

## **City of Greenfield State of the City – February 27, 2023**

**Mayor Roxann Wedegartner**

Good evening, fellow citizens and City government leaders, our City Councilors and School Committee.

### **INTRODUCTIONS & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

It is my sincere pleasure to be delivering the 2023 State of the City address here tonight to those who are in attendance and those who are tuning in through GCTV. Thank you, GCTV, for making that possible.

Before I start with my remarks on the state of our City, I want to acknowledge many others who have helped us get to where we are today. First, our partners in our Federal delegation, Congressman Jim McGovern, Senator Elizabeth Warren, and Senator Edward Markey, who continuously provide us with their leadership and counsel on important local and national issues from climate change to food insecurity to maintaining our nation's democracy. I want to pause here for a moment of silence to honor one of Western Massachusetts' great Congressional Representatives: Congressman John Olver, who passed away late last week.

As we enter 2023, we have recently elected the historic team of Governor Maura Healey and Lieutenant Governor Kim Driscoll, newly at the helm of our beautiful, productive, and progressive state. It has been my pleasure to know and collaborate with

Lieutenant Governor Driscoll when she was Mayor of Salem, and it will be my honor to work with both Governor Healey and the Lieutenant Governor on behalf of Greenfield in the coming months and years. Next, and most important to our day-to-day existence, let me recognize and thank our extraordinary local Massachusetts delegation, Senator Jo Comerford, Representative Natalie Blais, and Representative Susannah Whipps. Those three women leaders and their capable staffs are always ready to lend an ear and give me quality advice as well as advocacy at the state level. I look forward to working together with you to answer the call to make Greenfield a better city. Finally, our many board and committee volunteers, our workers, teachers, police officers, firefighters, our School Superintendent, and Department Heads continue to address and adapt to the demands, challenges, and requirements of helping me run Greenfield. I want to personally thank and recognize you all for your continued commitment to our students and our city.

I can say with great confidence tonight that we have stayed the course and remain on a path toward progress and success for Greenfield.

## **WHAT WE'VE DONE 2022**

First, it is important to be reminded of how we got to where we are now. At the beginning of 2020, the City of Greenfield was poised for a rebirth and revitalization of its business, manufacturing, and commercial environment. New restaurants were opening and thriving in our compact, walkable downtown area along with recently established entertainment venues, providing art, music, and stage performances. Our industrial park was and still is home to many businesses and advanced manufacturers, most with deep

roots and long-term stability in Greenfield, providing hundreds of higher wage jobs with benefits. We WERE ready to let the world know of our “rurban” – rural + urban -- city at the crossroads of Route 2 and Interstate 91, among the hills and rivers of beautiful Franklin County. Greenfield offers the best of a “rurban” lifestyle for residents and visitors, with its hospital and medical centers; downtown YMCA complex; its community college, GCC; and its transportation center, the John Olver Transit Center, providing bus service to area residents along with daily AMTRAK rail service to New York City and Montreal.

The COVID 19 pandemic changed many things about the City’s growth plans for the short term, all of 2020 and most of 2021, but it did not change the grit, determination and resiliency of our City’s business and government leaders. Throughout those months and all through 2022, along with my executive staff and Community and Economic Development Director, MJ Adams, I put into place as many construction and revitalization programs as possible with the help of state and federal money intended to pump life into our economy and our infrastructure to sustain Greenfield. During that time, the City also broke ground on a new \$20 million library, solidified a location for its new \$21 million fire station, and built a temporary fire station to ensure that we would have continued fire and emergency medical service while the permanent station was being built. Today, construction continues on both the library and the permanent fire station with the library opening in late spring of this year and the fire station opening in early 2024. These projects are a testament to the willingness of Greenfield citizens to fund essential services that serve our city and surrounding communities. And there’s one more significant project that broke ground last year: the long-awaited and much anticipated Skate Park between Chapman and Davis Streets in downtown Greenfield, funded with a combination of state grant money and City capital improvement funding. This project, scheduled to be completed in the early spring of this year is the best of what

it means for our citizens, the State, and the City to work together to realize a dream for our young people and the young-at-heart.

To be clear, we are building a city that is more professional in its daily operations, that can withstand climate change, works to provide housing for people across all age groups and backgrounds, creates opportunities for new economic development, and rebuilds its infrastructure. The adage, “Rome wasn’t built in a day” applies here. Likewise, neither is Greenfield, but we make progress daily. And we will not stop, even when presented with myriad challenges around funding and plain old bureaucratic hoops.

Before we move on to 2023 I want to acknowledge one of last year’s biggest challenges that remains with us for the coming year. I speak now of the civil suit jury finding regarding our Police Chief, Robert Haigh, which is making its way through the state Appeals court as I speak.

Make no mistake, I understand the gravity of the jury’s decision citing racial animus. Hearing those painful words as the basis of the jury award was not only devastating for me, but for the women and men of the Greenfield Police department, and for Chief Haigh. We cannot escape it; we can only move forward. While I believe the City’s police department under Chief Haigh has made great progress in the last several years in its understanding of what it means to achieve and practice racial justice for all of the people of our city, we have more work to do. Last summer, when I requested funding from the City Council to hire independent professionals to examine the internal operations, policies, procedures, and practices of the police department to detect the presence of implicit and systemic racial bias, I had high hopes that we would be much further along in improving our police department and continuing to build trust in it within our community. However, that funding request was rejected by the City Council. Since then, Chief Haigh has made and will continue to make the systemic changes within the department that help it better protect against implicit and unconscious bias. Among those

efforts are upgrading policies and procedures regarding promotions and continuing to recruit new officers with diverse backgrounds, education, and abilities.

Those policies must first be agreed upon among the police department bargaining units, and they are working their way through that process. I am taking steps to bring on new people to our Public Safety Commission and look forward to the near future when we have a full board of five members to assist and advise me on public safety issues. Meanwhile, the current commission membership is working with the police department to offer guidance on changing those and other policies.

## **WHERE WE'RE GOING**

### *Advancing Business Development Along With Housing Development*

We are taking a holistic approach to moving Greenfield forward and achieving progress. Today, the City remains resilient and focused on setting the stage for continued economic development. We do this so that we can grow our tax base for today and for the future. Downtown areas throughout the nation are changing; some have dried up completely, others like ours are focusing on recognizing demographic and business shifts and are embracing that change. We have a robust downtown redevelopment strategy focused on transformational change incorporating available and new housing, new infrastructure improvements, and retail and commercial opportunities. Here is where we merge our economic development, infrastructure, and housing efforts into a cohesive plan.

The recent sale of a downtown anchor building, Wilson's Department Store, is pivotal in that transformation. Working in partnership with The Community Builders, MassDevelopment, and the Franklin Community Cooperative (Green Fields Market), the city invested in and facilitated the acquisition of the property in order to provide 65 new

units of workforce and income-adjusted housing, a new expanded location for the grocery market, and eventual additional retail space on Chapman Street. We continue to remain involved in that project.

The Community and Economic Development Department is working with downtown property owners, where we can, in order to promote upper-story redevelopment for housing and offices, whether it's advising on available grant funding or in introducing property owners to non-profit and state entities that can partner with owners to assist in the investments needed for their projects. Upper story redevelopment is a significant building block in our efforts to create more business development and housing in Greenfield.

In other economic development news, the state and federal government-funded \$7.8 million multi-modal Main Street Improvement program will make our Main Street area safer for vehicles, pedestrians and cyclists. While this project is underway, the City will also be able to upgrade underground utilities, primarily our water and sewer infrastructure. This will save the City money as we will not need to dig up Main Street twice.

Additional grant money is being used to fund a parking management study for our downtown area to give us the data we need to make smart decisions for the future on how we can grow our downtown business and housing sectors while providing adequate parking to meet that growth. Data is our currency of the realm. We used it to successfully manage our pandemic response and we will continue to seek and use it to solve our city's most pressing problems. We do not deal in guess work!

Outside the downtown area, we are focusing our economic development efforts on growing our advanced manufacturing sector to increase opportunities for higher paying

jobs with benefits. We must stop losing business to our neighboring communities; this is how we do it! More planned industrial space is on the way!

We continue to work with the Greenfield Planning Department and the City Council to rezone approximately 40 acres across Route 2A from the I-91 Industrial Park, with easy on/off access to Route 2 and I-91 as additional planned industrial space geared to attracting more advanced manufacturers and sustaining our existing manufacturers who have run out of space in the current industrial park. Although we need additional property for light industry development because most of the remaining developable land at the I-91 Industrial Park is sparse, the City is working on a single, large lot expansion of 88 privately owned acres in the park, which is not under the control of the City or the Greenfield Redevelopment Authority. We are doing this with the assistance of grant money from our partners at MassDevelopment.

#### *More On Housing: A Strategy for Sustainability*

Our housing creation strategy offers a more sustainable future with a primary focus on density within our downtown and surrounding neighborhoods. We have targeted this area because we are short on available land elsewhere for larger single-family residential developments, and because in the long run it uses fewer resources. Denser housing is more environmentally friendly and ultimately, on an acre-by-acre basis, can contribute more to our tax base than single family homes.

Housing in Greenfield must focus on affordability while serving a broad cross section of people with diverse housing needs. It is not a secret that we have many unhoused individuals and families in Greenfield. However, the City cannot afford to provide housing for everyone that needs it on a temporary or permanent basis, so we work with our social service partners to solve some of the housing problems for our homeless population. That's why we are also investing in the recently announced

Clinical & Support Options Wells Street permanent, supportive housing for chronically unhoused individuals. The plan includes 36 **new** housing units and their existing shelter beds will increase from the current 36 to 40, with individuals having access to 24/7 social services that meet the needs of formerly homeless individuals.

Between the Wilson's project and this one, that's 101 new units of housing in the Greenfield downtown area, all on land that's already in use!

*City Finances: Maintaining Financial Stability for Today and the Future*

One of the most pleasant outcomes of a focus on growing our tax base while also revaluing our real estate, as we are mandated to do every five years, is that we were able to lower the tax rate for the second time in a row since I was elected Mayor. ***Our current tax rate is \$19.65, the lowest tax rate since the 2012 fiscal year, and representing the biggest single-year decline in at least two decades!***

By being fiscally responsible and following our prudent municipal financial policies put in place by the City's Finance Department in recent years, we have been able to weather some of the significant pandemic-related financial challenges of the last three years. I do need to acknowledge, however, that I have had the extraordinary, once-in-a-Mayor's lifetime benefit of an unprecedented amount of state and federal COVID relief money to help us through our financial hardships. We fully expect that money to taper off and create a potential gap in funding. All the more reason why we need to continuously seek grants, adhere to our strict policy limit on capital borrowing, and better use technology to receive and manage the City's finances.

We're able to provide the services we provide to the residents of Greenfield because we run on money from a variety of revenue sources, among them real estate taxes and other fees, state aid, general revenue from things like Excise Tax and



local Meals & Entertainment tax, and grants. I can't emphasize enough the importance of that last resource...GRANTS. One of the first things I did was hire a grant writer/manager and establish a solid foundation and practice of seeking and receiving state, federal, and private grants. I like to think of Athena Bradley as a miner, mining gold for Greenfield. Since she's come on board, the City has received more than \$61 MILLION DOLLARS in grants for infrastructure improvements, and other projects and programs in most of our City departments and our schools. That is your tax dollars coming back to you to help us do things we could otherwise not afford.

All of this goes into the mix of how we've been able to increase our stabilization funds, hold the line for now on taxes, and maintain our excellent [DOUBLE A MINUS] AA- bond rating. Because of this, we're able to take advantage of very low interest rates to invest in those projects that make a strong community: public safety, libraries, and infrastructure, all of it within our debt limit for the next several years.

Since I'm talking about investing for the future, let's talk about Greenfield's investment in our schools. As a very wise School Superintendent once told me when I was first serving on the School Committee in the mid-to-late Nineties, and the City was facing a particularly tough budget year: "We're not a factory. We don't make widgets here; we educate children for the future. It's expensive. There aren't any short cuts." What's important to note is that over the years, Greenfield has steadily invested in education, although 2020 and 2021 were challenging. Still, we currently spend more than \$5 MILLION DOLLARS *over* the state requirement for net school spending. We should always be ready to do more while budgeting within our means, but we should also lean on the Commonwealth to make good on its promises under the Student Opportunity Act and next year in the Fair Share Act funding for education. The recent release of the FY24 State Budget numbers suggests that the Healey-Driscoll Administration is making

good on those promises. It remains to be seen if Greenfield will fare better this year than in years past.

I am a member of the School Department's Strategic Planning Task Force, a group of parents, teachers, school administrators, and City government officials who are working with outside consultants on a Strategic Plan. This plan intends to be a roadmap to move our district forward over the next three to five years, because we know that the pandemic not only dramatically affected the educational progress of our students but showed us that we must adapt to new ways of educating them. We are currently in Phase 1 of a two-phase project, a data gathering and analysis effort. Phase 2 will focus on the development of the plan based on that data and then reach out to the community to help in that development. It has been an enlightening process, and I look forward to the opportunity to bring it to the public.

Last fall the School Department received the results of a thorough study from NESDEC, the New England School Development Council, on how we might rethink using our school facilities. Armed with the information from the Strategic Planning process plus the NESDEC study, it is my hope that working with Superintendent DeBarge, we on the School Committee can come up with a realistic, data-driven 5 to 10 Year School District Capital Improvement Plan for making infrastructure, technology, and curriculum investments in our schools to prepare students for working in a world that's rapidly changing socially, environmentally, and economically.

### *City Infrastructure: The Foundation of our City*

Making infrastructure improvements in Greenfield is critical to the City's growth and long-term sustainability. The maintenance of much of our City's infrastructure was deferred for far too long, so we've been determined to reverse that trend. Some of the highlights of the past year have been to replace 4,480 linear feet of sidewalk using

contracted services and DPW workers. We allocate between \$100K and \$200K in our Capital Budget every year to repair and replacement of our sidewalks. This year that number will be augmented with \$607,000 of CDBG funding, making over \$900,000 available for sidewalk repair and replacement.

Among other highlights, using a combination of capital spending, grants, and water/sewer retained earnings, we completed the West Street and Sanderson Streets reconstruction projects including 3,280 feet of sewer and drains and 1,030 feet of water main on West Street along with 3,000 feet of sewer and drain and 2,000 feet of water main on Sanderson Street. The remainder of Sanderson Street from High Street to the ridge will be done this year. We completed the dredging of the Leyden Glen Reservoir, a critical project that is meant to protect and keep our water supply safe. Speaking of water supply, we upgraded 43 water services from curb to main as part of our annual paving program. This is just a partial – a very small part of the infrastructure work we do annually. I cite this work in terms of numbers of feet because every foot, every upgrade has a dollar cost to it. Infrastructure repair and replacement is a priority for the City, and we invest heavily in it using your tax dollars and the assistance of state and federal money.

Elsewhere in our infrastructure, our municipally-owned Internet and cable television provider, continues to serve everyone from single user to large companies to the City and Greenfield Public Schools. They have more than 2000 customers in Greenfield. Using ARPA [American Rescue Plan Act] money from the City, they have continued their buildout. In 2022 they added 346 new customers and are planning to add another 350 in 2023.

## **WHAT'S ON THE HORIZON?**

We have more work to do, more challenges to overcome. I've outlined tonight many of this year's continuing projects in the areas of economic development, housing, and infrastructure. Among the work on the horizon, we'll tackle the challenge of preserving and reviving other iconic, historic landmarks of our downtown area: the First National Bank Building and the Leavitt-Hovey House, otherwise known as the "old library," at 402 Main St. We'll continue to move the Main Street Redesign project to the 50% design phase in preparation for future construction in the coming years. We'll install the City's first state-of-the art outdoor comfort station, a "Portland Loo," at the Chapman/Davis parking lot. We'll complete the Dewatering Project at the Water Pollution Control Facility on Deerfield Street. This project will go a long way toward meeting the costly challenge of removing and handling sludge from our wastewater. We'll continue making interior and exterior upgrades to our Police Station.

We're working hard and we're having many successes and it's all due to the dedication of our City employees who help me run this City daily. This is how government should work. We can accomplish much more when we work together rather than at odds with one another. It's not about "social media gotchas" or personal gain at the expense of progress. It's about doing the work; working together. For you, the residents of Greenfield.

In closing, I'd like to leave you with a quote from Eduardo Paes, a former mayor of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil that motivates me every day as your Mayor. "I strongly believe being mayor is the public post in which you have the greatest opportunity to change people's lives for the better."

Fellow citizens, it is an honor and a privilege to work for you every day as your Mayor. Thank you!