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There's still plenty of economic development activity in Lewiston/Auburn

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Despite signs of growing economic anemia elsewhere in northern New England, there's still plenty of activity in Lewiston/Auburn. Bisson Transportation is finishing up its 100,000 s/f distribution facility at the new Auburn Industrial Park, for example, while Davinci's Eatery held an open house to celebrate its newly expanded restaurant at the Bates Mill Complex.

Meanwhile, work continues on the Dominican Block, a 19th century brick masterpiece that had long been ignored but is now being renovated by Boston developer David Clem for possible use as retail and office space.

But what has really gathered momentum and generated buzz in the area is a list of projects that can be considered part of the so-called creative economy - particularly the proliferation of dining, cultural, and entertainment venues in L/A.

A new performance venue called the Maple Room recently opened on Park St. in downtown Lewiston. The Maple Room (a play on the names of owners Taylor and Rebecca MesplÃ©, two musicians who recently moved from Colorado) offers an 80-seat performance space with seating along three sides of the stage "to maximize the up-close-and-personal feel of the room," as their web site says. A gallery space will feature the work of area artists and the concession area will offer organic and made-in-Maine treats. Slated to entertain patrons are Livingston Taylor, the Portland String Quartet, Peter Mulvey, and Willy Porter.

Just a street away you'll find a modest looking sign heralding She Doesn't Like Guthrie's, the name of a handsomely decorated coffee shop and burrito/quesadilla haven. Local artwork also adorns the walls, along with decorator skateboards above the entrance.

On Lewiston's main downtown artery, Lisbon St., Eric and Carrie Agren have opened a 90-seat French bistro-style restaurant called Fuel, along with an art gallery next door operated by the non-profit arts organization L/A Arts. The Agrens, who generously donated the space to L/A Arts, refurbished the historic Lyceum Building, including living space on the top floors. Fuel now employs 17 people.

Indeed, the list of new restaurants that have opened up over the past year is long indeed. The ramifications have been significant, as entrepreneurs like David Clem, the Agrens, and George Schott (the developer who recently bought the Auburn Mall and surrounding properties responsible for the spate of activity in the Mount Auburn Aven. retail corridor) are looking at this community for business opportunities. Just last month, L/A Arts and the Brunswick-based Five Rivers Arts Alliance sponsored a statewide conference on the arts entitled "Crossroads for Community Arts: Strategies for Success on the Road Ahead," held at the Franco-American Heritage Center in Lewiston. It was a tip of the hat to L/A for its emerging arts scene.

Another cultural project with significant economic potential is Museum L/A. Although nearly 10 years

old and a tenant of the Bates Mill Complex for many years, the museum launched its first formal exhibit, entitled "Portraits & Voices: Workers of Seven Mills." The mixed media exhibit celebrated the heritage and stories of the retired employees of seven local mills. The exhibit was housed in nearby space at the mill, separate from the museum itself. The museum has grown exponentially in recent years, with a full-time director, a board populated with local leaders, a professionally designed strategic plan, and hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants and donations.

Hotel developers are looking to capitalize on all this increased activity, traffic, and economic growth. Winston Hotels is exploring the option of developing a hotel overlooking the Great Falls of the Androscoggin River and Veterans Park in Lewiston. This would be part of the long-awaited Island Point project. Another developer is looking at establishing a hotel - possibly a Marriott Courtyard, according to published reports -- near the retail hot spot along the Turner St. area in Auburn. The prospective site would be located where the Androscoggin Plaza now sits.

All this comes only a few months after the Hilton Garden Inn Auburn Riverwatch completed renovations to its facility, only a few short years after opening its doors.

The media has started to pay attention to the renaissance in central Maine as well. The Maine Public Broadcasting Network featured an hour-long show on L/A's renaissance as part of its Hometown Economies series, and also recently held its Annual Founders Reception in Auburn. In late October, MaineBiz was set to host a statewide symposium on pessimism in Maine at the Ramada Conference Center in Lewiston. MaineBiz publisher Donna Brossard said they selected Lewiston because "we decided to have it in the most un-pessimistic place we could think of" Lewiston/Auburn."

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