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Lewiston-Auburn ground is thawing and conditions are slowly starting to warm up

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Spring has sprung, and so have new projects in the Twin Cities. To carry the analogy of spring to our current economy, consider these projects as proof that the ground is thawing and conditions are slowly starting to warm up.

Kellogg Snacks - the originators of snap, crackle and pop! - recently opened a brand new 60,000 s/f facility in the Auburn Industrial Park. Numerous Keebler trucks can be seen coming and going at the facility, as Keebler is a subsidiary of Kellogg. (no Keebler elf sightings yet...)

Several buildings are proposed to be built in the Auburn Industrial Park by developer Gendron and Gendron to capitalize on the area's rail, highway, Foreign Trade Zone, and other amenities. The Auburn Business Development Corp.'s purchase of a nearby parcel of land will allow Gendron and Gendron the ability to develop two proposed buildings, 30,000 s/f and 28,000 s/f, along with a smaller one at 9,000 s/f. As readers of this column know, Lewiston-Auburn has become a major gateway for transportation, distribution, and logistics.

The nearby Auburn Lewiston Municipal Airport has completed a market feasibility study to determine the viability of reintroducing passenger air service to the area. According to Sixel Consulting Group, Inc.'s True Market Study, the airport can "reasonably expect to capture passengers from a large region to the north and northwest of the airport." That area includes 278,000 people, many of whom currently fly from the Portland Jetport.

The March 2009 study found that the Auburn-Lewiston market is likely to produce as many as 667 passengers per day each way (though not all would use the Auburn facility). The airport catchment area is projected to produce about \$90 million in annual airline revenue, or \$123,300 in revenue per day, with flyers largely destined for East Coast destinations.

Largely recession proof, the health care industry continues to be strong in Lewiston-Auburn. Work crews at a new medical and diagnostic facility to be operated by St. Mary's Medical Center continue to make quick progress on the 20,000 s/f building. The Turner St. center, a satellite facility for the Lewiston-based institution, will include space for X-ray, cardiac rehabilitation, physical/occupational rehabilitation, and health screening departments, along with a sleep center, lab, and office space.

Construction on a new \$13 million, 100-room Marriott Residence Inn is complete, and the hotel is now open for business. The project is located in Auburn's bustling Turner St. and Mount Auburn Ave. area. The extended stay property features large suites, marble-topped kitchen counters, modern décor, a fitness center, outdoor barbecue, and all the amenities of modern living.

At least two new restaurants have opened so far this spring in the Twin Cities. Mother India has opened its doors on Lisbon St. for patrons who enjoy traditional Indian food, along with some African fare. The family business is run by partners who operate A Taste of India in Bangor. The restaurant has seating for 45 and will be open seven days a week. The owners were attracted to the close

proximity of the courthouse, Bates College, the hospitals and lots of office buildings within walking distance.

At Great Falls Plaza in Auburn, The Falls restaurant is opening its doors to capture business from downtown traffic and lodging clients staying across the street at the Hilton Garden Inn.

Both restaurants are located in spaces that once housed other eateries.

Meanwhile, most of the structure is up at Lewiston's newest school, Raymond Geiger Elementary, named in honor of the former president of Geiger Bros. The school on outer College St. will replace the Pettingill Elementary School and is scheduled to open in September 2009. The 650-student school will be energy efficient with lights and ventilation systems that go off when no one's in the rooms.

Two housing projects are also in the works. The former Vincent Bottling Plant in New Auburn will be renovated to accommodate elderly housing. A groundbreaking ceremony is slated for May 1st.

Construction has begun on Birch Hill Senior Housing, a 20-unit apartment complex on the southwestern corner of Birch and Bates streets in downtown Lewiston. The project is targeted for completion in 2010. Funded in part by Coastal Enterprises Inc., the project will include 17 one-bedroom and three two-bedroom apartments. Five units will be fully handicapped accessible. Birch Hill will replace three vacant lots, and is budgeted to cost \$4.48 million.

The city of Lewiston has completed a downtown strategic planning process to outline downtown priorities. Of particular interest and emphasis in the plan is the development of an area dubbed "Riverfront Island," bounded by the upper Androscoggin River canal and Canal St., Gully Brook, and the Androscoggin River to the west. Riverwalks, arts and culture, mixed use, and a possible hotel are all part of the visioning of this area.

The Lewiston city council also determined the fate of Bates Mill Number 5 after years of deliberating and searching for investors. The massive former textile building with a unique saw-tooth roof will come down over the coming months. In its place will be a large parcel of land, and large opportunity for development.

The Great Falls Performing Arts Center, home to Community Little Theatre and a number of other arts organizations including a photography studio and two dance schools, has also been the focus of significant public attention. The city of Auburn conducted a study to determine the feasibility of a full fledged arts center at the former Great Falls School, in part to serve as a magnet for downtown recreation and entertainment. The council recently adopted a series of recommendations and directed city staff to develop an implementation plan to bring back to the council. Sub-committees have been assigned to tackle various aspects of the strategy, and will report back to the council by mid-summer.

A final sign of spring: plans for the Androscoggin Business to Business Trade Show are in full bloom. The show takes place June 11 at the Androscoggin Bank Colisee. It's the largest one-day business show in Maine, attracting 2,500 people and nearly 200 exhibitors. Exhibit space remains, but will sell out soon. For more info visit www.economicgrowth.org

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