

## STATE OF THE CITY ADDRESS

CITY COUNCIL CHAMBERS

Monday, March 18, 2024

6:00 p.m.

Mayor Gerding welcomed everyone to the State of the City Address and he expressed his excitement to share the many great things that the City is already doing and as well as the City's upcoming plans.

### **Mayor Gerding presented the following State of the City Address:**

#### Housing –

Mayor Gerding stated that housing throughout the City has been a top priority for him coming into his first term as Mayor as he works towards continuing to close the housing gap in Somersworth. He noted that the City Master Plan's Housing Chapter identified that the City needs to build 748 units by the year 2040 in order to fill the housing gap. He listed a number of projects including the Elm Street development that is already in process as well as upcoming plans for the Chinburg Mill Project, National Guard Armory, former Police Station and a development off of High Street. The projects mentioned will create up to 340 units which is an attestation to the City's effort in tackling the housing crisis.

Mayor Gerding shared that the Strafford Regional Planning Commission (SRPC) assisted staff in the development of the Housing Chapter of City's Master Plan and SRPC is also working on submitting a number of potential Zoning Ordinance changes that could help incentive more housing development throughout the Community. The Mayor also established a Housing Task Force Committee to address the housing crisis in Somersworth and are currently discussing Zoning changes and a number of other ideas to increase housing developments.

#### Infrastructure & Public Works –

Mayor Gerding stated that the City Council has made sidewalk and road improvements a top priority over the last few years. He shared plans of the Constitutional Way Complete Streets Project, sidewalk improvements along High Street, West High Street, Maple Street and more, watermain replacement on Main Street, phase II improvements to the Wastewater Treatment Facility, completion of the water meter replacement program, and constructing a new water tower at Noble Pines Park. Additionally, a new mechanic position at Public Works is being introduced in the 2024-2025 budget.

#### Parks & Recreation –

Mayor Gerding shared the Ash Street Park project progress and the plans to begin landscaping this Spring. He listed off improvement plans for the Jules Bisson Park as well as the Conservation Commission efforts place Malley Farm into Conservation and some much-needed trail improvements throughout the parcel of land. Mayor Gerding stated that the City is in the planning stages of improving and expanding the Somersworth Public Library that

*State of the City Address  
Monday March 18, 2024*

would increase accessibility, increase the inventory of books and also relocating the children's room.

#### Economic Development –

Mayor Gerding shared that the City has welcomed 16 new businesses in the year 2023 with many more planning to come, he added that with the road and sidewalk improvements and new developments coming to the City, he expects that more businesses will want to come to Somersworth. He mentioned the sale and redevelopment of the former Police Station in the Downtown; plans for a new permitting software increasing accessibility and streamlining of City services; and the City-wide revaluation in 2024.

#### Arts & Culture –

Mayor Gerding stated that he is happy to announce the chosen art pieces which were determined through the Mayor's Commission on Culture, Ethnicity and the Arts, he added that he will be announcing the artists and their pieces during the City Council meeting tonight at 7:00 p.m. He shared that there are plans for a number of murals to be placed throughout the City, grant and partnership opportunities through the Schools and oral history series of residents and the Community. Mayor Gerding noted the new historic district street signs which resemble the original wooden street signs from many years ago. He commented that the City had recently installed two new State historical markers and we have also been working towards installing a number of local historic markers as well. Lastly, he mentioned that the City's 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary from when it became a parish is in 2029 and he would like to begin working on plans for a City-wide celebration.

#### Public Safety –

Mayor Gerding spoke about the completion of the new Fire Station in 2023, the increase in Community policing efforts, and the replacement of the Police Departments failed air conditioning system. He also shared new purchases including 31 body-worn cameras and new police cruisers for the Police Department, as well as the replacement of 11 self-contained breathing apparatus for the Fire Department. Mayor Gerding noted the City working to hire a new Fire Chief and then a Deputy Fire Chief and the hiring of a new part-time Police Officer.

#### Sustainability –

Mayor Gerding commented that he believes that the City of Somersworth has led the way in many of its sustainability projects. He mentioned the City's approval of their solar project installation and the new proposed land-use and natural resource chapters in the City's Master Plan. He shared that Somersworth is working to join the Community Power Coalition of New Hampshire which will lower electric rates for residents, he also mentioned the significant cost of living and salary increases provided to City staff to help ensure staff retention.

Human Services –

Mayor Gerding stated that he hopes to better coordinate with the Tri-City Mayors as well as the Strafford County Commissioners to work towards increasing the capacity of the Warming Center and ways to better accommodate its use. Although he is not sure yet what that will look like, he reported having many important discussions about it. He spoke about homelessness being looked at year-round which will better prepare providers for the winter months and increasing coordination with neighboring Cities, Strafford County and the State of New Hampshire to provide much needed sheltering and services to individuals. Mayor Gerding stated that the City needs to continue to advocate for a County-run shelter and he hopes to be able to work towards developing more transitional housing to lessen the need of emergency warming shelters.

Mayor Gerding introduced the School Board Chair, Maggie Larson, to present her State of the City pertaining to the School Department.

**School Board Chair Maggie Larson presented the following State of the City Address:**

Good evening Somersworth! It is my honor to report on the remarkable progress of our school district over this past year.

For many years, we have prioritized educating the whole child through social-emotional learning across all grade levels. We know nurturing both academic excellence and emotional well-being is critical for lifelong success. Our counselors, teachers, and staff have applied evidence-based SEL curricula alongside trauma-informed practices. We have seen positive impacts on school climate and student resilience.

Retaining our exceptional educators has also been a key focus. We have purposefully cultivated a culture of gratitude through staff appreciation initiatives and competitive compensation packages secured through fair and supportive collective bargaining agreements. Our teachers and staff are the very bedrock of our district. We are committed to showing them the profound respect they deserve.

So let me express my deepest gratitude to these professionals who show up every day as educators, mentors, and advocates for our students. Your passion and dedication do not go unnoticed. We see you, and we appreciate you.

This year also brought the opening of the school-based health center at Somersworth High School. Providing integrated physical and mental health services. The high school also implemented the Teen Mental Health First Aid curriculum which teaches all sophomore-level students how to identify, understand, and respond to mental health and substance use challenges among their friends and peers. SHS was the 2nd school in NH to provide this important training supported by the national council for mental wellbeing. Also, our entire middle school staff has been trained in Youth Mental Health First Aid as of last Friday.

While prioritizing the whole child, we have simultaneously strengthened academic rigor through curriculum alignment across all our schools. This pre-K through 12th grade

*State of the City Address  
Monday March 18, 2024*

articulation ensures students build strong foundations and face coherent, cumulative learning progressions. Our exceptional CTE programs, with over 50% of graduates completing two-year pathways, exemplify our steadfast commitment to highly relevant, real-world skills.

And our students continue achieving outstanding successes - a testament to the power of our Somersworth community. The Hilltoppers football team brought home their third consecutive state championship trophy. Our girls' volleyball team made an inspired run to the state finals. Our Athletic program is focused on supporting youth athletics and encouraging participation in sports at all levels.

At every Hilltopper game, we have witnessed exceptional sportsmanship and unmatched Somersworth pride.

Our music program continues to grow and marches forward with beautiful new band uniforms for the first time since 1979. Our theater department has worked tirelessly toward this week's production of Little Shop of Horrors. All are welcome to the Black Box Theatre this Thursday, Friday, and Saturday at 7pm for the show.

None of this would be possible without the collective commitment of our entire city. Residents, school board members, city officials, local businesses, and community partners - we are all working together, united by a vision of success and security for our children. It is this distinct Somersworth pride that allows us to meet every challenge and unlock incredible opportunities.

We are a diverse, vibrant, resilient community with exceptional educators and wonderful empathetic students. Thank you Somersworth for your partnership. Together we will continue achieving great things. Go Hilltoppers!

**Mayor Gerding thanked the City Councilors, City staff and the public for their attendance.**

The State of the City Address concluded at 6:28 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

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Kristen LaPanne, City Clerk

*State of the City Address  
Monday March 18, 2024*