 Skipped: 9



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly agree	13.68%	26
Agree	43.16%	82
Neither agree nor disagree	28.42%	54
Disagree	11.58%	22
Strongly disagree	3.16%	6
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>190</b>

## Q17 How do you primarily get around to access work, food, and recreational activities?

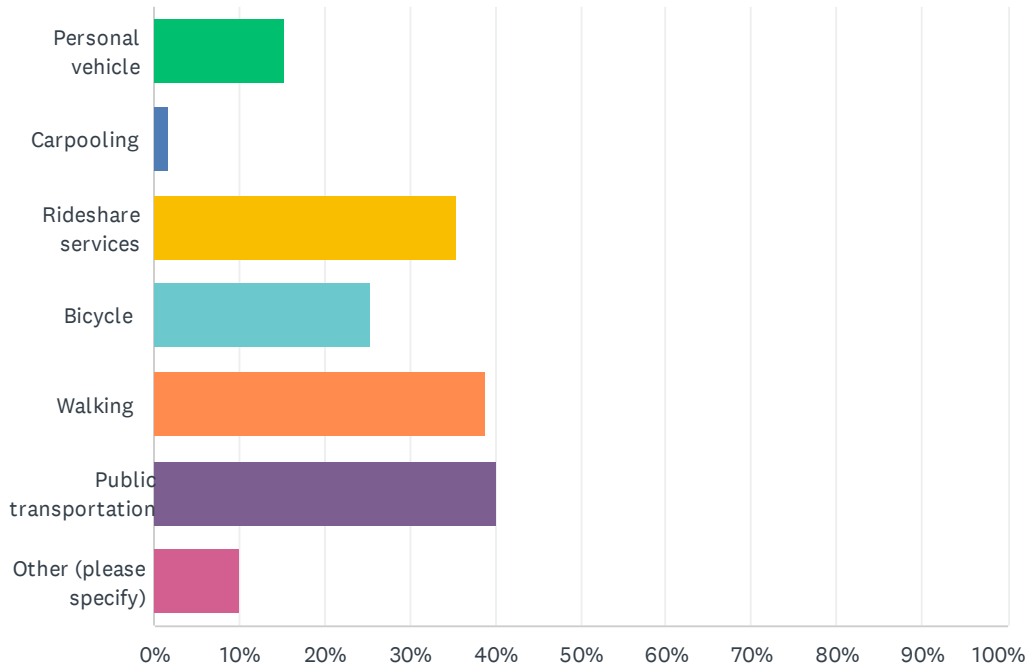
Answered: 189 Skipped: 10



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Personal vehicle	97.35%	184
Carpooling	0.00%	0
Rideshare services	0.00%	0
Bicycle	0.53%	1
Walking	0.53%	1
Public transportation	0.53%	1
Other	1.06%	2
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>189</b>

## Q18 What types of transportation would you like to see more of in the city?

Answered: 170 Skipped: 29



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Personal vehicle	15.29% 26
Carpooling	1.76% 3
Rideshare services	35.29% 60
Bicycle	25.29% 43
Walking	38.82% 66
Public transportation	40.00% 68
Other (please specify)	10.00% 17
Total Respondents: 170	

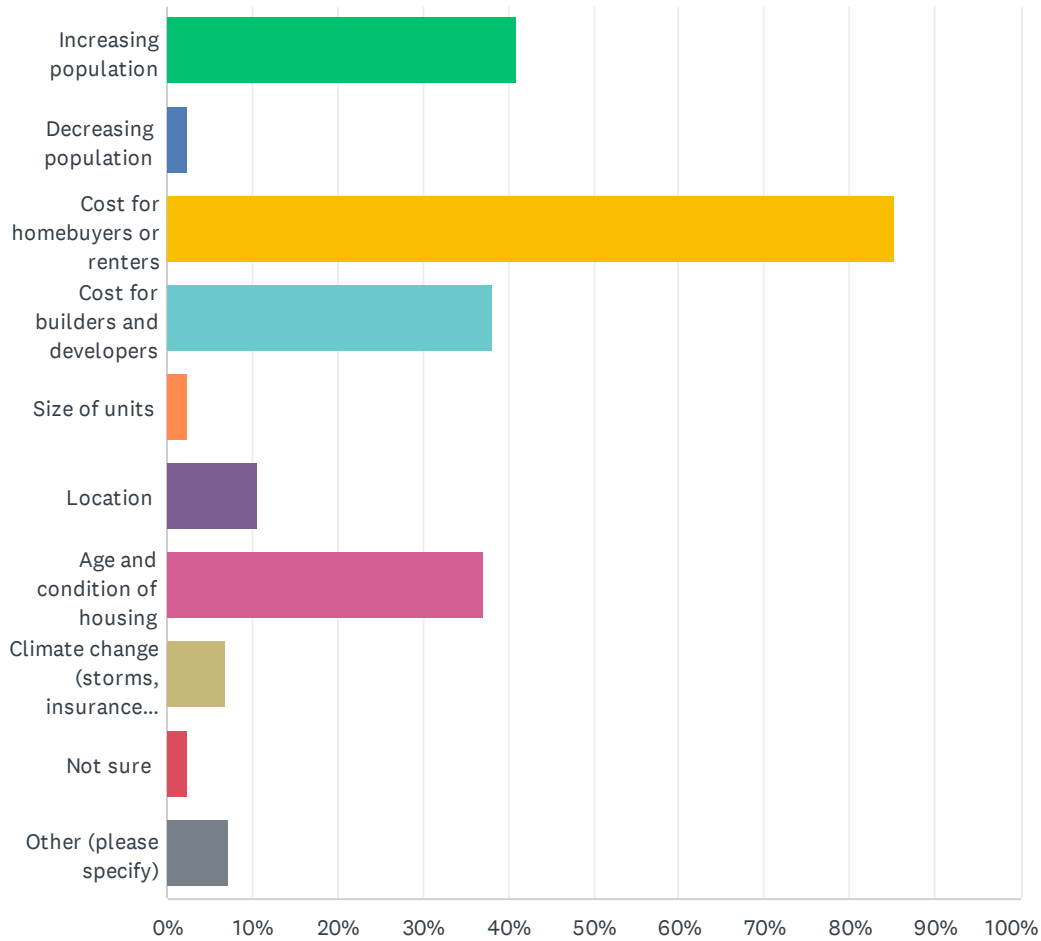
#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	Cab	5/23/2025 6:44 AM
2	One contiguous greenway with a trail running through it, east to west or preferably North to South.	5/22/2025 4:19 PM
3	Elderly transportation	5/21/2025 4:00 PM
4	Train	5/20/2025 3:06 PM
5	Disabled community member transportation services	5/20/2025 9:16 AM
6	None	5/19/2025 9:52 PM

## Gardner Master Plan Community Survey

7	I think it would be interesting if you brought back the trolley	5/19/2025 9:25 PM
8	Taxi service - unbelievable a city of this size doesn't have one. For many, Uber/Lyft is not an option	5/19/2025 7:42 PM
9	Trains	5/19/2025 3:45 PM
10	Train service	5/19/2025 2:55 PM
11	None	5/19/2025 2:31 PM
12	a combination-public train stations-more public transportation-bicycle lane delineated-	5/19/2025 12:39 PM
13	Taxi	5/9/2025 10:04 PM
14	Commuter rail to Boston	5/8/2025 6:18 AM
15	Taxi service	5/7/2025 7:17 PM
16	Uber	5/7/2025 7:15 PM
17	Safe sidewalks, re-install sidewalks that have been removed over the years, increase overall walkability in and around downtown	5/7/2025 1:13 PM

### Q19 What do you think will most affect housing in Gardner over the next ten years? Please choose up to three.

Answered: 178 Skipped: 21



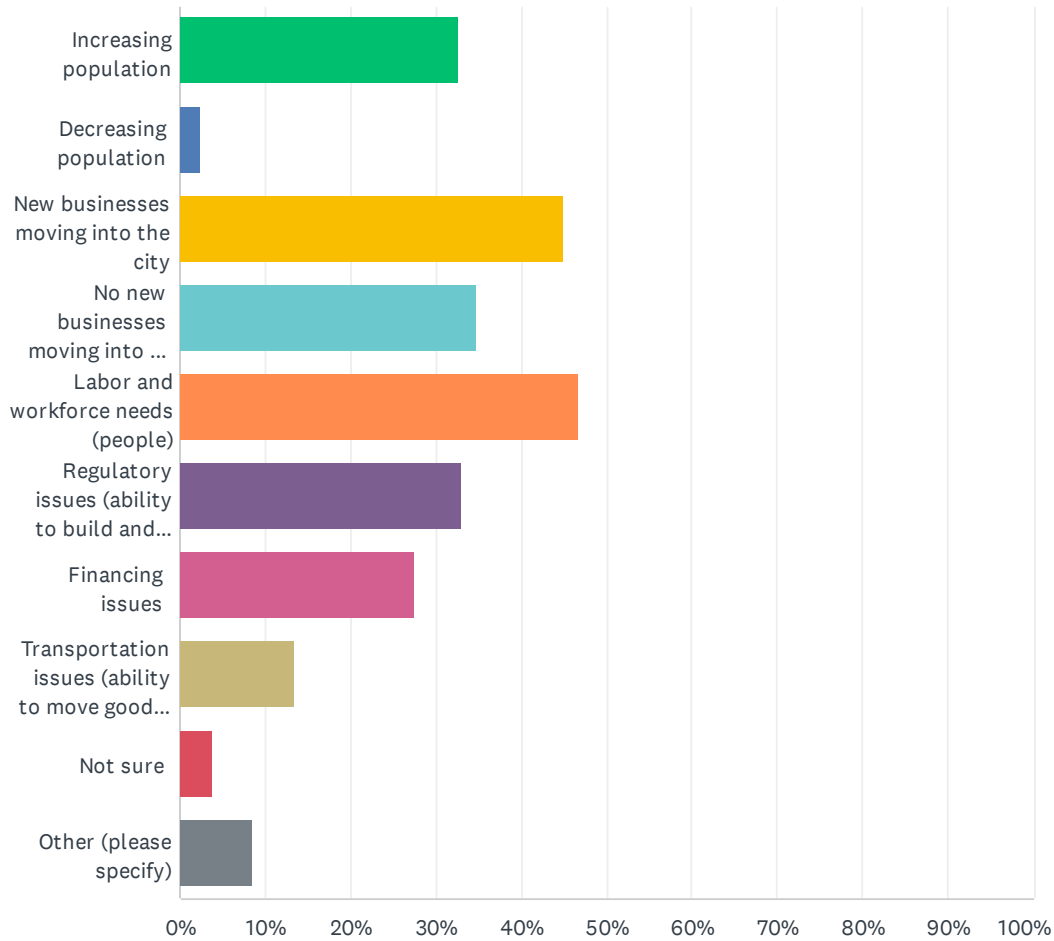
## Gardner Master Plan Community Survey

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Increasing population	41.01%	73
Decreasing population	2.25%	4
Cost for homebuyers or renters	85.39%	152
Cost for builders and developers	38.20%	68
Size of units	2.25%	4
Location	10.67%	19
Age and condition of housing	37.08%	66
Climate change (storms, insurance costs)	6.74%	12
Not sure	2.25%	4
Other (please specify)	7.30%	13
Total Respondents: 178		

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	Taxes	5/26/2025 9:16 AM
2	Too much regulation, uncooperative inspectional services/permitting officials	5/22/2025 8:54 PM
3	Illegal aliens	5/22/2025 5:42 PM
4	Venture Capital firms buying up residential properties	5/22/2025 10:13 AM
5	Taxes	5/20/2025 3:12 PM
6	Ease of regulations to allow future expansion from inspectional authorities.	5/20/2025 8:23 AM
7	More section 8 housing for disabled people either mentally or physically	5/19/2025 9:28 PM
8	Skyrocketing property taxes on way too high evaluation for price of a house	5/19/2025 7:47 PM
9	Lack of apartment construction is an issue, lack of supply	5/8/2025 11:34 AM
10	Increasing costs of taxes & property upkeep.	5/7/2025 7:17 PM
11	Many run down homes make neighborhoods less attractive to buyers	5/7/2025 1:13 PM
12	Illegals getting top priority over tax payers.	5/7/2025 1:13 PM
13	People moving to Gardner from east of 495	5/6/2025 12:14 PM

## Q20 What do you think will most affect the economic development of Gardner over the next ten years? Please choose up to three.

Answered: 178 Skipped: 21



## Gardner Master Plan Community Survey

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Increasing population	32.58%	58
Decreasing population	2.25%	4
New businesses moving into the city	44.94%	80
No new businesses moving into the city	34.83%	62
Labor and workforce needs (people)	46.63%	83
Regulatory issues (ability to build and open new businesses)	33.15%	59
Financing issues	27.53%	49
Transportation issues (ability to move goods and people)	13.48%	24
Not sure	3.93%	7
Other (please specify)	8.43%	15
Total Respondents: 178		

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	Would love to see more workshops with easy language to encourage new aspiring business owners.	5/24/2025 10:24 AM
2	Items to consider: 1) The quality, size, education level, and the areas of expertise of the regional workforce in the greater Gardner area. 2) A highly rated and soundly managed education system. 3) The types of new business proposed for the city. 4) Potential environmental and economic impacts of proposed businesses. 5) The attitude of the community toward the proposed new businesses.	5/22/2025 4:54 PM
3	Transparency	5/22/2025 1:36 PM
4	We have many great small businesses but it would be nice to see larger businesses move into the area	5/22/2025 1:11 PM
5	Lack of good paying jobs	5/20/2025 7:01 PM
6	Inability of Mayor and Councilers to respond. Taxes and roads	5/20/2025 3:12 PM
7	Low income residents and renters are not tax contributors to our city.	5/20/2025 1:09 PM
8	Very high housing costs - need affordable housing constructed. Just market rental units isn't going to work.	5/20/2025 7:37 AM
9	People wanting to work for the wages offered	5/19/2025 9:00 PM
10	Diversity of ownership. All the eggs in one basket with Candor ain't a great plan. Allowing the water to potentially be poisoned by the proposed landfill expansion is the dumbest  move economically. If that hits the water, no one will want to move here. And if it does, by the time it's found it will already be too late.	5/19/2025 3:35 PM
11	Taxes! Control local spending better.	5/19/2025 2:33 PM
12	The City has to increase its median income base. If it continues to focus on low income and low middle income housing, there will be limited income to support business in Gardner. Housing stock does not support professional business in the City such as the Hospital. The businesses that have come into Gardner over the last five years have either closed, or cater to low income populations further driving persons with disposable income out of the City to look for shopping, restaurants, etc.	5/9/2025 7:23 AM
13	The capacity of our town to support new businesses	5/8/2025 6:18 AM
14	Ability of local government to move at speed of business.	5/7/2025 10:39 PM

# Gardner Master Plan Community Survey

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15

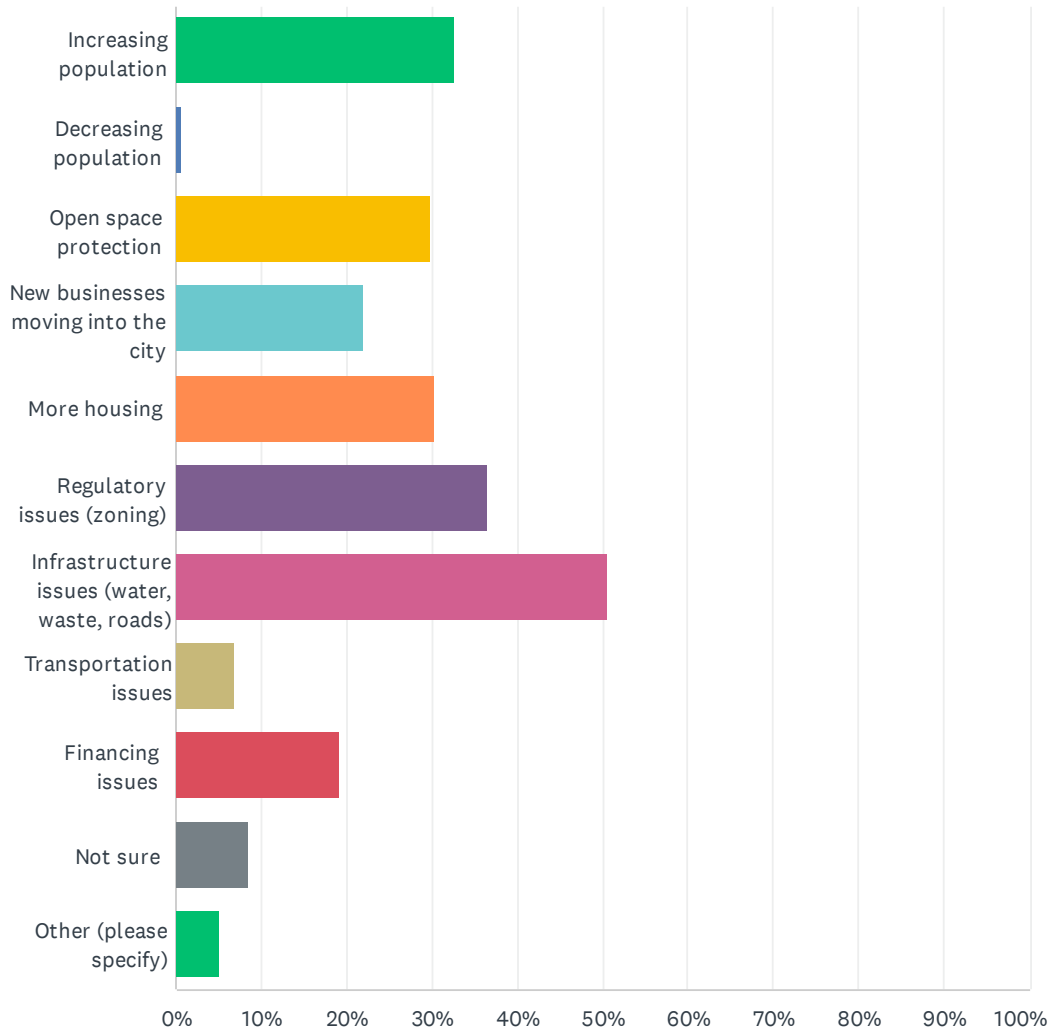
Having Mayor Nikolson in office will continue to destroy Gardner.

5/7/2025 1:13 PM

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### Q21 What do you think will most affect how land is used in Gardner over the next ten years? Please choose up to three.

Answered: 178 Skipped: 21



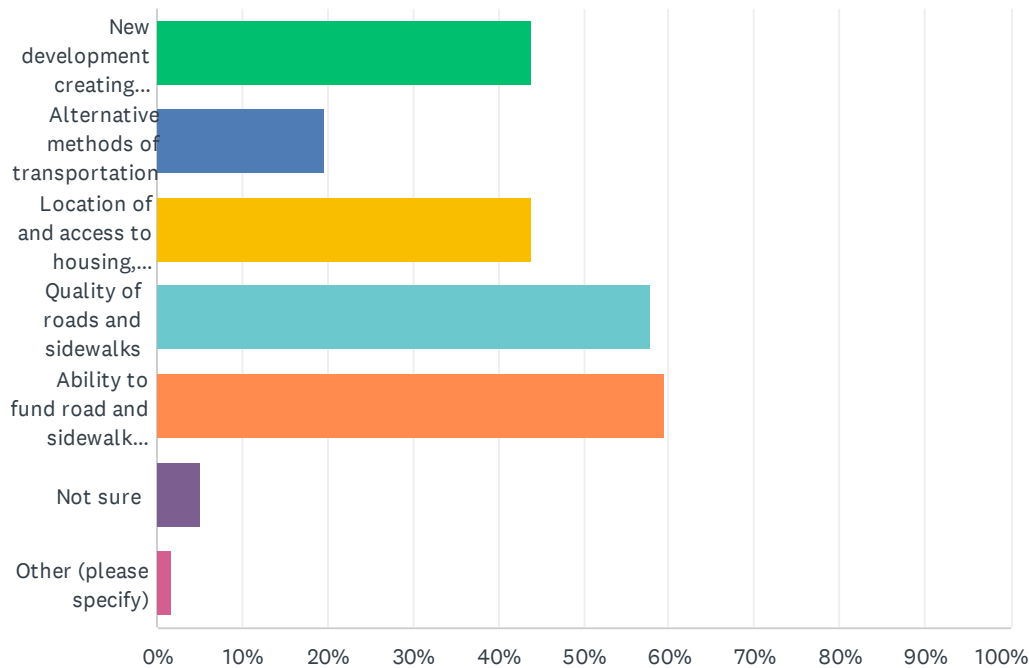
## Gardner Master Plan Community Survey

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Increasing population	32.58%	58
Decreasing population	0.56%	1
Open space protection	29.78%	53
New businesses moving into the city	21.91%	39
More housing	30.34%	54
Regulatory issues (zoning)	36.52%	65
Infrastructure issues (water, waste, roads)	50.56%	90
Transportation issues	6.74%	12
Financing issues	19.10%	34
Not sure	8.43%	15
Other (please specify)	5.06%	9
Total Respondents: 178		

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	Question is to broad and unclear	5/24/2025 10:24 AM
2	Not certain if current zoning will meet the future needs and desires of the community.	5/22/2025 4:54 PM
3	DPH, DPW, BOH all making short sighted decisions	5/22/2025 10:13 AM
4	Negative attitudes by many residents	5/20/2025 7:01 PM
5	If our politicians sell us out and don't protect the land we have we will be in trouble.	5/20/2025 1:09 PM
6	Drive time to Boston is right at the edge of most people's pain points vs. cost of ownership.	5/19/2025 3:35 PM
7	The City has to continue to protect and preserve existing open space and responsibly address blighted structures. For example old municipal buildings located adjacent to park land or open space, should be torn down to allow further development of open space/parks. Any focus on alternative energy production such as solar, should also focus on utilizing existing structures and not clear cutting of wooded lands.	5/9/2025 7:23 AM
8	Keep your hands off our woods and watersheds. If I wanted to live in a concrete jungle, I'd move to one.	5/7/2025 5:52 PM
9	We need to be conservative on building new housing/apartments	5/6/2025 12:14 PM

## Q22 What do you think will most affect transportation in Gardner over the next ten years? Please choose up to three.

Answered: 178 Skipped: 21

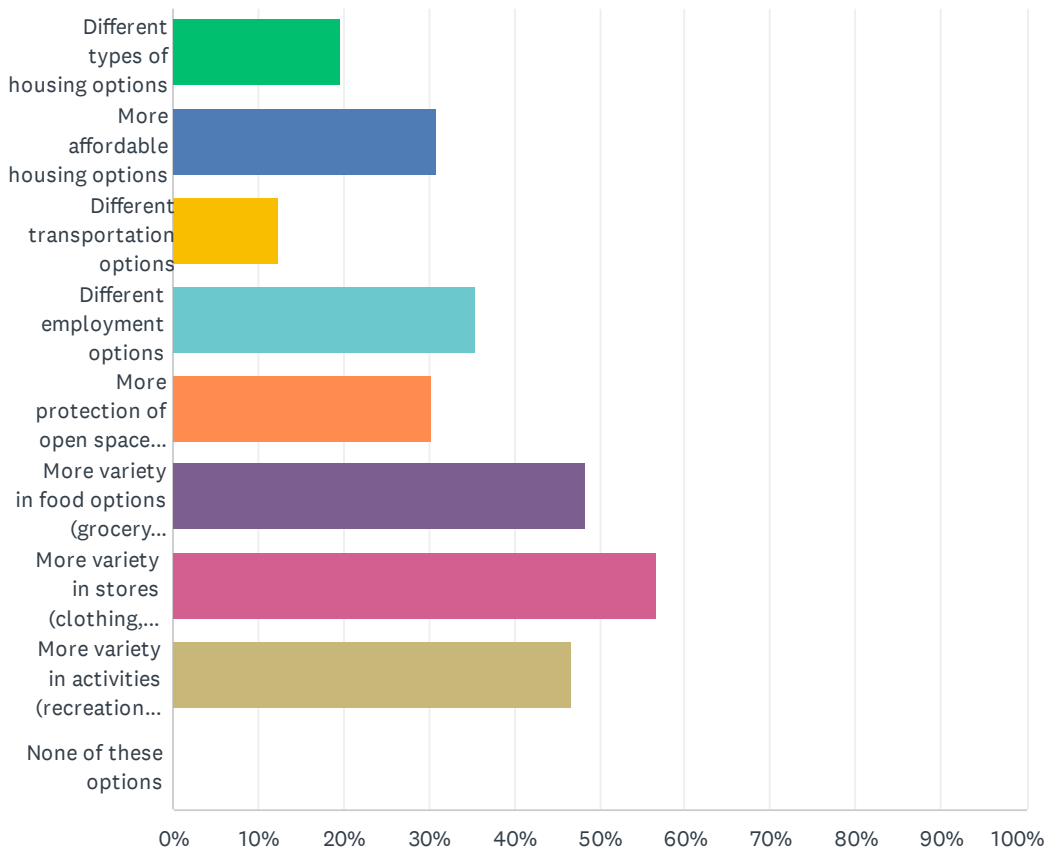


ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
New development creating traffic	43.82%	78
Alternative methods of transportation	19.66%	35
Location of and access to housing, employment, and services	43.82%	78
Quality of roads and sidewalks	57.87%	103
Ability to fund road and sidewalk improvements	59.55%	106
Not sure	5.06%	9
Other (please specify)	1.69%	3
Total Respondents: 178		

#	OTHER (PLEASE SPECIFY)	DATE
1	Lack of public transportation, need for commuter rail extension, route 2 needs widening	5/22/2025 8:54 PM
2	Hopefully, businesses realize for many jobs people can work fully remotely with no need to commute	5/19/2025 7:47 PM
3	Greater modal shift to bikes and transit through better infrastructure especially for bikes is needed! A commuter rail stop would help	5/8/2025 11:34 AM

## Q23 What would you like to see more of in Gardner? Please choose up to three.

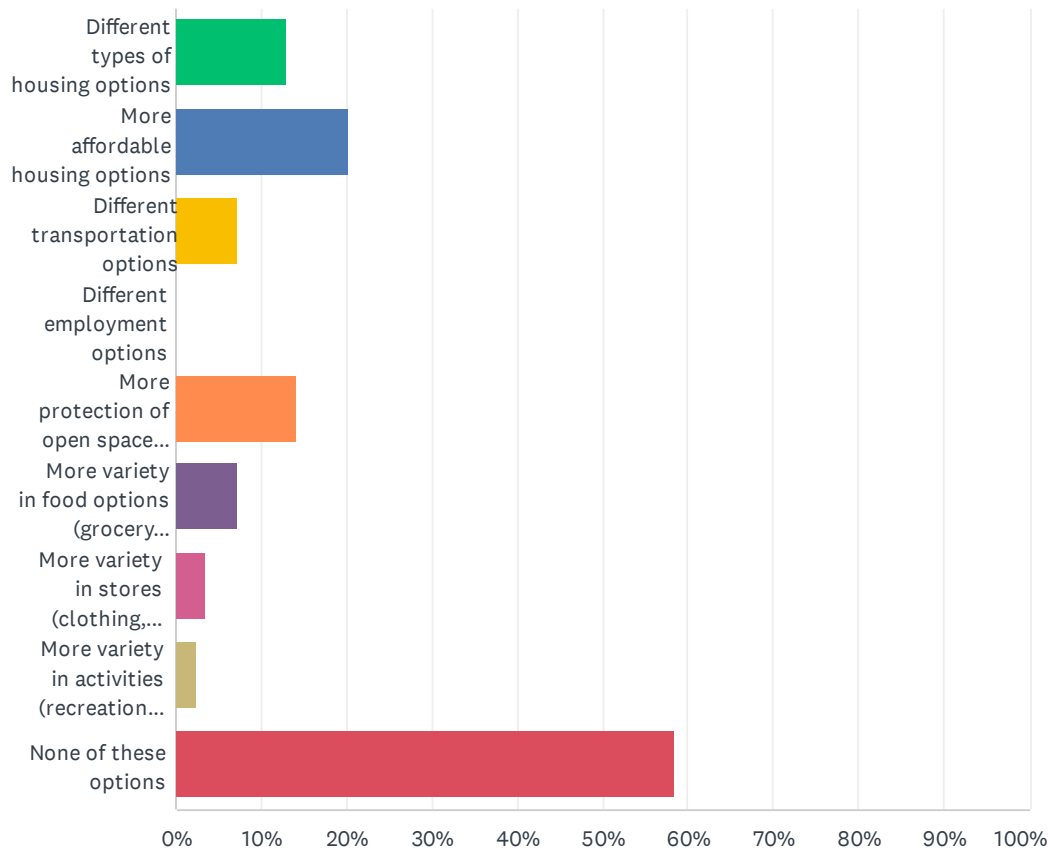
Answered: 178 Skipped: 21



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Different types of housing options	19.66%	35
More affordable housing options	30.90%	55
Different transportation options	12.36%	22
Different employment options	35.39%	63
More protection of open space lands	30.34%	54
More variety in food options (grocery stores, restaurants)	48.31%	86
More variety in stores (clothing, basic needs, speciality goods)	56.74%	101
More variety in activities (recreation areas, events, places to hang out)	46.63%	83
None of these options	0.00%	0
Total Respondents: 178		

## Q24 What do you not want to see more of in Gardner? Please choose up to three.

Answered: 178 Skipped: 21



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Different types of housing options	12.92%	23
More affordable housing options	20.22%	36
Different transportation options	7.30%	13
Different employment options	0.00%	0
More protection of open space lands	14.04%	25
More variety in food options (grocery stores, restaurants)	7.30%	13
More variety in stores (clothing, basic needs, speciality goods)	3.37%	6
More variety in activities (recreation areas, events, places to hang out)	2.25%	4
None of these options	58.43%	104
Total Respondents: 178		

## Q25 I love that Gardner...

Answered: 112 Skipped: 87

#	RESPONSES	DATE
1	is a walkable city. Has a great library, hospital, college.	6/7/2025 9:26 PM
2	Is a small City	5/27/2025 8:18 AM
3	Is bringing in new businesses Trying to get roads done	5/27/2025 7:19 AM
4	Is an affordable place to live.	5/26/2025 11:50 AM
5	Has easy access to highways	5/26/2025 7:43 AM
6	Small city with everything I need	5/25/2025 5:53 PM
7	feels safe	5/24/2025 4:21 PM
8	Has small feel and none of that big city noise pollution and traffic.	5/24/2025 10:28 AM
9	Is centrally located and is a city, with city amenities, but still feels like a smaller rural ish town.	5/24/2025 7:22 AM
10	invests in its children. We have an awesome rec program, several city sports leagues run by volunteers, our music program is phenomenal and we have several areas in town for children to run around and play and just be kids!	5/23/2025 11:31 PM
11	Has grown and brought in more businesses over the 19 years we have lived here and cleaned up the blight that used to be the downtown area of the city.	5/23/2025 6:52 PM
12	Is so peaceful and easy to get around in	5/23/2025 6:50 AM
13	*Beautiful Historic Homes *Caring Community *Great Elementary School *Great Hospital *Great Golf Course *Nice Bike Path *Easy to get around in town! *Although, Green St, Elm St, Chestnut St needs replacing. *Great community spirit *MWCC DUAL Enrollment opportunities for High School students. *Camp Collier *BSAScout Troop 6 *Dunn State Park *Ice Skating Rink *Love the Community Swimming Pool *Shopping, Restaurants, 24hr CVS although need more clothing stores....	5/22/2025 8:28 PM
14	Has a local hospital, very responsive EMS/Fire/Police, everything offered is easily accessible, cemeteries are well maintained.	5/22/2025 4:22 PM
15	I love that gardner has beautiful places like Dunns or the bike path to enjoy.	5/22/2025 1:40 PM
16	Offers many opportunities & activities for kids . Our area of town is safe & friendly	5/22/2025 1:15 PM
17	Affordable country setting.	5/22/2025 12:20 PM
18	has so many public spaces/parks	5/22/2025 10:52 AM
19	Is a friendly small city	5/22/2025 10:28 AM
20	Is improving, developing the downtown area, and managing the properties that have fallen into disrepair.	5/22/2025 10:20 AM
21	is an hour from lots of places to go which have more interesting options than Gardner has	5/22/2025 10:19 AM
22	Has character, older buildings, is near to places for outdoor activities	5/22/2025 9:32 AM
23	Has so much open land, parks, and trails. It has a small city and small town vibe in various areas. Plus a nice variety of restaurants.	5/22/2025 9:04 AM
24	Is a small city	5/22/2025 8:36 AM
25	25. I love that Gardner has sidewalks. 24. Double negative. I DO NOT want to see __x__ NONE of these, meaning I WANT to see --ALL-- of these. Bad wording in a survey.	5/21/2025 4:45 PM

## Gardner Master Plan Community Survey

26	has open spaces and bicycle and walking trails and grocery and dining options.	5/21/2025 3:23 PM
27	I love that Gardner is a city that honors its history while actively planning for its future. From the vibrant downtown and beautiful parks to the growing support for local businesses and community events, there's a real sense of pride and momentum here. I appreciate that the city is asking residents for input through the Master Plan process—it shows a commitment to making Gardner a place where everyone has a voice and a stake in shaping what comes next.	5/21/2025 9:58 AM
28	Is revitalizing Downtown.	5/21/2025 6:19 AM
29	Is so accessible to Route 2	5/21/2025 4:53 AM
30	No longer has to deal with Mark Hawk	5/20/2025 8:59 PM
31	Very happy here	5/20/2025 7:03 PM
32	Has small town feel	5/20/2025 5:08 PM
33	Is affordable and not a bad place to live	5/20/2025 4:17 PM
34	Exists	5/20/2025 4:09 PM
35	Has a hospital, community college including Theater at the Mount, skating rink, affordable movie theater, library, organized sports , golf course and parks. Love that the high school is opening up opportunities for students connecting to MWCC.	5/20/2025 1:21 PM
36	Has a warm and welcoming feeling.	5/20/2025 1:04 PM
37	is a historical city with lots of manufacturing history with good schools and an overall blue collar town.	5/20/2025 8:29 AM
38	Has a solid Mayor	5/20/2025 7:40 AM
39	?	5/20/2025 7:39 AM
40	Is getting small businesses to come in. We need alternatives to Walmart.	5/20/2025 7:11 AM
41	Is so centrally located and affordable	5/19/2025 10:46 PM
42	Is getting more new businesses	5/19/2025 10:38 PM
43	Is a smaller city	5/19/2025 9:39 PM
44	Is a progressive Democratic town unfortunately over the years that has been changing ever since we've had much more right wing style of stores and or propaganda allowed in our town Think about it ever since we allowed that gun shop to open up in 2019 we've had how many shootings It's absolutely terrifying	5/19/2025 9:32 PM
45	Is affordable for me, purchased my condo long ago so living here is affordable, would hate to be starting now.	5/19/2025 9:05 PM
46	Still feels like a small community	5/19/2025 8:43 PM
47	Is rural	5/19/2025 8:42 PM
48	Still has the small-town atmosphere, where a lot of people know each other and city is quiet overall.	5/19/2025 7:55 PM
49	Supports Veterans and takes pride in the appearance.	5/19/2025 6:38 PM
50	Easy to get around the city. Anywhere I need to go is quick.	5/19/2025 6:28 PM
51	is becoming more like it was when I was a child - new restaurants and businesses and a nicer looking downtown.	5/19/2025 6:27 PM
52	Is a small community.	5/19/2025 6:23 PM
53	Has access to most needs	5/19/2025 5:56 PM
54	I love that Gardner has a library, a museum and monument park concerts. Also, Dunn park is a great place. Great to have a college and a hospital.	5/19/2025 5:54 PM
55	Has a small town feel and has one of everything. Movie theater, skating rink, state park	5/19/2025 5:29 PM

## Gardner Master Plan Community Survey

	community college, hospital, golf course example	
56	Golf Course	5/19/2025 5:24 PM
57	Is working on revitalization	5/19/2025 5:17 PM
58	Is very welcoming	5/19/2025 4:58 PM
59	Has a mayor who is interested in the opinion of the taxpayers.	5/19/2025 4:42 PM
60	Is invested in its youth and has dedicated, hard working people bringing good recreational opportunities to children. The dual enrollment program and community college is an asset.	5/19/2025 4:38 PM
61	Is where I was born and have lived my entire life.	5/19/2025 4:27 PM
62	Moving forward	5/19/2025 4:07 PM
63	has a great potential for success	5/19/2025 3:38 PM
64	Has bike paths, Dunns and open space. The changes and offerings at the library have been great.	5/19/2025 3:30 PM
65	I love that gardner is a quite simple town, i love that while trying do an overall update they are still keeping to that simple style and not starting to resemble a city	5/19/2025 3:06 PM
66	Has a variety of grocery stores	5/19/2025 3:00 PM
67	Has an amazing library	5/19/2025 3:00 PM
68	Is a beautiful city that seems to care about its people, and that even though we are a small city that we still have public transit.	5/19/2025 2:51 PM
69	Is centrally located	5/19/2025 2:35 PM
70	Has the college, the downtown and hospital while also still having a small town feel	5/19/2025 2:32 PM
71	has so much to offer but feels like a small town.	5/19/2025 2:11 PM
72	is growing, bringing in new development, doing its best to be future facing.	5/19/2025 1:50 PM
73	Has been making significant progress in recent years by bringing in new developers.	5/19/2025 12:55 PM
74	Is a simple community. That keeps a lot of trees around.	5/19/2025 12:46 PM
75	Offers many of the amenities that exist within a big city while still feeling like a small one.	5/19/2025 12:24 PM
76	is a caring community	5/19/2025 8:12 AM
77	Has a big chair	5/16/2025 10:44 AM
78	Isn't huge, isn't overcrowded.	5/16/2025 9:27 AM
79	Has a variety of independently owned small businesses	5/15/2025 3:47 PM
80	Is a good place for families, many opportunities for kids	5/14/2025 2:26 PM
81	has a central location and easy access to surrounding communities and amenities.	5/14/2025 10:39 AM
82	Has ample walking/biking trails, a nice library, and puts on events like the food truck festival and the chair races.	5/13/2025 10:00 AM
83	It is quiet, less crime than other cities, feel safe walking in the city on my walks I always see a few police cars on patrol.	5/10/2025 7:32 PM
84	Is close to Route 2	5/10/2025 7:29 PM
85	Is friendly, kind and caring.	5/9/2025 10:04 PM
86	No answer. There is currently not a lot to love about Gardner. Gardner has an identity crisis that has only worsened over the last five years. Redevelopment efforts that began have stalled or stopped altogether further increasing blight, and the current administration lacks a cohesive, economically productive vision for the City.	5/9/2025 7:23 AM
87	Is open and is growing in new business, maybe we need a mall and activities for fun and for	5/9/2025 12:22 AM

## Gardner Master Plan Community Survey

	families. Maybe bring a fair with rides	
88	has a large downtown core with a healthy amount of parking.	5/8/2025 11:34 AM
89	Is expanding the Mart services but still long way to go	5/8/2025 10:38 AM
90	Has a small town feel	5/8/2025 8:21 AM
91	Is small but has everything I need	5/8/2025 6:18 AM
92	Has people that care about the community.	5/7/2025 10:39 PM
93	Is affordable	5/7/2025 10:03 PM
94	Is a clean city, caring for those in need by having the resources	5/7/2025 8:52 PM
95	Is a small community	5/7/2025 8:49 PM
96	Is not congested and full of concrete	5/7/2025 7:15 PM
97	Has a dog park	5/7/2025 6:51 PM
98	Is an affordable community for commuting to employment hubs ie. Worcester, Devons, Boston.	5/7/2025 6:22 PM
99	Maintains its somewhat rural feel despite the Mayor's desire to sell our watershed lands to horsetrack dirtbags who lavished him with campaign contributions.	5/7/2025 5:52 PM
100	Has a strong rec program for younger children, that is low-cost. Dan Forte and his staff are so beneficial to the city!	5/7/2025 4:35 PM
101	Is moving forward, wants to grow and cares about the community.	5/7/2025 3:58 PM
102	Is affordable and has easy access to stores, healthcare, and outdoor recreation.	5/7/2025 2:59 PM
103	Quite and affordable	5/7/2025 2:30 PM
104	Is a good place to raise your family, low crime	5/7/2025 1:53 PM
105	Is small and walkable downtown. And has a great bus system for non drivers.	5/7/2025 1:15 PM
106	Retains such a strong community feel where there is support and optimism for the future.	5/7/2025 1:13 PM
107	Is quiet	5/7/2025 1:13 PM
108	Has a community that cares	5/7/2025 1:00 PM
109	Is centrally located.	5/7/2025 12:47 PM
110	...is not overly built up and I would hate to that happen.	5/6/2025 12:14 PM
111	Has a well organized and competent city government.	5/6/2025 11:58 AM
112	has a great community of people	5/5/2025 10:45 AM

## Q26 I wish Gardner had more...

Answered: 114 Skipped: 85

#	RESPONSES	DATE
1	interesting things to do and to shop at	6/7/2025 9:26 PM
2	Restaurants	5/27/2025 8:18 AM
3	Senior housing options Senior community housing	5/27/2025 7:19 AM
4	Affordable spaces for small businesses to open up.	5/26/2025 11:50 AM
5	Restaurants and less strict zoning	5/26/2025 7:43 AM
6	Shopping, restaurants	5/25/2025 5:53 PM
7	Stores and dining	5/24/2025 4:21 PM
8	Affordable activities that encourage movement and are exciting for our youth and teens.	5/24/2025 10:28 AM
9	Options for toddlers to play safely. Also I wish we had better communication - accurate town website would be a great start!!	5/24/2025 7:22 AM
10	resources so that we could double our workforce within the school system. Why does the Elementary School have so many resources for the younger kids but once they leave for the Middle and High school they are put in classrooms with only 1 teacher? So many times kids are acting up because of lack of supervision.	5/23/2025 11:31 PM
11	manufacturing businesses that could provide skilled labor jobs and increased business tax revenue	5/23/2025 6:52 PM
12	Affordable housing for all	5/23/2025 6:50 AM
13	Bakery Clothing Stores Cafe Better Playgrounds Splash Park for kids	5/22/2025 8:28 PM
14	More recreational options for people of all ages.	5/22/2025 5:10 PM
15	Activities for teens and families, clean swimming areas, clean drinking water, pot-hole free roads.	5/22/2025 4:22 PM
16	People who worked.	5/22/2025 1:40 PM
17	Management & upkeep of things such as parks, playgrounds, new fields - they are great but upkeep needs to be planned	5/22/2025 1:15 PM
18	Employment, more to do.	5/22/2025 12:20 PM
19	restaurants	5/22/2025 10:52 AM
20	Green Space/ Canopy Coverage	5/22/2025 10:28 AM
21	Sit-down restaurants: The options we have are good, but it would be nice to see a few more—especially if they are locally owned and not chain restaurants. I would also like to see more variety in restaurant choices; more ethnic food options would be a welcome addition.	5/22/2025 10:20 AM
22	creative places, third places, fun activities not centered around children or public health, and more city councilors/mayor/city workers who have sustainable, creative, and healthy visions for the future. also better playgrounds that aren't just plastic and painted metal. More stimulating playgrounds like Up Down playground use to be	5/22/2025 10:19 AM
23	Sidewalks, bike lanes, and upkeep of existing infrastructure.	5/22/2025 9:32 AM
24	a Market Basket and larger movie theater screens.	5/22/2025 9:04 AM
25	Jobs	5/22/2025 8:36 AM

## Gardner Master Plan Community Survey

26	1.) buses on weekends and evenings. 2.) more frequent buses to/from the Wachusett railroad station and TO Winchendon/Fitchburg/Leominster/Athol	5/21/2025 4:45 PM
27	I wish Gardner had more opportunities for youth and families—like affordable after-school programs, community events, and indoor recreational spaces for all ages. It would also be great to see more diverse dining options, arts and cultural events, and a strong focus on developing top-level schools that will attract new families and help current residents feel confident in the future of their children’s education.	5/21/2025 9:58 AM
28	Industry	5/21/2025 6:19 AM
29	Clothing/Shoe stores, Chain restaurants, entertainment options (indoor theater for plays, comedy, concerts)	5/21/2025 4:53 AM
30	Integrity in the City Council	5/20/2025 8:59 PM
31	Shopping options	5/20/2025 7:03 PM
32	Open space and conservation land	5/20/2025 4:17 PM
33	Restaurants	5/20/2025 4:09 PM
34	More politicians that were involved in the schools and showed concern about the atrocious behaviors that are happening in the Middle School and Elementary school. Blue collar or any employment opportunities in the city.	5/20/2025 1:21 PM
35	Stores in or near Gardner	5/20/2025 1:04 PM
36	manufacturing. Manufacturing is the key to creating a tax base to ease the burden off the residents themselves. The Hospital and the College pay no tax.	5/20/2025 8:29 AM
37	Nonprofit funding	5/20/2025 7:40 AM
38	Drinkable water. My water eats thru pipes and metal. I will not even give it to my pets. Cost me \$\$\$\$ in repairs to my boiler over the years. Also walkable side walks and roads that don't pop your tires. We pay high property taxes and high water bills and get nothing to show for it. Awful.	5/20/2025 7:39 AM
39	Family run restaurants. A nice seafood restaurant like Pete and Henry's would be great.	5/20/2025 7:11 AM
40	More affordable rental properties and recreation	5/20/2025 2:22 AM
41	Actual businesses	5/19/2025 10:46 PM
42	Pet supply stores (Petco/PetSmart), a market basket	5/19/2025 10:38 PM
43	Parking downtown	5/19/2025 9:39 PM
44	Security areas like booths where you can directly call the Police issues happening, cause not everybody's gonna have their cell phone on them. We have to be naïve to think that people are going to carry their cell phones all the time elderly don't do that. Some children don't even have cell phones So like a booth area set up to call 911 when you need it	5/19/2025 9:32 PM
45	Options for shopping, Marshalls, TJ Maxx, something along the lines like that.	5/19/2025 9:05 PM
46	Food options that aren't Chinese, pizza, or Dunkins.	5/19/2025 8:43 PM
47	Market basket , cheaper property tax	5/19/2025 8:42 PM
48	Restaurants	5/19/2025 8:32 PM
49	Sit-down restaurants that are not pizza or chinese places that are open for lunch and dinner. There are WAY too many restaurants open for just breakfast/lunch, which is useless to most of the working population.	5/19/2025 7:55 PM
50	Industries, jobs that pay people to be able to afford housing and home ownership.	5/19/2025 6:28 PM
51	opportunities for young children to connect; also, better playground equipment and a new splash pad.	5/19/2025 6:27 PM
52	Recreational things to do	5/19/2025 6:23 PM
53	Restaurant choices	5/19/2025 5:56 PM

## Gardner Master Plan Community Survey

54	Stores like TJ Max, paper store and cheaper gas stations, like BJ's.	5/19/2025 5:54 PM
55	More bike paths!!! Public transportation to Logan airport or to a shuttle that goes regularly to Logan airport.	5/19/2025 5:29 PM
56	Restaurants, pub style places	5/19/2025 5:17 PM
57	Stores	5/19/2025 4:58 PM
58	CONDOS AND TOWNHOUSES	5/19/2025 4:42 PM
59	Dining/shopping options	5/19/2025 4:38 PM
60	Stores and places to eat	5/19/2025 4:27 PM
61	We should have allowed the race track	5/19/2025 4:07 PM
62	Trees in the downtown.	5/19/2025 3:38 PM
63	Jobs paying a living wage. A more robust downtown.	5/19/2025 3:30 PM
64	Better/more parking downtown i love all the updates but people will completely avoid going to the stores just due to lack of parking. Me and my husband also wish there was more places indoor and outdoor that activities or play places for kids, most of our playground either need serious updating or the ones in good condition are not age appropriate for all children	5/19/2025 3:06 PM
65	Clothing, gift stores. Ex Marshall's, TJ Maxx, etc.	5/19/2025 3:00 PM
66	Public transportation options to get outside of city	5/19/2025 3:00 PM
67	Buses, bus drivers, better routes, better SIDEWALKS, sidewalks at all in most neighborhoods, better roads. There is no reason why someone riding in a car should literally get whiplash and neck pain because of potholes. And let's talk about the sidewalks, how come only the nice neighborhoods get sidewalks, where everyone has a car and people don't need to walk to the bus stop or walk to a store? What if someone is a wheelchair user or uses mobility aids? The sidewalks in this city are embarrassing at best and a massive ADA violation at worst. And don't even get me started on the fact that no one clears the sidewalks in the winter when it's snowing and icy, and then pedestrians have to walk in the road (like me, I could not walk on ice and snow in a stable way) and then drivers get angry because they think they own the road.	5/19/2025 2:51 PM
68	Shopping and dining opportunities	5/19/2025 2:35 PM
69	Evening activities	5/19/2025 2:32 PM
70	Restaurants, small businesses, and stores.	5/19/2025 2:11 PM
71	options for restaurants, night life, retail.	5/19/2025 1:50 PM
72	Ice Hockey rinks	5/19/2025 1:37 PM
73	Restaurants/cafes/bars social places	5/19/2025 12:55 PM
74	Events, Entertainments, transportation, more affordable housing.	5/19/2025 12:46 PM
75	Parking downtown, gluten free restaurants, high paying job opportunities.	5/19/2025 12:24 PM
76	options for different types of restaurants	5/19/2025 8:12 AM
77	Community Functions	5/16/2025 10:44 AM
78	Parks, green areas, unity between businesses and the people here.	5/16/2025 9:27 AM
79	Vegan options	5/15/2025 3:47 PM
80	Funding for growth; although the state/federal programs have been helpful, there is always room for more.	5/14/2025 2:26 PM
81	more commercial business and industrial base to promote a strong local economy and increase the tax base.	5/14/2025 10:39 AM
82	Variety in ethnic food restaurants. An Indian, Vietnamese, or Mexican food place would be nice.	5/13/2025 10:00 AM

## Gardner Master Plan Community Survey

83	More sidewalks especially on the side of heywood to golf area should also have a sidewalk.	5/10/2025 7:32 PM
84	Diversity and inclusivity	5/10/2025 7:29 PM
85	Restaurants and shops.	5/9/2025 10:04 PM
86	Of a systemic perspective on community development. Gardner cannot attract young professionals to live here as there is no attractive housing, poor dining & shopping options, and a mediocre (at best) school system. It's a chicken and egg question, does Gardner work to attract good paying manufacturing (challenging in the Massachusetts regulatory climate) and professional businesses, or does Gardner focus on creating a bedroom community to support such businesses in the region.	5/9/2025 7:23 AM
87	Activities and restaurants I, there's currently too many pizza shops.	5/9/2025 12:22 AM
88	protected bike lanes, getting around the city on bike is not for the faint of heart.	5/8/2025 11:34 AM
89	Retail clothing stores Better organized events not by the local organizers	5/8/2025 10:38 AM
90	Parking for residents downtown	5/8/2025 8:21 AM
91	dining options and retail stores (TJ Maxx, HomeGoods, Sierra, Lowe's, etc).	5/8/2025 6:35 AM
92	Of a night life	5/8/2025 6:18 AM
93	Entertainment and quality dining options.	5/7/2025 10:39 PM
94	Recreational activities	5/7/2025 10:03 PM
95	Manufacturing, large companies that employ all levels of education	5/7/2025 9:37 PM
96	Red lights	5/7/2025 8:52 PM
97	Political leaders with diverse opinions where healthful debate can occur to choose the best for Gardner. Currently, there is very little dissent with city leadership. City hall needs to be able to accommodate the public by being open late one night. Residents who work out of town cannot make city hall hours to transact business unless the resident takes time off from work. Trash pickup should include quarterly bulky waste pickup or on demand pickup of items either requests and fees paid via website or calling city hall. Better equipment for the DPW.	5/7/2025 8:49 PM
98	Activities, better playground areas, things to do as a family.	5/7/2025 7:17 PM
99	New trees being planted... European style bakeries...Trader Joes Whole Foods	5/7/2025 7:15 PM
100	Restaurants, clothing stores, employment	5/7/2025 6:51 PM
101	Local employment opportunities, such as manufacturing, and biotech.	5/7/2025 6:22 PM
102	Teen and adult entertainment options. My kids love skating during the winter, but there isn't much else for evening outside of movies and bowling. Almost zero adult options for an evening out. Not looking for dive bars!	5/7/2025 4:35 PM
103	I would love for gardner to have more clothing/ retail stores, restaurants, and definitely night life.	5/7/2025 3:58 PM
104	playgrounds, areas for children to play in downtown.	5/7/2025 3:36 PM
105	Restaurants and housing in the downtown area.	5/7/2025 2:59 PM
106	Restaurants and shops	5/7/2025 2:30 PM
107	Affordable housing, with more out of towners moving in people who grew up in gardner can't afford to buy a house	5/7/2025 1:53 PM
108	Accessibility in the various businesses and recreation options. Many exclude wheelchair users.	5/7/2025 1:15 PM
109	Consistently attractive (well-kept) neighborhoods and people who take pride in their property, street, city.	5/7/2025 1:13 PM
110	Politicians who were trusted, Workers to pick up the filth a d trash that's all over our community and a Mayor who isn't a 	5/7/2025 1:13 PM

## Gardner Master Plan Community Survey

111	Shops, stores restaurants	5/7/2025 1:00 PM
112	Stores so no need to always have to go elsewhere or just only have option to order online	5/7/2025 12:47 PM
113	restaurants	5/6/2025 11:58 AM
114	affordable housing	5/5/2025 10:45 AM

## Q27 In ten years I want Gardner to be...

Answered: 107 Skipped: 92

#	RESPONSES	DATE
1	A vibrant affordable city	6/7/2025 9:26 PM
2	Walking friendly for the residents	5/27/2025 8:18 AM
3	Still able to afford my house and taxes or have an option to stay in the city	5/27/2025 7:19 AM
4	More affordable for small businesses.	5/26/2025 11:50 AM
5	Small city living with more amenities	5/25/2025 5:53 PM
6	More diverse	5/24/2025 4:21 PM
7	What it is now but with more exciting attractions and businesses.	5/24/2025 10:28 AM
8	A place I love, and am still proud to tell people I live here. A place with young families, block parties, and a lot of diversity.	5/24/2025 7:22 AM
9	A place where when people hear about us they instantly want to move here. I want all our downtown storefronts and upper floor apartments to be filled, cleaned up and modernized. I would love for our schools to be ranked in the top 10% of the state.	5/23/2025 11:31 PM
10	A clean, safe, thriving city made up of a majority of single family homes supported by a vastly better school system, and businesses/services to support the needs of the residents.	5/23/2025 6:52 PM
11	A hidden gem	5/23/2025 6:50 AM
12	*More quaint-with historic signs, road signs, lighting with better roads and side walks. *More litter picked up on a regular basis. Downtown weeded and cleaned up on a ongoing basis. *The Uptown rotary maintained on a regular basis. There's tire marks in the grass that needs to be raked out and seeded. Better historic signage and lights in that area *Get rid of the blight/falling down buildings! *Something done with the Uptown Building next to the rotary. There's gang graffiti on the building. *Better Children's Park-Like Littleton's "Castle in the Tree's". *Downtown store's filled with businesses.	5/22/2025 8:28 PM
13	More like Hudson or a similar town. A vibrant downtown that makes not only residents but outside visitors want to explore	5/22/2025 7:59 PM
14	A desired community with with a highly rated, well managed, and effective K - 12 educational system.	5/22/2025 5:10 PM
15	Well maintained.	5/22/2025 4:22 PM
16	A place a pride instead of a place for drugs.	5/22/2025 1:40 PM
17	I'd prefer less transient population, more people truly invested in growing the cityv	5/22/2025 1:15 PM
18	More attractive to higher wage earners & to diversied groups.	5/22/2025 12:20 PM
19	as affordable to individuals and families as it is now	5/22/2025 10:52 AM
20	Greener	5/22/2025 10:28 AM
21	A destination City for the surrounding towns with a vibrant downtown full of small shops and restaurants.	5/22/2025 10:20 AM
22	a place for artists and small scale manufacturing	5/22/2025 10:19 AM
23	More walkable with more accessible spaces for the community	5/22/2025 9:32 AM
24	Thriving, vibrant, with minimal abandoned/unused buildings and a healthy mix of national chain stores and local businesses.	5/22/2025 9:04 AM

## Gardner Master Plan Community Survey

25	Better run with good road maintenance	5/22/2025 8:36 AM
26	Improve Perry Auditorium: Unfortunately wood flooring was replaced by heated cement-type flooring. The floor punishes anyone standing. Miserable. The acoustics are appalling. An interior architect and acoustic engineer are needed to improve Perry Auditorium. In ten years perhaps we can have a wooden floor and a hall where the public can assemble to properly hear public meetings.	5/21/2025 4:45 PM
27	In ten years, I want Gardner to be a thriving, family-friendly city that blends small-town charm with forward-thinking growth. I envision a revitalized downtown filled with local shops and restaurants, top-ranked schools that attract and retain families, and a strong sense of community where all voices are heard. I hope Gardner becomes a model for how cities can invest in both people and place—preserving its history while embracing innovation and inclusion.	5/21/2025 9:58 AM
28	An area that people live and work in	5/21/2025 6:19 AM
29	More like Leominster	5/21/2025 4:53 AM
30	Clean	5/20/2025 8:59 PM
31	Exciting downtown	5/20/2025 7:03 PM
32	Good schools, good open space and with good local business scene	5/20/2025 4:17 PM
33	Bigger and better economically	5/20/2025 4:09 PM
34	Known for having a good school system, a safe place to live and job opportunities.	5/20/2025 1:21 PM
35	Still warm and welcoming. Better roads. Improved school system	5/20/2025 1:04 PM
36	the place for new manufacturing jobs with housing to accommodate the new workforce. This will create all the infrastructure needed to assist development.	5/20/2025 8:29 AM
37	more affordable housing Clothing stores a market basket food store Fine restaurants	5/20/2025 7:40 AM
38	Affordable and livable.	5/20/2025 7:39 AM
39	Kind and inclusive. I want future generations to have clean water and air.	5/20/2025 7:11 AM
40	A thriving 50 to 60 thousand person artsy up and coming city. If promoted the right way and directed that way...it can happen!	5/19/2025 10:46 PM
41	Still affordable with more new businesses	5/19/2025 10:38 PM
42	A desirable place to love	5/19/2025 9:39 PM
43	A safe space for the younger generation to be without having to worry about being prosecuted or even accosted by people I want to be safe for everybody	5/19/2025 9:32 PM
44	Booming with business, not more housing downtown, but businesses.	5/19/2025 9:05 PM
45	A strong and respected community with fewer drug issues and a higher rated school system.	5/19/2025 8:43 PM
46	Sacs	5/19/2025 8:42 PM
47	A place that has more restaurants and businesses. Seems like it takes so long for any such business to open in town. How did Athol manage to build that whole shopping area off of Rt. 2? What happened to all the stores that were promised around Price Chopper or out near 140/101 interchange? Or open the Victorian as a bed & breakfast?	5/19/2025 7:55 PM
48	Still small city. A city to be proud to live here.	5/19/2025 6:28 PM
49	more walker-friendly. The sidewalk conditions are pretty bad in residential neighborhoods, especially in the winter. I frequently see vehicles parked on sidewalks.	5/19/2025 6:27 PM
50	Thriving community	5/19/2025 6:23 PM
51	Thriving	5/19/2025 5:56 PM
52	A place for people in the surrounding towns to come and spend money.	5/19/2025 5:54 PM
53	Better school system that holds children accountable. Students should not be allowed to pass	5/19/2025 5:29 PM

## Gardner Master Plan Community Survey

	till the 8th grade even if they fail.	
54	More affordable with more employment opportunities	5/19/2025 5:17 PM
55	The place where no one wants to leave	5/19/2025 4:58 PM
56	On the map for something other than 'the chair city.'	5/19/2025 4:42 PM
57	A place that is appealing for my children to settle	5/19/2025 4:38 PM
58	Safer	5/19/2025 4:27 PM
59	A place that has more trees downtown. You can put in all the businesses you like but if it's a heat sink and no tree cover, no one will be walking, no one will be shopping.	5/19/2025 3:38 PM
60	A place where first time homebuyers to want to live because it's safe and our schools are decent.	5/19/2025 3:30 PM
61	A safe place that I can buy a home in for our family to grow with a good education system.	5/19/2025 3:06 PM
62	A big cosmopolitan city	5/19/2025 3:00 PM
63	Travel destination for trails, nature, and history.	5/19/2025 3:00 PM
64	Thriving with lower housing costs and better public transit. I would like to keep public transportation free because as a bus rider for the last 6+ years I have witnessed ridership growing now that the bus is free.	5/19/2025 2:51 PM
65	Less reliant on my taxes	5/19/2025 2:35 PM
66	A close knit community that doesn't complain about progress	5/19/2025 2:32 PM
67	A community that cares about its citizens.	5/19/2025 2:11 PM
68	an MBTA community, a place people who work in larger urban areas want to move to.	5/19/2025 1:50 PM
69	Top 10 places to live in MA	5/19/2025 1:37 PM
70	Add housing for younger people.	5/19/2025 12:55 PM
71	Gateway city.	5/19/2025 12:46 PM
72	A larger city in what it offers while still retaining the feel of community.	5/19/2025 12:24 PM
73	Like downtown Salem, MA around Halloween time	5/16/2025 10:44 AM
74	Cute, fun and quirky. Not a carbon copy of every other small town out here. Funky.	5/16/2025 9:27 AM
75	Thriving with a strong balance between the housing and commercial needs of the residents	5/14/2025 2:26 PM
76	a strong community with a revitalized downtown where vacant and blighted properties are revamped and occupied with a mix of commercial/retail businesses and residential uses. I want Gardner to be a popular destination for residents of surrounding communities to visit and support these businesses.	5/14/2025 10:39 AM
77	Walkable with enough variety downtown to get travelers to stop instead of passing through, and to keep green space around for residents to enjoy.	5/13/2025 10:00 AM
78	Thriving with more support for low income residents, more buisnesses and diversity.	5/10/2025 7:29 PM
79	Be the place it has always been—kind, friendly, caring.	5/9/2025 10:04 PM
80	The community of choice in the region for families to live and raise their children.	5/9/2025 7:23 AM
81	Beautiful and thriving, keep our current mayor.	5/9/2025 12:22 AM
82	more diverse, in people and transportation.	5/8/2025 11:34 AM
83	Calm supportive community	5/8/2025 10:38 AM
84	Thriving	5/8/2025 8:21 AM
85	NOT full of auto parts stores and banks.	5/8/2025 6:35 AM
86	A destination for young families and professionals leaving Boston	5/8/2025 6:18 AM

## Gardner Master Plan Community Survey

87	In better financial condition to maintain public infrastructure and services.	5/7/2025 10:39 PM
88	More fun to explore and live	5/7/2025 10:03 PM
89	Thriving down town, plenty of employment opportunities. City that takes care of parks and open spaces, mows,does general upkeep	5/7/2025 9:37 PM
90	A safe city, low crime	5/7/2025 8:52 PM
91	Have a higher medium income to attract many of the amenities many will desire. Higher income demographic will also improve the visual blight by better maintenance of properties. Increase in senior cottage style housing to allow older residents to sell their family homes and move to smaller and more manageable homes making available their family homes to new owners. To achieve this demographic increase, the quality of the public school system needs to improve. Gardner should come to the realization that neighborhood playgrounds are obsolete. One site should be constructed to include multi-sport fields, community center, tennis and pickleball courts, etc. One facility is easier to maintain and police to ensure the quality and upkeep.	5/7/2025 8:49 PM
92	A better place to raise a family.	5/7/2025 7:17 PM
93	More beautiful... with more diverse trees/plants better roads and fewer eyesores! Tear down dilapidated buildings put back a new indoor pool for all to enjoy	5/7/2025 7:15 PM
94	Better than now	5/7/2025 6:51 PM
95	A place where people can live and work with upward social and economic mobility.	5/7/2025 6:22 PM
96	More progressive. Hub for entertainment, restaurants and recreation.	5/7/2025 4:35 PM
97	Thriving!	5/7/2025 3:58 PM
98	in 10 years, I won't be in Gardner. My plans are to move back to North Carolina.	5/7/2025 3:36 PM
99	An up and coming small city with a thriving downtown area.	5/7/2025 2:59 PM
100	A vibrant with update public transportation options. More investments in encouraging small businesses	5/7/2025 2:30 PM
101	Cleaner streets less looking like a poor city	5/7/2025 1:53 PM
102	Beautified, more affordable and variety of housing for individuals. My mobility impaired friends to be able to go into any business.	5/7/2025 1:15 PM
103	A warm, welcoming bedroom Community with many small businesses and good roads.	5/7/2025 1:13 PM
104	A larger city with improved infrastructure. The roads are awful.	5/7/2025 1:00 PM
105	Affordable for seniors and young families.	5/7/2025 12:47 PM
106	...not much different than it is now.	5/6/2025 12:14 PM
107	A good place to live and work	5/6/2025 11:58 AM

## Q28 My favorite place in Gardner is...

Answered: 109 Skipped: 90

#	RESPONSES	DATE
1	Mt. Wachusett pool	6/7/2025 9:26 PM
2	Golf course	5/27/2025 8:18 AM
3	Victoria coffee Chair city church Gardner elementary school	5/26/2025 11:50 AM
4	The paved walking/biking trails	5/25/2025 5:53 PM
5	Ale house and sawa	5/24/2025 4:21 PM
6	Dunns and I rarely visit due to water pollution.	5/24/2025 10:28 AM
7	Dunn State - it's the safest playground for young kids. The library is on the list too, but it'd be nice if they had the budget to be open longer hours, especially in the summer when it's hot.	5/24/2025 7:22 AM
8	Dunn Park	5/23/2025 11:31 PM
9	Lake Wampanog Wildlife Sanctuary	5/23/2025 6:52 PM
10	Home	5/23/2025 6:50 AM
11	Camp Collier Crystal Lake Area Dunn State Park Big Chair MWCC area	5/22/2025 8:28 PM
12	Downtown. I enjoy the renovations and like the feel of the new park as it makes the town seem nicer and more modern, which I would like.	5/22/2025 7:59 PM
13	I have many: Pearly Brook Res. watershed area, because of the hiking trails and fishing opportunities. Dunn Pond State Park, Wildlife Mgt. area off RT 140. Bike trails. Conservation/Trustee property behind the Gardner landfill. Gardner Museum. Gardner Public Library. I just have to mention Duguay's restaurant. Yum!	5/22/2025 5:10 PM
14	Dunn Park walking trails. I used to also enjoy swimming there but the water quality has diminished.	5/22/2025 4:22 PM
15	The college greens.	5/22/2025 1:40 PM
16	Lake Wampanoag recreation area	5/22/2025 1:15 PM
17	My neighborhood (Fernwood Drive area)	5/22/2025 12:20 PM
18	the dog park	5/22/2025 10:52 AM
19	Bailey Brook	5/22/2025 10:28 AM
20	the Library	5/22/2025 10:20 AM
21	any NCLT property	5/22/2025 10:19 AM
22	Dunns park	5/22/2025 9:32 AM
23	Dunn State Park	5/22/2025 9:04 AM
24	Walking and Biking trails that are safe	5/22/2025 8:36 AM
25	The open spaces, woods, lakes, conservation lands, trails. Please include alternatives to paved trails when developing new hiking opportunities, Thanks!	5/21/2025 4:45 PM
26	Crystal Lake area	5/21/2025 3:23 PM
27	My favorite place in Gardner is Dunn State Park. I love spending time on the Woodland Trail—it's a peaceful, scenic walk that's perfect for all ages. The park's beach and picnic areas are great for relaxing with family, and there are plenty of spots where kids can play and enjoy the outdoors. It's a beautiful, welcoming place that really showcases the natural beauty of Gardner.	5/21/2025 9:58 AM

## Gardner Master Plan Community Survey

28	Gardner has many places, golf course, great restaurants, Library, museum, walking trails.	5/21/2025 6:19 AM
29	Golf course, cinema and any road that doesn't have potholes!	5/21/2025 4:53 AM
30	Home	5/20/2025 8:59 PM
31	My home	5/20/2025 7:03 PM
32	My house	5/20/2025 4:17 PM
33	Ale House	5/20/2025 4:09 PM
34	The movie theater, mwcc, and library.	5/20/2025 1:21 PM
35	Monument Park	5/20/2025 1:04 PM
36	my home.	5/20/2025 8:29 AM
37	Dunn park. However, the pond needs to be dredged.	5/20/2025 7:40 AM
38	The restaurants.	5/20/2025 7:39 AM
39	My home	5/20/2025 7:11 AM
40	WAS the indoor/outdoor pool	5/20/2025 2:22 AM
41	I'm a food and beverage person and I also work in entertainment so I will definitely say SAWA restaurant	5/19/2025 10:46 PM
42	Gardner Ten Pins	5/19/2025 10:38 PM
43	Williams restaurant	5/19/2025 9:39 PM
44	Honestly, the walking paths behind Crystal Lake are absolutely breathtaking and the bird sanctuary	5/19/2025 9:32 PM
45	Safety of my home	5/19/2025 9:05 PM
46	My home	5/19/2025 8:43 PM
47	Home	5/19/2025 8:42 PM
48	Kendall Pond	5/19/2025 8:32 PM
49	William's Restaurant, though it is always SO busy! A few more restaurants like this would help everyone.	5/19/2025 7:55 PM
50	Parks and walking trails.	5/19/2025 6:38 PM
51	Down town	5/19/2025 6:28 PM
52	the section of trail by Crystal Lake.	5/19/2025 6:27 PM
53	Bike path	5/19/2025 6:23 PM
54	Dunns	5/19/2025 5:56 PM
55	My home	5/19/2025 5:54 PM
56	MWCC wellness center and it's pool.	5/19/2025 5:29 PM
57	Golf Course	5/19/2025 5:24 PM
58	My home	5/19/2025 5:17 PM
59	Dunno park	5/19/2025 4:58 PM
60	Restaurants that serve breakfast. They are all great!	5/19/2025 4:42 PM
61	Library, MWCC, Gardner Museum	5/19/2025 4:38 PM
62	My house	5/19/2025 4:27 PM
63	Crystal Lake	5/19/2025 3:38 PM

## Gardner Master Plan Community Survey

64	Dunns and the new park by the Elks.	5/19/2025 3:30 PM
65	Playground on Leo drive, and walking around dunns park	5/19/2025 3:06 PM
66	The parks	5/19/2025 3:00 PM
67	Heywood library	5/19/2025 3:00 PM
68	The Gardner Plaza, looking up at Pearson blvd. There's something so beautiful about seeing the restaurants and gas stations, then seeing the woods in the distance.	5/19/2025 2:51 PM
69	Crystal Lake	5/19/2025 2:35 PM
70	The bike path	5/19/2025 2:32 PM
71	Dunn's park	5/19/2025 2:11 PM
72	Crystal Lake, Dunn Park, Downtown	5/19/2025 1:50 PM
73	Any Pizza place	5/19/2025 1:37 PM
74	The water view next to the cemetery.	5/19/2025 12:46 PM
75	My home. Other than that, I appreciate businesses like Parker House of Pizza that provide a services while still giving back to the community. I think that's what I appreciate the most is the feel of community.	5/19/2025 12:24 PM
76	Price Chopper	5/16/2025 10:44 AM
77	Blue Moon Diner	5/16/2025 9:27 AM
78	Crystal Lake	5/15/2025 3:47 PM
79	Watkins Field	5/14/2025 2:26 PM
80	my home.	5/14/2025 10:39 AM
81	Dunn Pond and Pearly Brook Reservoir.	5/13/2025 10:00 AM
82	Walk path around crystal lake.	5/10/2025 7:32 PM
83	Gardner Ale House and my house	5/10/2025 7:29 PM
84	The Velvet Goose until it closed in January.....now Crystal Lake.	5/9/2025 10:04 PM
85	my back yard.	5/9/2025 7:23 AM
86	The state park and kennys chinese	5/9/2025 12:22 AM
87	the ice rink and bike path.	5/8/2025 11:34 AM
88	Nothing	5/8/2025 10:38 AM
89	Fitness Concepts	5/8/2025 8:21 AM
90	Bike path or Dunn's	5/8/2025 6:18 AM
91	MWCC, bike trail and golf course area.	5/7/2025 10:39 PM
92	Dunns pond	5/7/2025 10:03 PM
93	Home.	5/7/2025 8:49 PM
94	The parks near Crystal lake.	5/7/2025 7:42 PM
95	My home.	5/7/2025 7:17 PM
96	The Mount	5/7/2025 7:15 PM
97	Walking in the woods	5/7/2025 6:51 PM
98	MWCC and surrounding bike paths.	5/7/2025 6:22 PM
99	Skating rink	5/7/2025 4:35 PM
100	My neighborhood and downtown	5/7/2025 3:58 PM

## Gardner Master Plan Community Survey

101	my adorable 175 year old home.	5/7/2025 3:36 PM
102	The North Central Pathway. It's such a great place to go for a run/walk/bike and it's great to see it's continued expansion.	5/7/2025 2:59 PM
103	South gardner	5/7/2025 1:53 PM
104	My daily walk downtown for coffee, by stores, parks, sitting and watching traffic go by..and knowing my disabled adult children have the same opportunity to do so.	5/7/2025 1:15 PM
105	For outdoors - the bike trail. For entertainment - Gardner Cinema. For food - 99 Restaurant or 4 Seasons.	5/7/2025 1:13 PM
106	My home	5/7/2025 1:00 PM
107	The Gardner Museum.	5/7/2025 12:47 PM
108	the Levi Heywood Memorial Library	5/6/2025 11:58 AM
109	Dunn State Park	5/5/2025 10:45 AM