



Northeast Kingdom Collaborative  
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**2016 Rural Economic Action Partnership (REAP) Strategic Plan**  
Northeast Kingdom of Vermont  
(Essex, Orleans, and Caledonia Counties)

Prepared by: The Northeast Kingdom Collaborative  
<http://www.nekcollaborative.org/>



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## **MISSION**

The Northeast Kingdom Enterprise Collaborative was formed in 1996 to develop ways for organizations to collaborate on economic and community development issues in Orleans, Essex and Caledonia Counties of Vermont, an area known as the Northeast Kingdom. Members include representatives of regional development organizations, social service and employment agencies, nonprofit organizations, conservation organizations, businesses, and local government officials, educators, health care providers.

## **REAP ZONE STATUS**

In 2000, the Northeast Kingdom Collaborative applied for and received the designation of Rural Economic Area Partnership (REAP) Zone by USDA Rural Development (RD), an arm of USDA focused on helping rural communities thrive. The REAP Initiative was established to address critical issues related to constraints in economic activity and growth, low density settlement patterns, stagnant or declining employment, and isolation that has led to disconnection from markets, suppliers, and centers of information and finance. The REAP Zone designation gives applicants access to a reserved set of funds only available to REAP Zones through some of USDA RD's 40 grant and loan programs. The 2014 Farm Bill extends the current REAP Zone status through the year 2018.

## **THE NEK COLLABORATIVE STRATEGIC PLAN**

To maintain the REAP Zone designation, the NEK Collaborative works with organizations and communities to develop and maintain a required strategic plan for the Northeast Kingdom. This plan highlights priorities set by the residents, businesses, and organizations across the region for community and economic development.

The priorities for the 2016 Strategic Plan were developed from the 2011 NEK Collaborative Strategic Plan and updated through a series of community visits during the Summer of 2015. Working with the Vermont Council on Rural Development, the NEK Collaborative met with community leaders, representatives from area organizations, and concerned citizens in three open community forums in Newport, Canaan, and Hardwick. The goal of each meeting was to share ideas for actions to support the economy, boost employment opportunities, and support the quality of life for Kingdom residents. These ideas were collected and reported back to the communities at the final "Decision Session" in Lyndonville to identify key priorities for collaborative action in the region. The final report can be viewed here: [http://vtrural.org/sites/default/files/NEKIdeaSessionFinalReport7\\_15\\_0.pdf](http://vtrural.org/sites/default/files/NEKIdeaSessionFinalReport7_15_0.pdf) In addition to these community meetings, the NEK Collaborative visited the Rotary clubs of Lyndon, Newport and St. Johnsbury to solicit input and feedback on the priorities from businesses.

## **THE ROLE OF THE NEK COLLABORATIVE STRATEGIC PLAN IN USDA-RD GRANT APPLICATIONS**

The Strategic Plan maintained for REAP Zone status by the NEK Collaborative is a citizen-led effort to enhance economic development in the Kingdom. For an organization or community to access USDA REAP Zone set-aside funding, the proposed project must be endorsed by the NEK Collaborative as meeting at least one priority of the NEK Collaborative Strategic Plan. Prior to submitting an application for REAP Zone funds, applicants are required to submit a Letter of Intent (LOI) to the NEK Collaborative Board for review and endorsement. Details are included in the USDA application guidelines.

In an effort to minimize duplication of efforts and promote sustainability of project initiatives, the NEK Collaborative strongly encourages applicants to seek out and form partnerships. These partnerships should be referred to in their letter of intent. During the endorsement review process, the NEK Collaborative will make every effort to identify opportunities for partnerships. Applicants whose projects would benefit from partnerships will be notified and given the opportunity to re-submit a letter of intent indicating collaboration. To promote sustainability of project initiatives, applicants for REAP zone set-aside funds are also encouraged to identify additional local and regional resources that will continue to be available for the project after the REAP Zone funding has ended.



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## BY THE NUMBERS: SNAPSHOT OF THE NORTHEAST KINGDOM

The Northeast Kingdom of Vermont is arguably one of the most beautiful regions in the State of Vermont. Picturesque villages are scattered across countryside and the great outdoors offers opportunities for recreational activities in every season. There is a strong sense of history and community within the towns and villages coupled with an appreciation for the independence and privacy of individuals.

But while true, this idyllic view masks deep and persistent challenges to life in these three counties. The Kingdom is the most isolated and sparsely populated area of the state. The loss of the railroad and manufacturing industries over the decades and the decline in family farms have left town and villages without an economic foundation. This has created generational poverty spread across vast expanses of terrain and has left community infrastructure with no reliable means of support or development. Unemployment rates are consistently the highest in the state and the cycle of unemployment and poverty has significantly impacted educational attainment and health outcomes, further compromising the future of the region. The following statistics provide a snapshot of some of the economic and social characteristics of the Northeast Kingdom.



### POPULATION

	2010	2015	2020
Population	64,764	65,841	67,112
Households	26,691	27,473	28,166
Families	17,265	17,553	17,865
Average Household Size	2.34	2.32	2.31



### HEALTH

	HEALTH OUTCOMES RANKING (of 14 Counties)	Population per PRIMARY CARE PHYSICIANS	Population per DENTISTS
VERMONT	N/A	922:1	1,567:1
Caledonia	9	1,197:1	1,484:1
Orleans	13	1,427:1	3,881:1
Essex	14	3,113:1	3,106:1



### ECONOMIC

Median Household Income	Average Household Income	Household Per Capita Income
\$41,628	\$53,504	\$22,602



### HIGHER EDUCATION

Total 2015 Population 25+	45,606
Less than 9th Grade	4.8%
9th - 12th Grade, No Diploma	7.6%
High School Graduate	33.8%
GED/Alternative Credential	4.5%
Some College, No Degree	17.7%
Associate Degree	8.4%
Bachelor's Degree	14.3%
Graduate/Professional Degree	8.9%



### 2015 Employed Population 16+ by Industry (top 10)

Total	30,438
Health Care/Social Assistance	15.6%
Educational Services	11.8%
Retail Trade	11.8%
Manufacturing	11.2%
Construction	9.2%
Other Services	5.7%
Public Administration	5.6%
Accommodation and Food Services	5.5%
Agriculture/Forestry	4.5%
Transportation and Warehousing	3.5%



### POVERTY RATES

VERMONT	11.8%
Caledonia	14.1%
Orleans	15.4%
Essex	15.9%



### AVERAGE WEEKLY WAGE

U.S.	Vermont	Caledonia	Orleans	Essex
\$1,035	\$882	\$753	\$695	\$692



## 2016 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

The Northeast Kingdom Collaborative Strategic Plan is a citizen-led effort to address some of the challenges in the Northeast Kingdom. The following priorities in economic and community development were identified by residents, businesses, and organizations across the region in a series of community forums during the summer and fall of 2015. The data provided with each priority highlights opportunities for development. The data is meant to inform potential projects and can be used as a baseline to gauge project impact.

### **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

Economic development in the NEK should focus on increasing access to capital and technical assistance to support new and emerging business. NVDA and VDOL are working on a pilot project with secondary schools in the St. J - Lyndon area linking schools with career opportunities in manufacturing but more such programs are needed; VT Small Business Development is focusing on entrepreneurship and this will be promoted by the Vermont Regional Development Commissions. Workforce development continues to be a challenge in the Kingdom with companies unable to fill positions with qualified workers. For business expansion and recruitment, the supply of 'existing and available' manufacturing facilities is limited and opportunities to develop new facilities to accommodate known interests are beginning.

- Despite the availability of open positions, the Northeast Kingdom consistently has the highest unemployment rates in Vermont.  
Vermont (4.1%) Caledonia County (5.0%) Orleans County (6.4%) Essex County (6.8%)
- The Northeast Kingdom consistently has the lowest wages in Vermont.  
Vermont (\$827) Caledonia County (\$717) Orleans County (\$667) Essex County (\$668)
- In FY 2015, while employment across all industries increased in Orleans County (1.7%), it dropped in Caledonia County (-2.4%) and Essex County (-7.1%).

### **EDUCATION**

The NEK should create a regional strategic plan for the future of education that will raise aspirations for young people in the area and ensure future prosperity. This effort should encourage greater collaboration between schools, communities, and businesses to identify the skills necessary to thrive in the region's workforce. Programs such as NVDA and VDOL's pilot project with secondary schools in the St. J - Lyndon area linking schools with career opportunities in manufacturing should be expanded. Any effort should have the active participation of youth, contextualize the region's economy in relation to globalization, and integrate existing community resources into the educational delivery system. Improved learning opportunities in the Kingdom are supported by statewide policy around universal pre-K, unification of school districts, and personalized learning plans recently enacted.

The level of education attainment is one of the defining markers of income inequality. In the Northeast Kingdom:

- 50.4% of the population aged 25+ have a high school diploma (or equivalent) or less:
  - 12.4% of the population aged 25+ have no high school diploma;
  - 38% of the population aged 25+ have a high school diploma or equivalent;
  - 50% of those unemployed hold a high school diploma or equivalent;
- The Vermont high school graduation rate (2013) is 86.6%  
but only 75.2% of economically disadvantaged students graduated from high school (2013)
- Vermont's secondary school dropout rate is 9.6%  
but for Vermont's economically disadvantaged students the dropout rate is 18 %
- Vermont's college enrollment rate is 52% despite the high graduation rate;



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## 2016 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

### DOWNTOWNS AND VILLAGE CENTERS

Communities should develop initiatives to strategically grow, revitalize, preserve and maintain historic downtowns, village centers, buildings, and rural and scenic landscapes that will enable the communities to retain links to their past, maintain their traditions, improve quality of life and enhance economic development.

- Vermont's thriving downtowns and quaint village centers are widely recognized as a key part of the state's allure where visitors and residents find the distinctive local businesses, historic buildings, and rich cultural and social activities that form Vermont's special sense of community.
- Vermont's Downtown and Village Designation program recognizes and supports local revitalization efforts across the state providing specialized training, dedicated staff and funding to help build strong communities. Downtown and Village Designation is a valuable tool for revitalization and can prove valuable to commercial properties in downtowns and village centers.
- The 2014 numbers, based on 22 of 24 designated downtowns across the state, show that continued investment in downtown amenities and infrastructure leverages millions in private investment, attracts new business and jobs and brings new vitality and energy to community centers.
  - Public Investment \$22,649,336
  - Private Investment \$31,930,024
  - Business Growth
    - 93 Net New Businesses
    - 46 Expanded Businesses
    - 301 Net New Jobs Created
  - Downtown Organization Volunteer Hours 50,417 Hours valued at \$1,104,636

### HOUSING

The housing stock available in the NEK should be expanded, adapted and improved to ensure that there is safe, sustainable, and affordable housing for residents across the socio-economic spectrum.

- 41% of the housing stock in the Northeast Kingdom was built before 1960;
- 11% of housing stock in the Northeast Kingdom was built during 2000 – 2009;
  - Only 0.2% of housing stock in the Northeast Kingdom was built after 2010;
- 37 % of owner-occupied households in the Northeast Kingdom spend more than 30% of household income on mortgage costs;
- 51% of renter-occupied households in the Northeast Kingdom spend more than 30% of household income on gross rent (rent and utilities);
- Older housing stock tends to be energy inefficient. Efficiency improvements, such as those offered by NETO and other programs, are one way to make housing more affordable.



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## 2016 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

### TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Access to affordable, high-speed broadband and cell phone service must be improved for the future economic vitality and public safety in the region. There still exists a need for capital to bring high-speed telecommunications to un-served and under-served areas of the region.

- 78% of people in the Northeast Kingdom consider their landline to be their primary telephone service compared to 56% of people in the Champlain Valley;
- 68% of all landline customers in the Northeast Kingdom also use a cell phone compared to 81% of landline users in the Champlain Valley;
- 63% of cell-phone users in the Northeast Kingdom rate the state-wide cell phone coverage as fair to poor compared to 48% of cell-phone users in the Champlain Valley;
- 37% of cell-phone users in the Northeast Kingdom rate the state-wide cell phone coverage as good to excellent compared to 49% of cell-phone users in the Champlain Valley;

### TRANSPORTATION

Public transportation should be expanded and be innovative to ensure choice and affordability for residents while also supporting the economic vitality of the region's downtowns and businesses. Carpooling, van-pooling, and telecommuting options increasingly are being utilized by employers/employees and should be encouraged. Incentives are available for Use of electric vehicles (EVs), including charging stations.

- There are 2,546 miles of roadway in the Northeast Kingdom (18% of all roads in Vermont)  
60% of these roads (or 1,527 miles) are unpaved;
- Of Northeast Kingdom workers age 16+
  - 77% drive alone to work
  - 9.9% carpool
  - 3.8% walk to work
  - 0.3% use public transportation
- Average travel time to work is 23.4 minutes

### TOURISM AND RECREATION

The Northeast Kingdom is a unique and special place in Vermont. Cooperative marketing of the region, including shared marketing costs, should be encouraged. Marketing and promotions should include telling the story of the NEK, highlighting assets and resources and making an effort to share positive stories about the quality of life in the region. Sharing data between businesses is also important. Community events should leverage the Northeast Kingdom brand and highlight the region's many assets.

- Visitors made an estimated 12.8 million person trips to Vermont for leisure, business or personal travel
- Direct spending by visitors for goods and services: \$1.82 billion. Vacation homeowners spent an additional \$670 million.
- Visitor spending supports an estimated 30,000 jobs for Vermonters (~8.0% of all Vermont jobs).
- Sectors of the Vermont tourism economy, like retail and dining, are 1-2 times more dependent on visitor spending than the national average.



## 2016 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

### WORKING LANDS

The working landscape is a key asset of the Northeast Kingdom that helps define the region and points a way to future prosperity. The working landscape includes viable and diverse farming operations, food businesses built on local products, wood products operations, logging and forestry businesses as well as land and water settings for recreational opportunities. It should be fostered through increased collaboration, sound ecological practices, the development of new markets, greater access to financing, innovation, and vertical integration of the supply chain for value added agro/forest products. About 78% of Vermont’s land is forested while another % 20 is used for agriculture .

#### In forestry:

- The forest-based industry (forest products, maple syrup products, and Christmas trees) contributes \$861 million in sales to the state economy annually and provides direct employment for about 6,600 people.
- Forests also provide a backdrop for the Vermont tourism industry. Forest-and-farm-related recreation and tourism, provide an additional \$1,936,000 per year to the state’s economy.

#### In agriculture

- the NEK is the only sub state region which has it's own food system plan and is becoming known throughout the state for its Farm to School initiative, Community Gardens, gleaning and farm operators, and promoting local products in its restaurants.
- The following table show overall significant growth in the sale of agricultural products between 2007—2012:

	Agricultural Products		Milk from Cows 1/			Maple Syrup 1/		
	(\$000's) 2012	% Chg 2007-12	(\$000's) 2012	% of Ag Products	% of State	(\$000's) 2012	% of Ag Products	% of State
Vermont	\$776,105	15.2%	\$504,884	65.1%	100.0%	\$32,419	4.2%	100.0%
Caledonia	\$37,245	18.1%	\$25,677	68.9%	5.1%	\$900	2.4%	2.8%
Essex	\$11,651	-4.1%	\$6,701	57.5%	1.3%	\$191	\$191	0.6%
Orleans	\$99,308	20.6%	\$77,547	78.1%	15.4%	\$2,678	2.7%	8.3%

- As an outcome of this growth there is a need for new storage facilities for agricultural commodities, especially cold storage facilities.



## 2016 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

### WORKING LANDS—continued

The following tables show significant growth in food manufacturing (sector 311) in both Caledonia and Orleans counties from 2001 through 2014.

- Growth occurred in the number of establishments and the number of covered employees.

Sector	description	Establishments					Covered employees				
		2001	2006	2009	2011	2014	2001	2006	2009	2011	2014
311	food manufacturing	15	14	17	21	21	132	211	177	264	299
	Caledonia	8	6	9	11	12	33	101	37	115	118
	Orleans	6	8	8	10	9	97	110	140	149	181
	Essex	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0

- Growth occurred in overall wages as well as in the average wage per employee.

Sector	description	Total Wages					Average Wage				
		2001	2006	2009	2011	2014	2001	2006	2009	2011	2014
311	food manufacturing		\$7,666,584	\$7,695,009	\$11,605,346	\$13,373,621					
	Caledonia	\$597,589	\$3,031,770	\$1,151,231	\$4,651,580	\$4,859,402	\$18,340	\$30,067	\$31,184	\$40,449	\$41,298
	Orleans	\$3,681,717	\$4,634,814	\$6,543,778	\$6,953,766	\$8,514,219	\$37,923	\$42,134	\$42,780	\$46,800	\$47,061
	Essex	n/a	\$	\$	\$	\$	n/a	\$	\$	\$	\$

- Wages are further broken down as a percentage of housing wage

*Average Wage in 311 as a percentage of housing wage					
	2001	2006	2009	2011	2014
Caledonia	\$ 18,340	\$ 30,067	\$ 31,184	\$ 40,449	\$ 41,298
Orleans	\$ 37,923	\$ 42,134	\$ 42,780	\$ 46,800	\$ 47,061

#### CALEDONIA

Hourly- Caledonia

1. Rural Living wage, 1 adult
2. Rural Living wage, 1 adult & 1 child

Hourly wage as a % of 1

Hourly wage as a % of 2

	2001	2006	2009	2011	2014
Hourly- Caledonia	\$ 8.82	\$ 14.46	\$ 14.99	\$ 19.45	\$ 19.85
1. Rural Living wage, 1 adult			\$ 13.04		\$ 15.42
2. Rural Living wage, 1 adult & 1 child			\$ 23.04		\$ 24.57
Hourly wage as a % of 1			115.0%		128.8%
Hourly wage as a % of 2			65.1%		62.8%

#### ORLEANS

Hourly - Orleans

1. Rural Living wage, 1 adult
2. Rural Living wage, 1 adult & 1 child

Hourly wage as a % of 1

Hourly wage as a % of 2

	2001	2006	2009	2011	2014
Hourly - Orleans	\$ 18.23	\$ 20.26	\$ 20.57	\$ 22.50	\$ 22.63
1. Rural Living wage, 1 adult			\$ 13.04		\$ 15.42
2. Rural Living wage, 1 adult & 1 child			\$ 23.04		\$ 24.57
Hourly wage as a % of 1			157.7%		146.7%
Hourly wage as a % of 2			89.3%		92.1%

\*Source: Vermont Department of Labor Economic Labor & Market Information



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## 2016 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

The following goals are listed in the 2011 NEK Collaborative Rural Economic Action Partnership (REAP) Strategic Plan . They continue to be critical on-going goals for economic and community development in the Northeast Kingdom.

### **ARTS AND CULTURE**

Goal: To employ our artistic and cultural offerings to the benefit of the Northeast Kingdom (NEK) economy via the enhancement of efforts surrounding the creation, organization, awareness, marketing, and execution of artistic and cultural offerings within Vermont's Northeast Kingdom.

### **COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP**

Goal: Achieve significantly increased and sustained interaction, communication, and involvement in regional development by a demographically diverse group of community members, business leaders, and youth.

### **ENERGY AND WEATHERIZATION**

Goal: The residents and communities of the Northeast Kingdom will plan, advocate for, and support: energy efficiency and conservation; the development of appropriate renewable energy sources; access to diverse, reliable, affordable, and environmentally responsible energy supplies.

### **HEALTH AND WELLNESS**

Goal: To encourage the development of collaborative, community-based strategies designed to enhance the health and well-being of area residents.

### **HUMAN SERVICES**

Goal: To work collaboratively with various human services agencies and community partners in order to lessen the impact of poverty on the families of the Northeast Kingdom.

### **WATER AND WASTEWATER INFRASTRUCTURE**

Goal: Municipal water and wastewater infrastructure will be upgraded or made available to effectively serve new and existing development and the region's communities. Existing water and wastewater systems will be maintained through community capital budget planning assuring highest potential performance and reducing risk of failure and injury to public health.



## APPENDIX

The following reports from the 2015 community meetings as well as the 2013 Regional Plan for the Northeast Kingdom were used by the Collaborative to identify the eight strategic priorities in this report for the communities of the Northeast Kingdom. Copies of these reports can be found with the Strategic Plan on the Northeast Kingdom Collaborative web site located at <http://www.nekcollaborative.org/planning/>

- The 2011 NEK Collaborative Rural Economic Action Partnership (REAP) Strategic Plan
- 2015 St. Johnsbury Community Visit (Vermont Council on Rural Development)
- 2015 Ideas for the Future of the NEK: Community visits in Canaan, Hardwick, and Newport
- 2013 NEK Today and Tomorrow: a Northeast Kingdom Summit Conference on Managing Change for the Best Future of the NEK
- 2013 Northeast Kingdom Regional Plan (Northeastern Vermont Development Association)
- 2011 Regional Food System plan

Data for the statistics included in this plan was drawn from the following resources:

- U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts
- Population Estimates, American Community Survey, Census of Population and Housing, State and County Housing Unit Estimates, County Business Patterns, Nonemployer Statistics, Economic Census, Survey of Business Owners, Building Permits
- Vermont Agency of Natural Resources
- Vermont Department of Tourism and Marketing *Benchmark Study of the Impact of Visitor Spending on the Vermont Economy: 2013*
- *The Robert Wood Johnson County Health Statistics, 2015*
- *The VSAC Special Report: Vermont's Class of 2012: Highlights and challenges for pursuing a postsecondary education*
- Vermont Department of Labor, Economic, Labor & Market Information

The following table highlights strategies for community and economic development suggested by residents and business leaders during the 2015 community forums and business meetings.

<b>COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT</b>
<b>Tell the Story of the Communities in the NEK</b> – Broadcast all we have, highlight assets and resources; make effort to write press releases and share positive stories about the quality of life in the NEK;
<b>Improve and Expand Housing</b> – Across the spectrum in NEK; Mixed-use housing offer market rate, affordable family, and senior housing. Housing stock old and energy-inefficient;
<b>Engage Youth in Future of NEK</b> – Build discussion of the future with youth; Encourage identification of projects that youth could decide to lead to better their communities;
<b>Improve and Expand Public Transportation</b> – Uber, ride-sharing, bus, jitney services can find expanded markets and can adapt through smart technology to better serve the needs of towns and residents;
<b>ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT</b>
<b>Build NEK Funds to Support Small Business Start-Ups</b> – Funding would be focused on working to seed, attract and nurture small businesses; Increase available development funds to offer more financial support for small business start-ups;
<b>Advance the Regional Food Economy</b> – Advance agriculture throughout the Kingdom; Promote “beer geek culture” and specialty foods; Spur new farms; Expand Farm-to-School;
<b>Advance Broadband and Cellular Infrastructure</b> – Universal Broadband and cell phone service crucial for economic progress and for retaining and attracting youth, entrepreneurs, and businesses;
<b>Grow and Promote Community Events</b> – Build sense of community, belonging; an economic development opportunity to attract tourists to enjoy the region;