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"Creative economy" characterizes several new projects in Lewiston-Auburn, Maine

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A number of development projects are underway in Lewiston-Auburn, and are either at the very beginning of the project cycle or nearing completion. However, most of them have a common thread: they all embody the area's growing creative economy.

"Creative economy" is a somewhat nebulous term, but in this case, I'm referring to a collection of cultural, natural, and social amenities or features that often attract young professionals and make a community more appealing as a place in which to live. The expansion of Auburn's Riverwalk pedestrian path along the Androscoggin River in downtown Auburn is targeted for completion in November. It is a great example of what young urban professionals say they find appealing: a riverfront oasis where they can take a quick stroll and recharge their batteries -- smack dab in the middle of an urban core. An ADA-compliant ramp will be added, and the path will extend under the Longley Bridge in order to connect to the Falls and existing paths near the Hilton Garden Inn Auburn Riverwatch. Over the next couple of weeks, new paving and lighting should complete the finishing touches.

L/A Arts has launched a new black box theatre on Lisbon Street called The Down Stage. L/A Arts opened the curtain to the intimate, 50-seat venue with a Greek tragedy, but hosted its first concert featuring local singer-songwriter Carolyn Currie in late October.

Museum L-A, whose mission to tell "the story of work and community in Lewiston-Auburn," is actively involved in a capital campaign that will take the organization to a comparatively stratospheric new level. The museum's board recently approved the purchase of the former Camden Yarns Mill in Lewiston. (The museum is currently housed in the Bates Mill Complex.)

Plans call for the museum to renovate 20,000 s/f of the mill within five years. That would require raising \$5-\$6 million for capital and endowment funds. Museum L-A is currently working with DesignLAB Architects of Boston on conceptual plans and design ideas.

Given its urban character, Lewiston-Auburn has a surprising number of natural attractions, including the Androscoggin River, Lake Auburn, Mount Apatite, and Lewiston's magnificent Thorncrag Nature Sanctuary.

Thorncrag is a 372-acre network of trails with recreational opportunities for wildlife watching, nature study and hiking. Thorncrag features woodlands, wetlands, and open spaces. The center recently added a paved parking area, and the resident Stanton Bird Club is raising funds for construction of an informational and interpretive kiosk, along with wildlife landscaping in the center of the lot as a kind of island.

A three-sided kiosk will consist of panels for trail and ecological information, sanctuary rules, community conservation announcements, and environmental information.

As soon as visitors arrive at the sanctuary, the forest is evident and the birds are visible and audible. To enhance this initial experience, native trees, shrubs, wildflowers, and mosses will be planted in the center island of the parking lot to attract native species of birds, insects, and other invertebrates. The plants will be labeled and serve as a community resource to demonstrate yard- and park-friendly plants.

Disciples of author and economist Richard Florida and his creative economy theory recognize that vibrant communities offer downtown housing options close to features such as restaurants, museums, and natural attractions. Both communities are doing just that with two housing projects, one is Auburn's Vincent Sq. Apartments project, which should be open by year's end, and the other, still in the early stages, is Community Concepts Inc.'s senior housing project in Lewiston.

Vincent Sq. is a former bottling plant and historic building located on a busy square in Auburn that has been converted to 17 housing units for residents aged 55 and older. It meets green building standards and has a passive solar hot water system. The 16,000 s/f CCI project will be built on the site of a former private high school, with construction underway before the new year.

How's this for seizing creative opportunities? Successful restaurateur and entrepreneur Eric Agren recently purchased a property at 40 Lisbon St. in Lewiston and is creating a mixed-use building with a high-end residence on the second floor, and a restaurant on the first. This will mirror the model he's created with his highly successful Fuel restaurant in Lewiston, which also houses him and his wife upstairs in a beautifully renovated and spacious loft apartment.

The new residence will be occupied by tenants in December and is about 2,100 s/f, with a full master suite, walk in closet, second bedroom with full bath, and a large living space.

The new restaurant will be called MarchÃ©, a boutique style lunch venue with limited dinner service. The cozy 40-seat luncheon will boast a 30-bottle wine list, beers, and a one-night-a week dinner called "Monday Night Supper" with four courses, and limited to 20 people. MarchÃ© is slated to open some time in March.

Meanwhile, the city's newest downtown eatery, City Side Grill, has opened its doors on Lewiston's Park St. In the words of a Sun Journal reviewer, the restaurant seems to "bridge the gap between pub food and fine dining." Entrees include such items as chicken piccata, Yankee pot roast, and shrimp scampi.

Making it easier for young professionals to find the community is critical, too, along with the ability to come and go as they please. That's the reason residents are delighted that the Auburn-Lewiston Municipal Airport is working with some small independent airlines to get daily air service, possibly from Auburn to Washington, D.C. for as little as \$111.

Lewiston-Auburn still has a way to go before comparisons can be made to the creative economy enticements of Providence or Burlington. Then again, Rome (or even Portland) wasn't built in a day.

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