Chamber questionnaire _ Mayor Greg Verga 2025

How do you view Downtown Gloucester today? What is working and what is not? What are 2 or 3 actionable items that you would implement in your administration to promote small businesses?

Tourism is the fastest-growing portion of the city's economy and downtown is a crucial part of that. Vacant buildings are the death of a downtown and we've had some success combatting that. I successfully petitioned the city council to approve a TIF tax incentive for the company that renovated what is now The Cut venue on Main Street, which is thriving. The former Santander building has a new owner, so we're moving in the right direction and that needs to continue.

Something else I'm looking forward to is leaning into doing everything we can to support the expansion of rooftops above retail downtown. In other words, residential space above the storefronts at the sidewalk level. To have a vibrant downtown, you need people downtown. People who live downtown and work downtown and patronize the businesses downtown. Improved access to parking downtown is a major action-item for us in our next term. It remains a challenge for our businesses and our residents and I've heard loud and clear those appeals to do what we can to improve it. That's a top priority for the Verga administration moving forward.

How would you propose to balance the competing interests on the future of Gloucester's waterfront? Would you propose to modify the DPA boundary uses and what nonresidential uses would you like to attract and retain?

I've been consistent about this since I got into the race to become mayor in 2021. Fishing will always be the heart and soul of our identity and it's not dead, it's just different. Gloucester has long been a leader in adaptation, improvisation and innovation. To fully leverage our fishing and maritime heritage, we have to continue to innovate, embrace this city's potential as a biotech hub and be open to implementing new approaches. Research and education are a huge piece of that new approach. We need to support and recruit the many career development opportunities that exist in sustainable ocean resource management, with jobs from marine biology and engineering to policy analysis and entrepreneurship.

We submitted Gloucester's first new Municipal Harbor Plan (MHP) and Designated Port Area (DPA) Master Plan since 2014 to the state for approval in March. It establishes community goals, standards and policies to guide public and private land use along harbors. I'm pleased to say it has now received state approval.

Putting plans into action—that is, delivering on implementation—has been a hallmark of my tenure as mayor. At its core, this new harbor plan will support the existing economic base and expand economic development opportunities, including both water-dependent and supporting uses of marine properties. The economic strategy will take into account the city's overall economic position, climate resiliency and waterfront infrastructure in order to most effectively position the economic revitalization of its maritime assets.

I encourage folks to visit the website (https://harborplan.gloucester-ma.gov/) and click on the Harbor Plan tab for details.

Tourism is a vital part of Gloucester's economy; how would you promote the city as a year-round destination without burdening the local infrastructure and residents during the peak season and what investments would you make in visitor amenities?

If I convey nothing else in this answer, I want to make sure to reiterate that tourism is not only the fastest-growing sector of our economy, but also that all of us know someone—friends, relatives, neighbors—who make their living from the tourism economy. It's critical that we as a community support it. Someone in your life relies on income earned during those three peak months.

The city needs to support thoughtful efforts to diversify the experience downtown. In other words, we need to help curate a good mix of restaurants, entertainment and business.

A parking and transportation assessment that we commissioned is complete and we've begun reviewing recommendations to see what's feasible, such as: tiered parking rates to encourage turnover in prime spots and improved traffic flow routes to create additional spots. We've also kicked off the implementation of a wayfinding signage system to deliver more coherent traffic and pedestrian flow on Main Street, Middle Street and Rogers Street.

Congestion and parking have been major challenges for years. We've had significant success streamlining parking for visitors and residents, alike. Residents need to see more future improvements.

The visitor experience has been transformed with the beach parking reservation system (app or web) introduced by my administration and, after years of experiencing severe traffic and illegal parking that blocked driveways during peak season, our residents' concerns about congestion have been alleviated by access management and, in part, by increased fees for non-residents.

Applying for a resident beach sticker is now highly efficient and digitized for folks' convenience. One resident reported receiving their confirmation just minutes after applying, and the sticker was mailed the same day. The city lost a ton of money on failed parking kiosks before I took office. We've updated those and digitized them with app access and we're continuing to troubleshoot sporadic issues. We're also considering options for making the kiosks more user-friendly in terms of visibility and clarity.

Many businesses in our community struggle to attract and retain workers because there simply isn't enough affordable housing available nearby. What specific steps would you take to encourage the creation of more workforce housing options—particularly approaches that update or rethink current local rules to make it easier to build the kinds of housing our workers need?

Helping people find a place to live and work in a city that has become unaffordable is essentially part of the work we do every day in my administration. We've had success disbursing funds

from our First Time Home Buyer Down Payment Assistance Program as well as our Community Development Block Grant program, which offers deferred loans to low and moderate income buyers purchasing their first home in Gloucester.

Another piece of the puzzle was passing the multifamily zoning ordinance to bring Gloucester in compliance with state Section 3A MBTA community guidelines for multifamily housing near public transit. The goal of that is to create entry-level housing. We just got this new zoning. Let's see how it works and what it produces. That takes time.

I also remain focused on retaining the housing we have and improving the housing we have. That's pivotal, and a piece of that is the rooftops over retail that I mentioned. We know we're not going to build our way out of our housing crisis. Supply and demand are huge factors. There's not an overabundance of buildable space here, and we're going to be respectful of our city's character and historic aesthetic.

Gloucester spans about 40 square miles; 20 are coastline and another sizable percentage consists of wetlands or granite. We're also de facto stewards to hundreds of acres of conservation land. Preserving all that means that the projects coming before the planning board and the associated permitting are more complex than we've seen in decades. They're difficult to get greenlit and they should be. Appropriately, the planning board takes the time that's required to review them.

If a project makes sense for the city, makes sense for the planning board and is thoughtful about the fabric of the street and neighborhood in question, the democratic process suggests we should at least have that conversation.