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Lewiston-Auburn seeing steady economic activity and continued growth/investment

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Despite a national economic downturn, the Twin Cities of Lewiston-Auburn, Maine, are experiencing overall stable job activity, and a number of companies show continued signs of growth and investment in the community.

At the Business Service Center on Lisbon St. in Lewiston - the headquarters of the Lewiston-Auburn Economic Growth Council (LAEGC), the Androscoggin County Chamber of Commerce, and a growing list of business service providers - the summer has been a noisy place with fit-up work nearly complete to welcome the newest tenants, Merrill Lynch.

"Merrill Lynch is making a significant investment in Lewiston-Auburn because it believes in the future growth of Androscoggin County," said Marc Pellerin, who heads up the local office. A staff of seven employees will be located at the facility, with plans to grow the team to nine or more over the next few years.

Watterson Prime, a second-floor tenant at the Business Service Center, moved in their new space earlier this year. Watterson Prime is a leading provider of due diligence services to global financial institutions that invest in mortgage loans. Watterson ensures loans are compliant with federal and other regulations. The Androscoggin Land Trust is renting a more modest-sized space at the Center. ALT is dedicated to the conservation and stewardship of 3,100 acres along Maine's Androscoggin River corridor.

Plenty of other business activity is occurring throughout Lewiston-Auburn. In June, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced that Lewiston-Auburn had been approved for a new out-patient health care clinic for Maine veterans. The exact location has yet to be determined, but the facility is targeted to open within two years. Maine is home to nearly 150,000 veterans.

Meanwhile, the Auburn-Lewiston Municipal Airport is building a \$2 million, 27,000 s/f hangar to accommodate a project by German aircraft giant Lufthansa. Lufthansa is restoring a 1950s-era Super Constellation Starliner, Germany's equivalent to Air Force One. The project was featured in a recent front-page article in the Wall Street Journal.

Local economic activity is increasingly dependent on L-A's rapidly growing transportation, distribution, and logistics sector. Estes Express opened a new 15,000 s/f trucking terminal on River Rd. in Lewiston late last summer. This national trucking giant is able to unload tractor trailers and redistribute goods headed to giant retailers such as Home Depot and Lowe's.

The community also saw the new Auburn Industrial Park come to life with its first client, developer Gendron & Gendron, which built a state-of-the-art warehouse for Bisson Transportation and LynxUS. Bisson made a major investment in a 100,000 s/f warehouse and distribution facility there. Bisson hopes to eventually expand its facility to a 300,000 s/f distribution center, serving not only the

paper industry, but non-perishable food manufacturers and freight forwarders.

Development and city officials decided to build the Auburn Industrial Park because the area was running out of space to develop, and because it is a natural progression in the ongoing goal of growing L-A's distribution and logistics infrastructure. The park, a project that has been years in the making through a collaboration between the Auburn Business Development Corp., the city of Auburn and other agencies, capitalizes on Auburn's Foreign Trade Zone, the Pine Tree Zone, its U.S. Customs Port, and international rail connections via St. Lawrence & Atlantic Railroad.

On a related note, LAEGC is collaborating with the Maine Department of Labor, the Central/Western Maine Workforce Investment Board, and other partners to develop a regional logistics cluster, and help identify workforce training needs and skills development for this important industry. Led by the local CareerCenter staff, employers who hire warehouse and logistics personnel, truckers, freight forwarders, and related positions will be invited to share their expertise and ideas on skills requirements to meet the distribution and logistics training needs of the future.

This TDL - or Transportation, Distribution, and Logistics -- cluster, as it is being called, holds great promise for the area.

LAEGC, in collaboration with Canadian consultant InterVISTAS, consulting firm Vital Economy Inc., and Fairpoint Communications, will help coordinate a regional conference on international trade and intermodal transportation. The parties recognize the explosion of growth locally in the TDL industry. A number of companies have expanded over the past year or so. World Harbors, the makers of gourmet sauces and marinades, invested in a 20,000 s/f expansion, and just implemented a new production line for heated sauces. This will allow them to produce their new Buccaneer Blends barbecue sauce.

The Riverpark office building on Main St. in Auburn, a project the Growth Council helped underwrite, is getting two new tenants that will bring a number of new jobs to the community. The beautifully renovated building at 72 Main St., which is also the home of Gritty McDuff's Brew Pub, will house Bluewater Energy Solutions, an alternative energy consulting group, and Canusa Corp., a sales agent for the paper industry.

This past year, Safe Handling, Inc. announced the opening of a new biofuel terminal with the first ethanol transloading facility in the state. Safe Handling now handles nearly 4,000 railcars and 12,000 truckloads of industrial raw materials per year. (The Small Business Administration recently named its CEO, Ford Reich, as the Small Business Person of the Year, and MaineBiz also honored him as its Business Leader of the Year in its Large Company category.)

Another business that has won its share of awards is Wahlco Metroflex, a leading designer and manufacturer of diverters, dampers and expansion joints. The company specializes in making duct systems and air scrubbing equipment for smokestacks.

Wahlco completed an 18,000 s/f expansion as a result of its business growth and burgeoning client base. The company has grown from 65 to 150 employees in the span of the past year and a half - impressive given so many reports of manufacturers scaling back on hiring.

On a final positive note, at the June 12 Androscoggin Business to Business Trade Show in Lewiston, a record number of people - an estimated 3,000 - attended the show, with a large number of repeat exhibitors reporting an increase in promising business leads over the past year.

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