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More hotels, more options for business travelers to the Lewiston-Auburn region

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Just 10 years ago, business travelers heading to or through Lewiston-Auburn had limited options for overnight accommodations. Once largely undeserved in terms of finding decent hotels or inns (a liability given that it was the second largest community in Maine), Lewiston-Auburn will soon have a wide variety of hotels to choose from, thanks to three projects coming on-line soon.

In Lewiston, the stalled Island Point project, an ambitious effort to renovate an area along Main Street that includes two former mill properties, the Cowan Mill and the recently demolished Libby Mill, now has a new lease on life. Winston Hospitality Inc. has agreed to build an approximately 120-room Marriott Courtyard there at a cost of about \$16 million. The hotel will sit on a 60,000 s/f parcel, which is now a city-owned parking lot, and have additional overflow parking nearby.

The city has agreed to spend \$1.5 million for infrastructure upgrades, including water, sewer, phone, and other utility enhancements. Construction is expected to begin no later than May 1, 2009. Winston is also considering redeveloping the nearby Cowan Mill into residential condos and possible mixed use office and retail for a minimum of \$6 million. If that occurs, a parking deck will be built by Winston to support the additional development at an estimated cost of \$3.2 million. (An additional building may also house mixed use at a later date.)

In Auburn, developer George Schott has broken ground on an \$8 million Residence Inn hotel. The hotel will sit on a 1.5 acre parcel near the Turner St. entrance of Lowe's Home Improvement Center in an increasingly retail-heavy area. The 100-room hotel is near the Auburn Mall, also recently purchased by Schott, who has made a number of improvements including attracting retailers such as Steve & Barry's, Super Shoes, and Jokers, a family games and entertainment emporium.

Also in Auburn, Platz & Associates plans to build a \$12 million, 110-room Hampton Inn & Suites near the Great Falls of the Androscoggin River. An accompanying 300-space municipal parking garage is also critical to the project. The hotel would be virtually next door to an existing Hilton Garden Inn, itself recently built and already renovated and expanded last year. Plans and timetables are still being firmed up on the Hampton Inn project.

Although some critics have voiced concern over the risk of creating a glut of rooms in the area, and given that two of the three new hotel projects sit in close proximity to each other, local officials say that given the number of businesses including major manufacturers, small- and mid-sized companies, financial institutions, and Bates College, business travel occurs frequently. Hotels also benefit from the health of the medical industry, both in terms of patient stays and family members who need extended stays to care for loved ones in Lewiston's cardiac and cancer centers. The hospitals also frequently host medical experts and surgeons in their recruiting efforts. The local hospitality industry has also benefited from the growth of the area's festivals and attractions, as well as a healthy number of industry conferences and workshops.

Adding to the ready-made market for business travel is the area's recent economic renaissance. The convenience of Lewiston-Auburn's central location, nearly half the state's population lives within a little over 30 miles of Lewiston-Auburn, also draws travelers from throughout central, western, and southern Maine.

Concerns were raised years ago when developer Lee Griswold proposed building his Hilton Garden Inn Auburn Riverwatch on the banks of the Androscoggin River. The fate of the more mature Ramada Conference Center in Lewiston, smaller discount hotels, and the former Auburn Inn (now a Fireside Inn & Suites) were feared by some. What resulted were substantial renovations to area facilities to keep up with competition, benefiting the community and business travelers alike.

The community is now working on making Lewiston-Auburn more of a destination for recreational visitors and vacationers on their way to and from the nearby ski resorts, lakes, and mountains.

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