

Getting creative with the economy of western Maine

By Mike Corrigan
Staff Writer

BROWNFIELD — What is the creative economy? And what is a nice, prosperous idea like this doing in a nice, not-so-prosperous place like Maine?

That an article on any part of the economy could be dated "Brownfield" is in itself somewhat of an upset. But it is, in a way, another testament to the strength and the boldness of the creative economy concept. Carol Noonan's new Stone Mountain Arts Center, which is not *exactly* located in the middle of nowhere — it's actually a bit off to one side of the middle of nowhere — hosted a recent conference on "The Creative Economy." A lot of people came to Brownfield for the Route 113 Corridor Committee's Dec. 8 meeting, and a goodly number of them apparently hoped

“ The creative are attracted to a place not because of its tax rate, but because of the quality of life... Therefore, a place's economic prosperity now depends more on diversity, healthy arts and cultural scenes, great universities, outdoor recreation and tolerance. ”

— Richard Florida, Carnegie-Mellon University

to find out what the creative economy *is*, exactly.

They learned that, and a bunch more.

Many also contributed some ideas about how the c.e. could be developed to Maine's advantage. To western Maine's advantage. Maybe even to your advantage.

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Let Toni Seger explain. For one thing, she's one of this area's major boosters of the c.e. and an early and faithful proponent, and, for a second

thing, well... she'll explain it, anyway, whether you ask her to or not!

Lovell's own ball of fire reports: "This has been a big part of my life for a long time. I was at the original conference with the Governor, where this first got its big boost in Maine, back in 2002. John Baldaccci looked across the table at me and basically said, 'Who the heck are you?' I said, 'I'm the one who sent you that e-mail.'"

Her e-mail, right on top of the Governor's impressive pile

of reports and other paperwork, talked enthusiastically about the creative economy, what it could do for Maine, and, not so incidentally, what it could do for John Baldaccci's political career. It gave the Democratic Governor another campaign platform plank. It gave him another way to focus on the way Maine should be, by emphasizing what Maine already is, and always has been.

Namely, a laboratory for the creative economy.

The creative economy

involves a bracing stew of the arts, culture, and quality of life. It focuses the benefits each can provide to a place's economy. Credited in recent years with lifting up the hearts of numerous troubled urban areas, some wondered if a critical mass of arts and culture could be developed sufficiently to allow the creative economy to work, in rural places like Maine.

Toni Seger has some news for you. It already is working.

"It's building," she said in a recent interview. "The main

thing is getting the word out, letting people know what we have here. And the artists themselves have to know how to market it. Organizing and supporting it is a big part of the effort. We already have a lot of wonderful artists and cultural attractions in western Maine, and the list is growing all the time."

While not so self-congratulatory that the movement will erect signs beside this or that roadside booth or museum exhibit saying, "Your Creative

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 Economy At Work," anyone who is observant can see the more subtle signs all around them. Look at the growing success of events such as arts fairs and craft shows. See the Maine Festival, and other big showcases. More locally, consider, for example, the sustained success of the Lovell Arts & Artists Show. Consider also that the artists at those shows, more and more, make their livings from their art. There is interest in artist's tours, as the Lake Region has seen. Think of the success of places such as the 302 Gallery in Bridgton, an artists' cooperative that "they" said wouldn't last a year, and anyway, was doomed to part-time status, at best. Yet Gallery 302 continues to be open every day; and the gallery provides art for the region and its visitors. The stuff sells; it encourages artists, who are boosted mainly by actually finding outlets for their creativity.

There are new galleries in Brownfield, and others have opened in the past five years around the area. One arts success seems to build on pioneering predecessor. Or consider the roaring success of last year's first annual Maine Blues Festival, held in Naples. Longstanding performing arts venues such as Deertrees — another place "they" said wouldn't be able to sustain any level of success — have been joined by the Denmark Arts Center, and by Noonan's own, highly-successful and innovative Stone Mountain Arts Center. They're all rolling along.

Ancillary interests also further spark business: history, antiquing, eco-tourism, and more. The lists keep growing. At some point, critical mass is reached, and passed, and an explosion occurs. Those who do the jewelry-making, sheep-herding, beekeeping, weaving, writing, painting, sculpting, Native American flute-making and so on, find a niche in the world. Right here in Maine. Right here in our own version of the creative economy.

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 Consider Janet Conner of Hiram. Hooked on rug hooking, she retired from teaching and thought she might want to

do something with her rugs. Specifically, her dream was to "be an artist full-time." She has succeeded at this through word of mouth, by participating faithfully at fairs and shows, and by keeping her name out there. The Internet has helped. Google "hooked rugs" and you'll find I Conner Hooked Rugs somewhere in your first few hits.

There is an Internet connection at the heart of the successes of several of these rural art businesses. It's the mass marketing of "targeted advertising." One exhibitor suggested buying space for awhile so that the business name can appear on the front page when a search engine is activated to the relevant subject.

Conner says "One-and-a-half days of my week is doing things to promote my business. I wish it didn't have to be that way, but it's necessary."

But some find that there's a critical mass of buyers around, these days, so they can grow the old-fashioned way. Bob and Theresa Prouty of Fryeburg started Northeast Gems six years ago. They've already had to move to a larger shop once, and may have to move to larger quarters again. By the simple expedient of providing an artistic service people like, but have trouble finding — "We help people design their own individual piece of jewelry," Bob Prouty said at the recent Route 113 Futures Forum — they have built a business that continues to blossom.

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 Toni Seger says: "A successful art gallery or craft store for preserving history, restoring buildings and engaging the community in telling its story. Look at Bridgton's downtown, for example. Gallery 302

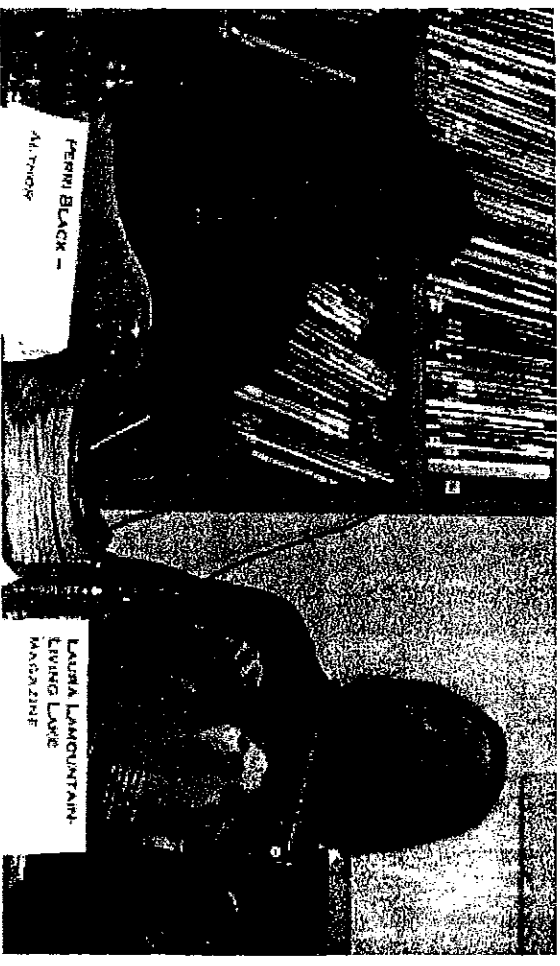
is one manifestation of this trend. Its Art in the Park Show in July has been very successful. The new Magic Lantern (privately-funded, with assistance from a town-approved TRF) will provide movies and a performing arts center of a kind. The Rufus Porter Museum prospered in its first phase, and is now looking to move downtown. There are two small bookstores thriving here. Steve Oliver took the old Smith Mill and made it into an artists' boutique, as Affinity Arts, with display and

workshop space available. The private club, The Big Kahuna, books nationally-known blues acts. There are numerous art and craft shops in the area, too. All in all, these ventures represent more sustained and vital arts and crafts, more culture, than one would have dared to predict for Bridgton 20 years ago. People might have been skeptical had you suggested that even one of these varied ventures would remain viable for long. But they're all going strong — and they're all, in a sense, in it together.

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 How to package and promote all this diverse spirit and enterprise remains a bit of a subject for debate. Certainly, the welcoming attitude towards arts and culture is perceived by people attracted to such things — and that includes large segments of the world's human population. It all factors into Maine's quality of life quotient, which was already high. "Cultural economics can be a crucial factor for decision-making in business location," Toni Seger reminds. "Cultural economics can play a role in downtown revitalization, in business attraction, and even in workforce development. It's the perfect thing for downtowns. You walk around. You go to a café. You see an exhibit."

Help is on the way. There are grants available from foundations and from the Maine Arts Commission. Maine Tourism gave a grant for a Fiber Arts Web site. The state runs a Creative Economy listserve. Artists can network more locally through the Western Maine Cultural Alliance.

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 The forum saw a need for continued and heightened private and public support for arts and culture. Support in the form



WRITING IS ESSENTIAL — Guest speakers from varying careers spoke to Stevens Brook Elementary School student before the holiday break about the importance of writing. The Writers Panel included SAD 61 Assistant Superintendent Kathleen Beecher, Pastor Dick Bennett of the First Congregational Church in Bridgton, Lisa Antel of Bridgton Academy, Dona Forke of The Healthy Maine Coalition, author Barbara Jenni, Sherry DeBerardinis of Chalmers Insurance, reporters Mike Corrigan and Wayne Rivet of The Bridgton News, writer and book reviewer Perri Black, Lake Living magazine owner and publisher Laurie LaMountain and Bridgton Police Chief Dave Lyons.

of getting the message out is particularly crucial.

But it's also vital that artists know how to promote themselves, Carol Noonan noted.

An accomplished singer and songwriter, Noonan is forever writing her own blurbs and press releases. She markets her own stuff. She promotes shows and performances at Stone Mountain. Songwriting is communication, and so is making sure people know your songs are out there. Use of the electronic and print media should be a key stone to any artist's success, she told the Dec. 8 forum. "The first challenge is to get people to know about you. Make it a story. Learn how to do this PR, or hire someone to do it for you," she advised.

Her gorgeous new arts center was built to her own specifications. She wanted a high-quality venue for performers, and she has brought and will continue to bring nationally-known, high-quality acts to the Brownfield woods, she said. She also performs often there herself; she has a rabid local following, as well as a regional reputation. *Boston Magazine* called Stone Mountain one of New England's 10 Best New Attractions.

The state has built some PR here. As Toni Seger noted: "Maine, as brand, is top shelf integrity, class, a terrific success. We have all that." The creative economy is already on its way. After all, the-its with complementary businesses: eco-tours, B&Bs, inns, restaurants, museums, transportation outlets. Noonan said the state could be more helpful to small busi-

nesses; actually, that's putting it mildly. She said the hurdles were "horrible." More advice: artists, even before getting started, do a business plan. If you're going to make a living at it, art and culture, by definition, is business, too. That's why it's called the creative economy. There are two parts to that designation. And it's already working here. As Toni Seger noted: "Maine, as brand, is top shelf integrity, class, a terrific success. We have all that."

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