

SINCE 1847 LEWISTON, MAINE

# Sun Journal

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 50 years of May Balls

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SUNDAY, APRIL 25, 2004

Connecting you with your community

\$1.



## It's show time

**MAKING ART WORK:** Buckfield artist Jonathan Mess prepares sculpture paintings that will be on display at the Blaine House Conference on the Creative Economy at the Bates Mill. Set for May 6-7, the conference will showcase the economic potential of businesses based in the arts, culture and creativity. A starring role has been reserved for Lewiston-Auburn, hosts of the conference.

DARYN SLOVER/SUN JOURNAL

When organizers picked Lewiston for the site of a statewide economic conference, they got creative. The result is anything but run-of-the-mill.

BY CAROL COULTAS  
 Staff Writer

**P**erched in a second-floor office suite in Auburn's Riverpark Block, Rinck Advertising reps chat with clients on retro stools surrounding a chrome-and-black bar table. On the walls are wild, three-dimensional paintings by local artist Jonathan Mess. Music from alternative station WCLZ plays softly in the background.

On this day, e-mail glitches have some of the staff a little frazzled, but it's obvious the general office atmosphere is both laid back and professional. The 3-year-old Auburn company has seen its sales double every year and expects to hit the \$1 million mark next year.

Across the river at the Hill Mill, woodworkers at McIntosh & Tuttle examine a piece of maple that will ultimately be part



**COLOR OF BUSINESS:** Mess uses many different types of paint in his sculptures.

of a \$70,000 kitchen cabinet project. The 2-year-old company is eyeing sales in the \$1 million range.

About 20 miles down the Turnpike, Edward Little grad Jason Leiva and his partner Dennis Welsh set up shop in the loft

of Welsh's Yarmouth barn, where Pixel Light Studios, a digital imaging photography studio, is hanging its shingle. Expected 2004 earnings: \$80,000 to \$100,000.

All three companies are small, energetic and growing. Founded on creativity — that wellspring of ideas and innovation that can't be outsourced, automated or faked — they are examples of a new direction in economic development.

A direction Lewiston-Auburn — and the state of Maine in general — want to very much chart a course for.

According to the theory, rather than focusing primarily on attracting large, industrial companies, economic developers should be investing in the cultural assets of their communities to lure businesses that embrace creativity, diversity and technology. Attracting more companies like Rinck,

### WHAT IS 'BUILDING A CREATIVE ECONOMY?'

It's the process of understanding and fostering the many businesses that rely on the creative process, because those businesses tend to attract more people and often more money to an area.

### IN PERSPECTIVE:

"Creative economy" is more than just the arts and culture. **Page D1**

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## Show time

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Tuttle & McIntosh and Pixel Light to Maine is key to reviving its economy.

At least that's the thinking behind the Blaine House Conference on the Creative Economy, which will converge at Lewiston's Bates Mill in less than two weeks. The two-day governor's conference is an extravaganza of ideas and examples of how investing in businesses based in the arts, culture and free-thinking pays off.

If attendance is an indicator, the concept is intriguing. The conference is nearly sold out, with more than 600 people scheduled to attend an event that has involved the efforts of hundreds of individuals.

It's also a chance for Lewiston-Auburn to show off.

"I'm hoping this will create a deep sense of community pride," said Laura Davis, vice president of Rinck Advertising and coordinator of the conference. "It's exciting that we have a historic, statewide conference right here in our back yard."

The conference itself is a study in unconventional thinking. Organizers intentionally bypassed the Augusta Civic Center and the South Portland Marriott in favor of the Bates Mill, despite the work entailed in converting raw mill space into a usable conference setting. Attendees at the May 6-7 event can expect to be entertained as well as enlightened, while members of the community will also have a shot at some of that fun and information.

For registered attendees, 20 break-out seminars will provide the nuts and bolts of the conference. They range from how to use cultural resources to create economic leverage, to identifying how diversity is an indicator of prosperity. But the information is peppered with fun.

Lunches of Maine-made food will be packed in apple crates and shared picnic-style. Opening remarks are coming from Oddfellow Theater funnyman Mike

Miclon. A networking social hosted by Nick Spitzer will feature three premier Maine bands that will be taped for broadcast by National Public Radio.

And the public is invited to many of the offerings. Walking tours that highlight some local creative businesses will be offered, and the public can kick up its heels at the networking social. In addition, a huge conference showcase — an interactive exhibition of organizations and businesses with ties to the arts and culture — is open to the public Thursday afternoon.

In nearly every respect, this is not a typical economic conference. And the selection of Lewiston as the venue — because of its recognition as a center of revival and creative thinking — is one reason.

"We could have gone to the Augusta Civic Center and my work would have been cut by a factor of 10," said Davis. "But when you're talking about large building revitalization and downtown revitalization as part of the creative economy, well, we should be walking that walk."

### Getting ready

If Allan Turgeon is feeling overwhelmed, he's not showing it. Two weeks ago, the manager of the Bates Mill was standing on the second floor of Mill No. 1, surveying the vast, dimly lit scene. The 17,000-square-foot space was defined by a phalanx of 12-foot-high columns. Some of the duct work wore a toupee of 150 years' worth of cotton dust. There was scant lighting and no running water.

Yet, by May 6, the space will host the showcase portion of the conference. For weeks, he has been meeting with city public works people, code enforcement officials, police, fire marshals and others on the details, including where to put the portable toilets with running water and piped-in music.

Turgeon points to a far corner of the room where a coffeehouse will be set up.

"How we're going to get running water to it and then drain it

## ON THE MAINE STAGE AT BATES MILL

THURSDAY, 1 P.M.

Poetry reading by Beloit Poetry Journal; at 3 p.m. juggling showcase by the Oddfellow Theater. Free and open to the public.

FRIDAY, 5:30-9:30 P.M.

A trio of Maine bands, hosted by Nick Spitzer of American Routes, National Public Radio. Performing are Don Roy Trio, The Sean Mencher Combo and Maine Jazz Set. Open to the public; \$10 advance admission and \$12 at the door. Tickets can be purchased by calling 782-7228.

...," he muses as his voice trails off.

"We've had preliminary discussions about where to get power from — there are two or three sources — but how to distribute it and who needs what ...," his voice trails off again.

But Turgeon is up to the task. In fact, he's excited about it.

Aside from being a believer in the potential of a creative economy, Turgeon is just thrilled about the chance to show off the mill and the community.

He's not alone. Dozens of local people have been working — some at a feverish pitch — to make sure L-A shines during the conference. Volunteers have signed up to lead the walking tours, others rolled up their sleeves to give the mill a good scrubbing. Bates College is donating the food for the conference; Tom Platz, owner of Mill No. 3, is waiving any rental fee. Platz is even delaying a new tenant he has for the mill space until after the conference.

Financial support is homegrown as well. Harriman Associates of Auburn is the biggest sponsor of the conference — a mantle usually reserved for the likes of L.L. Bean, UNUM or one of the big banks. As one of the longest-standing examples of a creative business, the 134-year-old architectural firm has been one of the conference's biggest backers since last summer.

"Ed Cormier gets it," said Davis of the Harriman president. "He just stood up and said 'I'd love to lead this effort.'"

Platz is the second biggest sponsor, adding cash support to his in-kind contributions.

Of course, as developer of the

mill, Platz stands to gain from the conference exposure. More than 600 conference attendees will sample seminars on two floors of Mill No. 3 and many are expected to make the short trek to Mill No. 1 for the showcase.

"My dream is that somebody walking through (the mill complex) will say, 'Hey, this place catches my fancy and I want my name on it,'" said Chip Morrison, president of the Androscoggin Chamber of Commerce.

Some of the economic benefits to L-A are more immediate. Local hotels are booked for the conference and some businesses are extending hours. But the notion that the conference could act as a dry run for future statewide events is widespread.

"This is a dress rehearsal for the idea of an L-A convention center," said Beckie Conrad, a local businesswoman and member of the Maine Arts Commission who is chairing the host committee. "I hope people will start to think of us more like a community that's a destination."

"This says to people who ask why would anybody want to have a conference center in Lewiston-Auburn, because we're central and we have unique features," said Morrison.

### Right idea, right time?

Scott Christiansen works in Rumford, a historic papermill town about 43 miles upriver from L-A.

The cities can have their convention center idea. As director of the River Valley Growth Council, he's got some ideas already under way to promote a

creative economy in his neck of the woods.

"We recognized from the start that in a mill town, there's community, art and cultural influences that are assets," said Christiansen. He's begun assembling an inventory of those assets in the River Valley, with an eye toward hosting a huge cultural event that will draw people to the area.

"Now with the governor's conference, it puts everything on a whole different level," he said. "There'll be more resources and talent."

Christiansen is looking forward to picking the brains of as many people as he can at the conference. He's wants to make contacts, find out who's doing what where, locate funding sources and available grants, and learn how to avoid pot holes.

"I look at it as pretty cheap consulting," he said with a smile.

And he's not coming alone. Members of the growth council and local arts association, as well as town officials, are coming too.

That's exactly the cross section of attendees conference organizers were hoping for. In order for the concept of a creative economy to fly, there has to be broad community support. Economic developers have to work in tandem with local arts and cultural groups, bankers, entrepreneurs and public policy-makers to launch the idea.

And that's not easy, especially when the notion of a creative economy resists easy definition and analysis.

Economists Richard Barringer and Charles Colgan of the University of Southern Maine have been collecting data and crunching numbers for more than six months, trying to get a sense of the economic potential a creative economy represents for Maine.

But they've been stymied. People who are employed because of their creativity are like threads running through traditional industrial sectors. An enterprise such as Thos. Moser furniture is counted by the Department of Labor simply as a manufacturer, despite a workforce of highly skilled craftspersons and artisans.

Some analyses have shown that in New England, creative businesses account for only about 4 percent of the workforce, but that they are growing faster than the rest of the economy (14 percent a year vs. 8 percent).

But there are other, less obvious benefits than merely job creation. For instance, an economic developer who lures a manufacturer to an industrial park gets a tenant, more money on the tax rolls and 200 good-paying jobs. But the developer who helps lure an advertising firm, a photographic studio, a theater group, a Web design studio and a specialty furniture maker might not only get an equal number of jobs and taxes, but an untold amount of cache. That in turn attracts more people to the area and ancillary businesses like upscale restaurants, shops



**EARLIER THIS MONTH:** Peter Rinck, president of Rinck Advertising, talks with volunteers about the work that needs to be done during L-A Community Help Day at the Bates Mill. Residents and employees of local businesses helped get three mill spaces ready for the Blaine House Conference on the Creative Economy. The Auburn ad agency is the event planner and organized the volunteers.

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