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The weather is getting colder, but Lewiston-Auburn is heating up for conferences and restaurants

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As the weather starts to get a little colder, it's only appropriate to recognize that the cities of Lewiston and Auburn, Maine have become a hotbed for recent meetings and small business growth. Despite an economic climate that is consistently highlighted as "uncertain" and "unstable," the Twin Cities have seen a surprising surge of recent development projects, initiatives, and excitement over the last few months.

In fact, the community was recently recognized by an outside group tasked with exploring existing "best practices" initiatives. At the end of September, city officials from Lewiston and Auburn welcomed 17 delegates from the Danville Regional Foundation out of Danville, Virginia for a three day tour exploring the economic redevelopment and transition of the Twin Cities from traditional mill community into modern industrial center.

Focused on collaborating and establishing partnerships while working across regional borders in order to create sustainable solutions, the delegation attended multiple sessions with local stake holders in order to better understand the working relationships between the economic development agencies, chamber of commerce, cities and educational institutions already in place here in the Twin Cities.

Earlier this summer, business leaders and officials from throughout Central Maine attended a free, one day workshop highlighting the advantages of utilizing local resources for international trade such as the 760 acre Foreign-Trade Zone (FTZ) #263, located in Auburn as well as how to better take advantage of the strategically placed supporting assets such as the intermodal port facility, multiple warehouses and convenient access to rail, highway and air transportation methods within the immediate area.

Designed to essentially level the global playing field, the FTZ program allows companies to defer paying duties on imported goods until they are sold domestically. If the product is exported, or shipped to another FTZ for storage or additional assembly to be exported, the tariff is deferred or eliminated altogether. An FTZ user can also warehouse raw materials or components, assemble, finish, or otherwise add value to the goods and typically expect to pay lower tariffs compared to the tariff rate prior to alteration.

Companies that conduct manufacturing, assembly, fabrication and value-added activities within a FTZ are also eligible for additional benefits including inverted tariff savings, weekly Customs entry savings, duty deferral, duty elimination on waste and scrap, duty elimination on rejected or defective parts, duty elimination on re-exports, and duty elimination on domestic content or value added including labor, overhead and profits.

With over 65 members in attendance, the Maine Association of Planners (MAP) held their annual conference and meeting at the Bates Mill Atrium in Lewiston in late June. A network of practicing

planners, citizens, and elected officials committed to urban, suburban, regional, and rural planning in the state of Maine, MAP offers a variety of benefits including providing information, services, and support to advance planning and policy throughout the state and through all levels of government. The one day meeting consisted of a panel and group discussion focused on the theme of "Collaborating to Create Vibrant, Healthy Communities."

With all these meetings, it's only appropriate to talk about the growing restaurant scene. In just the last 13 months, 10 new restaurants have opened in Lewiston and Auburn, and another 3 are scheduled to open over just the next few months.

Since announcing a soft opening in July, KP's Place recently celebrated their official grand opening in front of city officials, friends, family and the public. A third generation restaurant owner, this family run business is located along the busy Center Street commercial business corridor and is strategically positioned between many retail stores and commercial businesses.

It's not every day a passenger can share a burger or coffee with the pilot of a multi-million dollar corporate jet, but now that the Auburn-Lewiston Airport has finished renovations of The Landing Strip Caf , that is the norm again. Providing the opportunity for citizens, passengers and aviation enthusiasts to enjoy quality food while overlooking the 5,001 foot runway, the Landing Strip Caf  also expects to provide services to handle the approximately 68,000 aircraft operations that occur at the airport every year.

Much restaurant growth has also occurred in the downtowns. Over the last few months city officials have welcomed a handful of new restaurants to the Twin Cities.

Located at 84 Court St., the aptly named 84 Court Pizza and Restaurante opened adjacent to Auburn City Hall in early February. Primarily a pizza joint, the 2,000 s/f restaurant contains an outdoor patio, a bar and multiple large flat screen televisions for entertainment as well as seating for 42 people inside.

Located on the corner of Main and Court Street in downtown Auburn, Narals Experience Arabia officially opened in late February as well. The 4,800 s/f location seats up to 90 and features an extensive menu that is intended to replicate the diverse aspects of Arabic life and culture from ancient Arabia.

Across the river, a grocery store, caf  and bakery opened in mid-April named Forage Market. Featuring a fully renovated space, the market contains a wood-fired brick oven in the basement, fresh fruit on the shelves, dairy products from neighboring farms in the coolers and an extensive coffee selection for the growing downtown population.

On a final positive note, as the Riverfront Island master plan and riverfront corridor both continue to generate excitement in the community, many businesses and cultural events are looking to capitalize on future downtown growth opportunities. As our popular slogan around town says, in "L/A, it really is happening here!"

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