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January thaw brings new opportunities to Lewiston-Auburn as activity picks up

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A healthy stream of good news and forward progress pierced the winter gloom over the past several weeks in Lewiston-Auburn, as economic activity steadily picks up, promising the thaw of a bitter-cold recession.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture awarded a \$200,000 grant to the Lewiston-Auburn Railroad Company to renovate the Grand Trunk Railroad Depot. Among other things, the funds will be used for utility improvements, lead abatement, and window repairs. The grant comes as a result of a formal application prepared by LAEGC over the past several months.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced the selection of 44 recipients - including the Lewiston-Auburn Railroad Company -- for more than \$4 million in Recovery Act grants to start or expand businesses in rural communities.

The Lewiston-Auburn Railroad Company will use the Rural Business Enterprise Grant to preserve and renovate the historic building built in 1874. Once completed, the building will be used for a restaurant and tourist attraction, creating much needed employment in the area.

"These funds will go a long way in helping with retrofitting this historic building, and will be used for utility improvements, lead abatement, and window repairs, among other needs," said Robert Thorpe, president of the Lewiston-Auburn Railroad Company. The total budget for renovations of the depot is about \$300,000. The Lewiston-Auburn Economic Growth Council staffs the railroad.

In another significant announcement, the Auburn Business Development Corp. secured the purchase of a 30-acre parcel of land from Cascades Auburn Fiber that will allow for continued development of the Auburn Industrial Park. The acquisition clears the way for development of additional lots and construction of a secondary access road.

The Auburn Industrial Park, which has attracted Bisson Transportation and Kelloggs Snacks, was created to meet a shortage of industrial land, as well as to capitalize on rail access and use of a General Purpose Foreign Trade Zone. The park is also a stone's throw from the Auburn-Lewiston Municipal Airport, which has enjoyed substantial growth in recent years.

The Lewiston-Auburn Economic Growth Council welcomed a new tenant to the fourth floor of the Business Service Center at 415 Lisbon St.: the publisher of a new feature magazine about Lewiston-Auburn. "Lewiston Auburn Magazine" is being launched by Independent Publishing Group, which operates the Windham Independent. Plans call for the first issue to hit the streets in April.

The publication is the brainchild of Josh Shea, a former Sun Journal reporter who has launched other publications. He and director of sales Paul Roy will staff the office in the space vacated by the Maine International Trade Center.

A representative of the Growth Council and Mark McComas from the city of Lewiston presented the AVCOG region's local growth strategies as part of the statewide Mobilize Maine initiative. With

guidance from Vital Economy, Inc., and using an asset mapping process, Mobilize Maine aims to establish long-term strategies for growth through a sustained grass roots effort from each of the state's six regional economic development organizations.

One of the tri-county Androscoggin Valley area goals is to increase the number of people in the workforce who are aged 22-34 by 5% by the year 2015. The current number in that age cohort (based on 2008 figures) is 20,063. Another goal is to increase the area's service center population by 10%, thereby reducing sprawl and leveraging the state's limited resources.

According to a promotional flyer, the effort is a "collaborative approach to community and economic development that will help Maine grow and prosper" and "builds on indigenous strengths and authentic assets of Maine's people, places, and businesses." Partners include the State of Maine, the regional economic development districts, FairPoint Communications, and others.

Mobilize Maine is a private/public/nonprofit partnership facilitated by FairPoint's Connect Northern New England Community and Economic Development Initiative. The collaborative will help identify and develop strategies to address Maine's unique assets that may not have been previously recognized.

In other news:

* The Auburn Housing Authority held a ribbon-cutting ceremony for its new elderly housing complex on Vincent Sq. in Auburn. The facility, the site of a former bottling operation, is a beautiful, energy-efficient downtown facility that is accessible to numerous amenities including eateries, grocery stores, barbers and other service providers.

* Bangor Savings Bank opened a new bank branch on Lisbon St. in Lewiston, occupying the space vacated by a previous bank. Lewiston-Auburn is an important part of Bangor Saving's strategy to expand its footprint in southern and central Maine.

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