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Large economic development projects in the pipeline in cities of Lewiston-Auburn

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Just as all politics is local, the same can be said about economics. Although no doubt many people are struggling throughout Maine and New England during this difficult economy, the cities of Lewiston and Auburn are fairing rather well.

Although the unemployment rate in the Lewiston-Auburn MSA is creeping toward 9%, there is a surprising number of large economic development projects in the pipeline. There is also a significant number of new jobs being created.

Indeed, while lumber and construction material sales are off, which may be as much about the poor New England weather affecting construction plans as it is the recession, there are healthy signs of economic life. Staffers at the local CareerCenter say small layoffs are occurring "here and there," but no major ones are plaguing Lewiston-Auburn. The local Best Buy also reports that shoppers continue to buy electronics and back-to-school laptops at a healthy clip.

In June, the annual Androscoggin Business to Business Trade Show at the Androscoggin Bank Colisee enjoyed one of its best years ever, with about 3,000 business attendees. Exhibit space sold out, and only one vendor was absent as a "no-show." That could be attributed to the desire for people to network during a recession, but many attendees were guardedly optimistic.

There have been some big and positive employment stories. Earlier this summer, TD Banknorth announced it is building a \$16 million customer service center in vacant retail space at the Auburn Mall, creating about 300 new jobs by 2011. Using empty retail space to accommodate office tenants is a national trend. It provides a creative and winning scenario for landlords, nearby retailers, and prospective employees, who can run errands and pick from a wide choice of eateries during their lunch breaks.

Meanwhile, Affiliated Computer Services (ACS) said it is hiring another 130 people to work at its Lewiston customer care center.

Kellogg Snacks recently opened a 60,000 s/f facility in the new Auburn Industrial Park. The cereal giant adds its name to a growing number of internationally recognized companies that have a presence in L-A, including Procter & Gamble, Lufthansa, GE, Fed-Ex, Angostura, and Wal-Mart, which has a nearly 1 million s/f grocery distribution facility in Lewiston-Auburn.

Both Central Maine Medical Center (CMMC) and St. Mary's Regional Medical Center are in the midst of renovating their emergency rooms and labs, along with providing additional services. At CMMC, plans call for the emergency department footprint to almost double in size, creating 44 private treatment rooms. Patient flow from triage (initial evaluation) to treatment rooms will improve, as will patient privacy. The state-of-the art lab expansion will more than triple the size of the existing facility and optimize efficiencies.

CMMC estimates that more than 200 construction and trade jobs will be created with some \$140

million added to the local economy. Groundbreaking for the project is scheduled for the fall, with completion expected in 2011.

Phase one of the emergency department expansion project at St. Mary's Regional Medical Center is complete and focuses on behavioral emergencies. This space includes separate entrance, waiting, and treatment areas for behavioral patients. When the project is completed next year, the overall size of the entire emergency department will have tripled to accommodate 30 walled medical exam rooms. The rooms will be larger, add much needed privacy, and will allow for the latest technology to be placed at the bedside.

In addition to their ER and lab expansions, Lewiston-based St. Mary's is also building a 20,000 s/f satellite facility on Turner St. in Auburn. The facility will include space for x-rays, cardiac rehabilitation, physical/occupational rehab, a sleep center, and office space.

Outside of health care, there's activity in the restaurant business as well. The Village Inn, a longtime player in the local restaurant scene, reopened in July following a lengthy hiatus. The owners have spent many months renovating as a result of a devastating fire that occurred there. They add to a growing list of local eateries, including another new restaurant that launched in the spring, The Falls, located near the Androscoggin River and in Great Falls Plaza in Auburn.

In other news:

* A new \$22 million elementary school, Raymond A. Geiger Elementary, is set to open this fall in Lewiston to replace an aging school and provide relief at another overcrowded school. The school sits on a 24-acre site, is energy efficient, and includes an art room, music room, and space for student services.

* Museum Lewiston-Auburn, dedicated to the history of work and community in Lewiston-Auburn, has officially purchased the Camden Yarn Mill site, where it will eventually relocate. It will mark the first time the museum will own its own space. The museum is currently located in the Bates Mill Complex in Lewiston.

* Tractor Supply Company is building a 19,100 s/f store on Lisbon Street in Lewiston and should open later this year.

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