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NEK Collaborative: Ideas for the Future of the NEK Final Report

August 2015

The “Ideas for the Future of the NEK” forum series was produced by the Vermont Council on Rural Development for the NEK Collaborative to gather ideas and set directions for work to advance the prosperity and vitality of NEK communities.

In the Summer of 2015, NEK leaders, organizations, and concerned citizens from around the region came together in three open community forums in Newport, Canaan, and Hardwick to share their ideas for actions that can support the economy, boost opportunities, and support the quality of life of Kingdom residents. Ideas ranged from strengthening downtowns and village centers and supporting small business development, to supporting quality education and engaging youth. Other ideas focused on building a strong sense of community, telling the story of the NEK, and supporting enhancing the region’s farm and forested landscape. All ideas came from a shared dedication to advancing key values and common points of vision for the future. These ideas were collected and reported back to residents at the final “Decision Session” in Lyndonville to identify key priorities for collaborative action in the region.

This Final Report documents the “Ideas for the Future of the NEK” process, capturing notes and ideas from each public forum, collecting shared points of vision for the future of the region, and documenting action priorities for the Kingdom. This report will be shared with kingdom residents and with the NEK Collaborative members to inform their collective work to advance the NEK economy and local communities.

Points of Vision

The following points of vision were shared by Kingdom residents at public forums in Newport, Canaan, and Hardwick. These vision points are not meant to be a picture of current reality in the Kingdom or a prescription for the future. Rather, they share a set of broad hopes that Kingdom residents aspire to for the long term good of the region.

“Northeast Kingdom Residents look to a Future Where...”

- ✓ The economy in the NEK is based on mutually supportive business and community relationships – a shared and coordinated economy. NEK businesses are small and diverse, encouraging local jobs and purchasing, while having minimal environmental impact.
- ✓ There is diversity in the kinds of businesses found in the community, building community and economic resiliency. Businesses have strong local roots, but also out-of-state reach.
- ✓ As a result, the NEK is a community where men and women have equal access to good paying jobs and equal pay for those jobs and where young people have productive work and a meaningful role in the community.
- ✓ The NEK community expands a diverse economy and population demographics over time making it a more attractive place for young people and new businesses.
- ✓ NEK towns are places with vibrant downtown centers, where you can access what you need, surrounded by agricultural lands.
- ✓ The strong agricultural economy keeps land in production maintaining the beauty of the open working landscape and supporting agritourism as a significant part of the local economy. There are food hubs throughout the region that support farmers, the local economy, and provide food security for all residents. Agriculture expands from single crop farming to diversification, value added, and connects to the forest products industry – including a regional pellet mill.
- ✓ There is ready access to broadband, universal cell service, and a strong digital economy in the NEK that raises the profile of the region. Improved broadband and cell service allow people to work out of their homes. The region supports home businesses. Broadband internet and cell service allow visitors to stay in the area longer.
- ✓ The beautiful natural assets of the NEK are protected and used to attract tourists and potential residents. A thriving tourism industry is a lead contributor to the diverse and viable local economy in the region.
- ✓ There is a strong sense of belonging and community and many more young people are involved and active in the community.
- ✓ There is a strong focus on excellence in the education system. Education is integrated and place-based. Schools are community based and financially sustainable. Small schools are supported

and there is access to well-coordinated, quality, and affordable childcare. Youth have opportunities for work study/trade programs that allows them to learn a trade while in school and contribute to the local economy and there are expanded practical higher education opportunities in the Kingdom. The Kingdom retains our smart young people and attracts others.

- ✓ Infrastructure, such as town sewer systems allows for growth of housing and the expansion of local business.
- ✓ There is a good public transportation system in the NEK that works for everyone.
- ✓ The Kingdom has quality affordable rental housing and is available for seniors to allow for aging in place.
- ✓ The NEK region is a sharing community and a caring community. We do a better job connecting with resources and supporting all of our residents.
- ✓ Homeowners and landlords have access to technical assistance to renovate and repair older buildings.
- ✓ NEK communities embrace racial justice and are inclusive and sensitive to issues of diversity. This contributes to economic development because people of different races and ethnicities feel welcome.
- ✓ The NEK is a community where girls and women are free from sexual violence.
- ✓ There are opportunities for younger people to return to after having left the area.
- ✓ “We look to the past to guide the future.”
- ✓ There is a focus on healthy communities supported by walkable downtowns and comprehensive approaches to preventative healthcare.
- ✓ Families are strengthened by the larger community – not undermined.
- ✓ There is a corrections system that works to help people successfully transition back into the community.
- ✓ The NEK continues to celebrate the good quality of life in the community, and protects its natural and human assets while maintaining the region’s “aspiration quotient” for a better tomorrow.
- ✓ The region is able to grow but not at the expense of its local connectivity (i.e. community connections). Regular community events build and deepen connections and celebrate the NEK way of life.
- ✓ The impact of climate change is included in planning decisions and businesses use less energy and more green energy.
- ✓ The NEK Collaborative fulfills its mission; collaboration is a *reality*. A diverse group of stakeholders works to find ways to collaborate and coordinate community and economic development efforts employing a collective impact model.

Strengthening the NEK Collaborative

The NEK Collaborative has a critically important role to play as a convener and leader of collective action for the benefit of the communities of the kingdom. Participants in public forums emphasized significant needs and had recommendations for Collaborative Action.

Residents of the NEK see a strong need for the collaborative planning, partnership, and action of an overarching organization like the NEK Collaborative and would like to see a strong and expanded Collaborative in the future. Some residents believe that the NEK Collaborative should expand its facilitative leadership by bringing NEK organizations together to address fundamental challenges and realize major opportunities for the future of the Kingdom. For example, it could bring Selectboards together to review common issues and resources, consider infrastructure needs, and explore and encourage regional cooperation in services and programs. In many other arenas, the Collaborative could set structure for partnership meetings to address regional priorities, or to share with local officials all the potentially available resources that could be tapped to advance their communities.

Some residents believe that the NEK Collaborative could increase communication with NEK communities by inviting local representation from each town to be on its governing body. It could take the lead in bringing business leaders together with aspiring entrepreneurs to create a Kingdom-wide support network and ensure that available resources for small businesses are well-known and accessed. It could be more active in advancing its central work of framing planning that invites key partners to “join the conversation” toward action on key priorities or to improve communication and collaboration across people and groups with shared interests. The Collaborative can build better channels for information sharing and communication, and identify more ways to strengthen ties among community members or stakeholder groups who currently never interact.

Key Action Priorities for the Future of the NEK

The following priorities were selected by participants at the Decision Session at Lyndon State College in Lyndonville on August 6th. NEK residents reviewed the list of both Community Development and Economic Development ideas and then had the opportunity to champion their priorities for the future through reasoned arguments and thoughtful reflection. In the end, through a weighted voting exercise, participants chose the following 8 issues as key directions for action that can powerfully leverage community strength and positive economic development for the future of the Northeast Kingdom.

A. Community Development Priorities:

Tell the Story of Communities in the NEK

NEK Communities and the Kingdom as a whole have to better tell their story, broadcast all they have, and highlight their assets and resources. A concerted effort to write more press releases and intentionally share positive stories about the quality of life in the NEK could let people know about positive and exciting things happening in the community. This works internally to build community self-esteem, and externally, to make the town interesting and attractive to visitors and potential residents.

Improve and Expand Housing

There is room and opportunity to expand and improve housing across the spectrum in the NEK. Mixed-use housing could offer market rate apartments, affordable family housing, and additional senior housing. In addition, much of the housing stock in the kingdom is old and energy-inefficient. Advancing retrofits and housing upgrades could be a great benefit. New housing is also needed, especially reasonably affordable quality rental units; an effort should be made to expand these units in villages throughout the NEK.

Engage Youth in the Future of the NEK

Build a discussion of the future of the region for youth; this could be a conference or series of dialogues that could encourage the identification of projects youth could decide to lead to better their communities.

Improve and Expand Public Transportation

In an age with internet capacities and climate changes, public transportation is both more important than ever, but also smarter and more flexible to rural needs. Uber (a privatized, on-demand, taxi-like service and on-line ride platform), ride-sharing, bus and jitney services can find expanded markets and can adapt through smart technology to better serve the custom needs of towns and residents. Improving public transportation can save money for families and offer people socially responsible transportation choices.

B. Economic Development Priorities

Build NEK Funds to Support Small Business Start-Ups

The NEK could increase available development funds to offer more financial support for small business start-ups. For example, a private equity fund could be built for the NEK where business people could lend back and forth like Hardwick entrepreneurs did to build the food economy there. Wealthier members of the NEK community could be asked for their leadership with donations. Funding would be focused on working to seed, attract, and nurture small businesses rather than large companies with the goal of advancing business diversity with a particular focus on those that are woman-owned or supporting young entrepreneurs. Towns or the region could also work to enact tax breaks for people who want to build or expand small businesses here. Training for start-up businesses could help them add value to the local economy and opening underused buildings or vacant space for co-working, incubators or just cheap start up space could also attract start-ups and stimulate local activity.

Advance the Regional Food Economy

A systematic effort could be led to advance agriculture throughout the Kingdom. Key features would be to promote a “beer geek culture” and specialty foods as foundations to encourage agrotourism at the regional level. The NEK can tell the story in a way to make farming cool again with new branding for NEK food products and helping farms grow and be sustainable. In addition to spurring new farms and value added opportunities for youth, “retirement farms” could be developed where retired people looking for new/communal experiences can farm. Expanding Farm-to-School successes is another important component. Production, storage, aggregation, marketing, infrastructure/energy development, and distribution systems can all be improved and expanded to spur additional economic activity. Some of the next stage of this effort could include developing vertically structured business models that can benefit more local owners/producers in partnership. Affordable food access for all is a major goal, and employee-owned farms could help to make farming more viable.

Advance Broadband and Cellular Infrastructure

Universal broadband and cell phone service is crucial for economic progress and for retaining and attracting youth, entrepreneurs, and businesses for the future of the NEK. An initiative could build on the progress that has already been made to complete the effort for universal affordable services in the region.

Grow and Promote Community Events

Events are not only a way to bring NEK residents together to build a sense of community, belonging, and togetherness; they are also an economic development opportunity as they attract tourists from all over the world to enjoy what the region has to offer. The NEK could focus on growing and promoting community events that are designed to celebrate and share the Kingdom’s many assets including local food, culture and arts, sports and recreation, and the natural beauty of the region.

Ideas for the Future of the NEK for Prioritization

The following ideas for action were gathered at three public forums in Newport, Canaan, and Hardwick as contributions to the strategic planning of the Collaborative, or for action by organizations and individuals working for the collective good of the kingdom. For convenience in prioritization, they were broken into Community Priorities and Economic Development Priorities, even though, in practice, the two go hand in hand.

A. Community Development Ideas

Improve Health and Well Being

Community health and wellness should be improved in the Kingdom by expanding recreation, education for health, wellness activities, improving primary care and prevention, youth services, mental health services. A center for health and food education in the NEK could offer opportunities for people to learn to prepare foods to help address health issues.

Improve and Expand Housing

There is room and opportunity to expand and improve housing across the spectrum in the NEK. Mixed-use housing could offer market rate apartments, affordable family housing, and additional senior housing. In addition, much of the housing stock in the kingdom is old and energy-inefficient. Advancing retrofits and housing upgrades could be a great benefit. New housing is also needed, especially reasonably affordable quality rental units; an effort should be made to expand these units in villages throughout the NEK.

Develop a Center for Wellness in the NEK

With all its environmental and healthy food assets, the NEK could support the establishment of a private sector business that would act as a Center for Wellness. Services could include residential and out-patient services for diabetes or chronic care with a compendium of wrap-around services all available in one place (physical therapy, nutrition, health coaching, etc.) to help people build and take ownership over their own health care.

Expand Co-Housing and Intergenerational Housing

The NEK should look to systematically expand intergenerational housing opportunities. With aging residents in large older homes, there is room for mixed housing that could provide affordable options for young people in ways that can improve the quality of life of all.

Improve and Expand Public Transportation

In an age with internet capacities and climate changes, public transportation is both more important than ever, but also smarter and more flexible to rural needs. Uber (a privatized, on-demand, taxi-like service and on-line ride platform), ride-sharing, bus and jitney services can find expanded markets and can adapt through smart technology to better serve the custom needs of towns and residents. Improving public transportation can save money for families and offer people socially responsible transportation choices.

Support Walkable, Bike-able Communities

More and more, tourists and residents want villages and downtown to be walkable, safe, and welcoming to bikers and outdoor enthusiasts. Convening leaders in the NEK to frame and advance

ways to improve bike and pedestrian pathways, sidewalks, and infrastructure could build momentum and local and regional collaboration.

Protect the Land and the Environment

Aside from its people, the most precious asset of the NEK is the land and waters that define it. A major effort should expand the conservation of natural resources and farm land to ensure that these valuable assets are preserved for the long term future.

Provide Diversity Training

Area businesses and organizations could offer regular racial, gender, and cultural competency training for employees to support new immigrants to the kingdom, to make the region more attractive to young people, and to promote fairness and sensitivity in the workplace.

Develop a Substance Abuse Rehabilitation Program

The NEK needs to develop a drug rehabilitation program that addresses the needs of users and their families and helps people recover from addiction, hold jobs, and sustain their families.

Improve Social Services

Reenergize social services and support the region's social service agencies from food shelves to NEK Community Action. Advocate for funding for after-school programs and social services. Look for resources to build summer camp opportunities. Expand volunteerism to support NEKCA and other agencies.

Engage Youth in the Future of the NEK

Build a discussion of the future of the region for youth; this could be a conference or series of dialogues that could encourage the identification of projects youth could decide to lead to better their communities.

Celebrate, Preserve, and Beautify Downtowns

A key focus for quality of life and for attracting tourists and residents is to preserve heritage buildings, strengthen downtown infrastructure, plan for downtown commerce, open vistas and river frontage, and beautify streets and buildings. Investigate what resources are available for the communal purchase of blighted properties or zoning or other public means to encourage positive management of unkempt downtown structures. Redeveloped space could provide galleries, places to eat out, community gathering spaces, and recreation opportunities.

Improve Public Safety

Identify and promote strategies to increase public safety in the Kingdom such as working with local law enforcement to explore community policing models, connecting law enforcement to schools and youth, and implementing neighborhood watch programs.

Tell the Story of Communities in the NEK

NEK Communities and the Kingdom as a whole have to better tell their story, broadcast all they have, and highlight their assets and resources. A concerted effort to write more press releases and intentionally share positive stories about the quality of life in the NEK could let people know about positive and exciting things happening in the community. This works internally to build community self-esteem, and externally, to make the town interesting and attractive to visitors and potential residents.

The following action idea was added at the Decision Session on August 6th:

Expand Quality Affordable Early Education Opportunities in the NEK

Learning and development begin at birth. In order to ensure that the youngest NEK residents are set up to succeed; and to cultivate the next generation of NEK leaders, workers, parents, and community members, the region should invest in quality early learning programs that are accessible and affordable for all.

B. Economic Development Ideas

Build NEK Funds to Support Small Business Start-Ups

The NEK could increase available development funds to offer more financial support for small business start-ups. For example, a private equity fund could be built for the NEK where business people could lend back and forth like Hardwick entrepreneurs did to build the food economy there. Wealthier members of the NEK community could be asked for their leadership with donations. Funding would be focused on working to seed, attract, and nurture small businesses rather than large companies with the goal of advancing business diversity with a particular focus on those that are woman-owned or supporting young entrepreneurs. Towns or the region could also work to enact tax breaks for people who want to build or expand small businesses here. Training for start-up businesses could help them add value to the local economy and opening underused buildings or vacant space for co-working, incubators or just cheap start up space could also attract start-ups and stimulate local activity.

Advance the Regional Food Economy

A systematic effort could be led to advance agriculture throughout the Kingdom. Key features would be to promote a “beer geek culture” and specialty foods as foundations to encourage agrotourism at the regional level. The NEK can tell the story in a way to make farming cool again with new branding for NEK food products and helping farms grow and be sustainable. In addition to spurring new farms and value added opportunities for youth, “retirement farms” could be developed where retired people looking for new/communal experiences can farm. Expanding Farm-to-School successes is another important component. Production, storage, aggregation, marketing, infrastructure/energy development, and distribution systems can all be improved and expanded to spur additional economic activity. Some of the next stage of this effort could include developing vertically structured business models that can benefit more local owners/producers in partnership. Affordable food access for all is a major goal, and employee-owned farms could help to make farming more viable.

Support the Wood Industry

Develop incubator spaces and infrastructure for new forest products enterprise development similar to the great examples for agriculture and local foods initiatives in Hardwick and Newport.

Develop an NEK Brand

Develop a process to cooperatively identify, adopt, and embrace an NEK brand; then cooperatively market that brand on products, services, locations, and activities with all organizational partners.

Build a Border Commission

Develop an NEK Commission on Border Issues to set an open line of communication between the border patrol and NEK community. Work together to establish a standard of behavior and wait times, and serve as a clearinghouse to overcome barriers, seize opportunities, identify challenges, and resolve problems.

Support a Dynamic Creative Economy

Arts and culture provide incredible assets to the Kingdom and should be supported as a foundation for quality of life, tourism, and attracting young creative people to settle in the NEK.

Advance Broadband and Cellular Infrastructure

Universal broadband and cell phone service is crucial for economic progress and for retaining and attracting youth, entrepreneurs, and businesses for the future of the NEK. An initiative could build on the progress that has already been made to complete the effort for universal affordable services in the region.

Improve Water, Sewer, and Downtown Infrastructure

Identify funding for infrastructure projects for local towns through organizations such as USDA, EDA, and the Northern Borders Regional Commission. Work with NVDA for technical assistance and support.

Increase Local Energy Generation

With its sun, wind, and water assets, the NEK could generate a much greater share of its energy; this could be a focus for economic development in towns that see themselves as energy enterprise zones.

Change Vermont Tax Policy

Commerce in border communities suffers because of the unequal sales tax burden between VT and NH. Vermont should advance a tax neutral platform making VT more competitive; this would draw people over the border to shop in VT rather than VT residents leaving the state to shop.

Help Schools Connect Youth to Career Opportunities

Schools need to match education to relevance of job opportunities and to modern ways of business and life. They will need to expand connection of businesses to curricular elements, expand co-work spaces, youth entrepreneurial programs, apprenticeships, and experiential learning opportunities. Communities will need to bring the community into the school and the school into the community and boost student skills in creative problem solving, teamwork, critical thinking, and adaptability so crucial for career success today.

Establish a Private College in the NEK

A private college in Newport could be the cornerstone of economic and cultural development in the northern tier of the kingdom.

Create Incentives and Training Programs for to Keep Youth in the Kingdom

Temporary work programs could help to jumpstart employment for youth, especially in areas that are beneficial to the community, such as energy audits and building restoration. Communities could build incentives for youth to come back after school to work locally and schools could provide programs to help young people learn entrepreneurial and workforce skills and build their

expectations for work in the community. For those who have not graduated from high school, use the VT adult education system to help people obtain a diploma as well as job skills. Develop strong mentoring programs for young entrepreneurs – focus on helping them develop the basic business skills they will need to sustain a business.

Set Up an Information Clearing House

Residents and businesses need to connect through a centralized information system that provides information on regional programs and services and community and business supports. The Chamber has a great website, but the region needs to unify to build content and connect through a central vehicle. A guide could be developed that identifies what resources are available to improve community life, who can offer help and how they can help, and existing opportunities (tax-abatement programs, revolving loan funds, etc.) could be publicized. Many resources are already here – but people don't know about them. One practical way to achieve these goals would be to identify funding to hire a support person for the region that could help coordinate resources and serve as a point person; a lead Ombudsman to coordinate a communication process for projects in the NEK – potentially from the NEK Collaborative, the Chamber, or NVDA.

Use our Outdoor Assets for Recreation and Tourism

The NEK could expand outdoor activities and its tourism attraction. It could work together to set up a summer camp for kids – building a wonderful program here and attracting kids to our area for camp. Regional parks and recreation could be better promoted to expand the tourism economy.

Develop Small Business Incubators

To encourage entrepreneurs and young people, and to seed its economic future, the Kingdom could build incubator spaces for micro and startup businesses that would include shared resources and utilities, mutual support, cooperative marketing, and technical assistance from local and regional economic development organizations.

Develop Regional Composting Infrastructure

A new Vermont law will mandate reducing food waste headed to landfills and provide business opportunities to recover food waste and convert it to compost which can enhance local soils and support local food production, either for backyard gardeners or at a larger scale.

The following action idea was added at the Decision Session on August 6th:

Grow and Promote Community Events

Events are not only a way to bring NEK residents together to build a sense of community, belonging, and togetherness; they are also an economic development opportunity as they attract tourists from all over the world to enjoy what the region has to offer. The NEK could focus on growing and promoting community events that are designed to celebrate and share the Kingdom's many assets including local food, culture and arts, sports and recreation, and the natural beauty of the region.

Notes from the “Ideas for the Future Sessions”

What is your vision for the future of the communities and economy of the Northeast Kingdom?

Newport June 18 2015

- The NEK will address the underlying racial issues in the community. Community plans/goals are inclusive and sensitive to issues of diversity. This change contributes to economic development because people of different races/ethnicities feel welcome.
- There is diversity in the kinds of business found in the community—ones with local roots, but out-of-state reach. As a result, the community is more resilient.
- A community with a diverse economy, demographics, that makes it an attractive place for young people.
- The community more successfully utilizes its natural resources (for example the Lake in Newport). “We look to the past to guide the future.”
- Businesses in the NEK have a low environmental impact.
- There is ready access to transportation and broadband that can support economic development.
- There is a focus on healthy communities supported by walkable downtowns and comprehensive approaches to preventative healthcare.
- Schools are community based and financially sustainable. Small schools are supported.
- There is access to well-coordinated, quality, and affordable childcare.
- There is a strong organic farming community.
- Families are strengthened by the larger community—not undermined.
- There is a corrections system that works to help people successfully transition back into the community.
- The NEK Collaborative is a reality. A diverse group of stakeholders works to find ways to collaborate and coordinate community/economic development efforts employing a collective impact model.
- There are food hubs throughout the region that support farmers, the local economy (especially lower-income community members) and provide food security for residents.
- The NEK continues to celebrate the quality of life found in the community (life is good) while maintaining the region’s “aspiration quotient” for a better tomorrow.
- The region’s aspirations are tied to its assets.
- The region is able to grow but not at the expense of its local connectivity (i.e. community connections).
- A community where men and women have equal access to good paying jobs and equal pay for those jobs.
- The NEK is a place where young people have productive things to do in the community.
- There are opportunities for young and older residents to partner on projects/activities.
- There are opportunities for younger people to return to after having left the area.
- The NEK is a community where girls and women are free from sexual violence.

Canaan June 30 2015

- The community hosts events and functions every month in the summer making Canaan a destination rather than a place to pass through.
- Ethan Allen remains in Beecher Falls.
- More jobs come to Canaan and the region.
- Improved broadband and cell service allows people to work out of their homes. The region supports home businesses.
- Broadband internet and cell service allow visitors to stay in the area longer.
- Lower energy costs draw in business. It is affordable to operate in VT.
- Universal cell service.
- A thriving tourism industry leads to a viable local economy in the region.
- Beautiful natural assets are protected and used to attract tourists and potential residents.
- Agriculture in the region moves away from single crops towards a mixed forestry and agricultural model.
- A vibrant and dynamic website brags about what goes on in Canaan and the region.
- The focus is on identifying projects that are not energy intensive.
- The impact of climate change is included in planning decisions.
- We shop locally.

- A change in recreational easements on the land allows for the encouragement of ATV use in the area. More people are drawn to the area rather than passing through to NH.
- The Kingdom retains our smart young people.
- Infrastructure, such as town septic systems allow for growth. A town septic system extends to the lake to allow for expansion of local business.
- The NEK has a local wood pellet production facility
- Affordable housing is available for seniors to allow for aging in place.
- The area focuses on the development of a local creative economy.
- The NEK is left as it is - we have identified our assets and build there rather than trying to develop in other ways.
- The Kingdom is self-sufficient.
- Higher education opportunities are available in the Kingdom that are different than what you might encounter elsewhere. Higher ed opportunities attract students to the area who may decide to remain in the region after their studies.
- Youth have opportunities for work study/trade programs that allows them to learn a trade while in school and contribute to the local economy. For example, a program to rehabilitate houses to bring them back onto the market.

Hardwick July 15 2015

- NEK towns are places with vibrant downtown centers, where you can access what you need, surrounded by agricultural land that stay in production.
- NEK businesses are small and diverse, encouraging local jobs.
- The Economy in the NEK is based on mutual, supportive relationships - a shared and coordinated economy.
- There is a strong digital economy in the NEK and the digital economy is used to raise the profile of the region.
- More young people are involved and active in the community.
- A strong agricultural economy keeps land in production maintaining the beauty of the open working landscape.
- There are fair wages for all.
- More businesses develop in East Hardwick.
- There is a strong sense of belonging and community.
- Agritourism is a significant part of the local economy.
- There is a strong focus on excellence in the education system. Education is integrated and place-based.
- There is a good public transportation system in the NEK that works for everyone.
- The Kingdom has quality affordable rental housing.
- The NEK region is a sharing community and a caring community. We do a better job connecting with resources and supporting all of our residents.
- Homeowners and landlords have access to technical assistance to renovate and repair older buildings.

What are your ideas to support the NEK economy, boost opportunities, and support the quality of life for Kingdom Residents?

Newport June 18 2015

- Bring Select Boards together to review common issues and resources and encourage regional cooperation
- We don't know our assets
- Just lost country store in Albany.
- Could we bring select boards together in the Kingdom to think about building on our assets?
- Targeted Equity Funds
- Promote equity fund where business people could lend back and forth like Hardwick did to build the food economy there
- A fund could be targeted towards certain demographics - like women to become entrepreneurs - a 1k-5k fund for business startup - many groups involved in this work now - could build funds like this for other demographics
- this will help create diverse small businesses
- Create a private equity fund to help support local diverse businesses. The fund could be used to target specific challenges (increasing women-owned small businesses, growing emerging markets, etc.).
- Advance Food Economy
- Promote "beer geek culture" and specialty foods— encourage agro-tourism at the regional level.
- Make farming cool again. Branding effort.
- Develop "retirement farms" where retired people looking for new/communal experiences can farm.

- Highlight success stories and relationships between farms and businesses.
- We already have the “cool farming” thing down - now we need to build support for these businesses to grow and be sustainable
- Support employee owned farms to make farming more viable
- Intergenerational Housing
- Healthy Communities
- Expanding recreation, education for health, wellness, youth services, mental health services.
- Improve primary care and prevention
- loss of IROC was huge for this community
- Center for wellness - a center for diabetes or chronic care where all services were available in one place (physical therapy, nutrition, health coaching, etc) - help people build and take ownership over their own health care - wrap around care
- Public transportation - explore the development of public transportation or alternative models (Uber, etc.)
- Walkable communities - make villages and downtown walkable and welcoming
- Establish a private college
- support a vibrant arts and culture scene
- Protect land and the environment - conservation of natural resources and farm land - ensure valuable assets are preserved.

Canaan June 30 2015

- Local energy generation
- Universally available broadband service
- Universal cell phone service
- Double registration of ATVs. Allow those registered in NH to come to VT.
- A pellet production plant in the “new” Ethan Allen building.
- A trade program for students to rehab old houses and get them back on the market.
- Become tax neutral with the bordering state making VT more competitive to draw people over the border rather than us going over there.
- Draw bigger businesses here in the NEK. We have a key asset - hardworking people looking for work.
- Teach people to prepare foods to help address health issues by establishing a center for health and food education here in the NEK.
- Stop unfunded mandates from the state.
- Diversify agriculture and build the local agricultural economy.
- A drug rehabilitation program in the region.
- Services in the area that will help people get back to work
- Build community self esteem
- Temporary work programs to jump start employment with a focus on things that are beneficial to the community such as energy audits and building restoration.
- Training for startup businesses to add value to the local economy
- Identify skilled adults here to work with the kids. Youth are offered jobs that are paid at minimum wage so they get some training over the summer. There is potential for progressive employment. This program is starting to pick up.
- Tax breaks for people who want to build small businesses here.
- Incentives for students to come back here after school to work locally. Provide educational opportunities to kids that leave with the expectation they will come back to work/practice.
- Farm to school program at the school.
- Develop a home that helps local people with substance abuse
- Garden tours in the area in the summer
- Broadcast what we have. Highlight the assets and resources.
- Find ways to address nutrient deficiencies and increase access to healthy foods
- Invest in the community – identify strategic areas to invest to improve quality of life in the community
- Identify funding for infrastructure projects through organizations such as USDA, EDA, and the Northern Borders Regional Commission. Work with NVDA for technical assistance and support.

Hardwick July 15 2015

- Identify the right format to engage youth in community discussions.
- Develop an Arts collaborative in East Hardwick.
- Improve public transportation to save money for families and make socially responsible choices.
- Bring a privatized on-demand taxi service app, like Uber, to the NEK.
- Educate residents in the digital resources available to them.

- Focus on the preservation of infrastructure and beautification of streets and buildings.
- Capitalize on our assets - specifically on the beauty of the region. Attract tourists and ensure that tourists have access to the lake, trails, etc.
- Develop biker and pedestrian paths along NEK roadways.
- Improve the built environment.
- Get politically involved. Engage residents to help move the region forward.
- Capitalize on economic growth in Hardwick by offering available commercial space in surrounding towns.
- Advance the arts and cultural scene in the region.
- Identify financing and lending opportunities to support slow growth and social enterprises. Identify non-traditional funding mechanisms to support businesses that benefit the community.
- Increase the availability of quality affordable rental housing.
- Work more in collaboration with Quebec to take advantage of the NEK as a federal commerce zone.
- Improve downtown planning.
- Identify more banks that are willing to take financial risks on NEK business ventures.

What actions can be taken to implement these ideas and to support your vision for the future of the Kingdom?

Newport June 18 2015

- The NEK Collaborative could increase communication with NEK communities by inviting local representation from each town
- Bring existing entrepreneurs together with aspiring entrepreneurs to create a support network
- Make sure available resources are well-known and accessed
- Essex and Caledonia Counties qualify for a coach through the health department to improve healthy communities. The VDH in Newport is applying for a coach and would love to partner with residents and communities. The key right now is identifying a focus area
- Create a wellness center that can promote/foster general community health
- Keep the convening function of the Collaborative central to their work - "join the conversation"
- Build/improve infrastructure to support growth and business - malls, housing, water and sewer in town
- Area businesses and organizations could offer regular racial and cultural competency training for employees
- Bring more funding to the kingdom
- Host a meeting with a presentation on available resources
- Find a way to include new people and ideas in the NEK Collaborative
- Create a local micro-entrepreneurial fund.

Canaan June 30 2015

- Take a tour of the state and the food systems to look at what other people are doing successfully.
- Do asset mapping in community.
- Look for ways to learn about grant opportunities and take advantage of grant writers. (NVDA offers some technical assistance on this).
- Offer a class/training workshop on grant writing.
- Put priorities in the town plan so that funders see it.
- Get more people involved in local community and economic development.
- Use ongoing programs/project with (Heart and Soul or historical society) to move ideas forward.
- Find mechanism for bringing courses or educational opportunities to community. Revive program through technical college that brought classes to the rural area.
- Do soil analysis to see how industry and ag are affecting the land.
- Reenergize social services (NEKCA, food-shelf). Let NEKCA know that the community needs more help (hours of staff has recently been cut).
- Advocate for funding for after-school and social services.
- Find way to preserve food for the future to address health issues. Food preserved and then sent out as a product.
- Look for resources to build summer camp opportunities.
- Find a way to coordinate with NEKCA to supplement services through volunteers.
- Use Farm to School program to develop interest in sustainable ag in the community.
- Look to other communities and steal good ideas (when NEKCA closed a foodbank in Island Pon the school took it over).

- Work more closely with our neighbors because communities like Canaan are geographically isolated.
- Centralize information system—the chamber already has a great website, but we need to get the word out to support.
- Dust off economic development plan from Ethan Allen closure.
- Snow machine reciprocity day is a great example of how the two states could work together.
- Upward program isn't open to kids who go to school in NH even if they live in Vermont—another example of how the two states need to work together more.
- Look to example in Colebrook around power issues.

Hardwick July 15 2015

- Take action - no more studies.
- Work together to engage political leadership around these issues. Be vocal in requests for help.
- Revise zoning laws to support the vision outlined by community members.
- Investigate what resources are available for the communal purchase of blighted properties.
- Develop a guide that identifies what resources are available to improve community life, who can offer help, and how they can help.
- Change the perception of the NEK communities. Intentionally share positive stories about the quality of life in the NEK.
- Increase available development funds. Advocate on behalf of programs like the Working Lands Enterprise Fund. Focus funding on small regionally-based businesses rather than large companies.
- Organize more food systems tours as well as tours for other emerging economic drivers. "Let people know about the great things."
- Communicate about positive quality of life to residents as well! Tell ourselves about all the great assets.
- Organize fieldtrips for school boards so they can learn more about opportunities/challenges for students.
- Develop strong mentoring programs for young entrepreneurs. Focus on helping them develop the basic business skills they will need to sustain a business.
- Write more press-releases! Let people know about positive and exciting things happening in the community.
- Develop one page documents that highlight why someone should live/invest in St, Johnsbury, Hardwick, etc.
- Reach out to wealthier members of the NEK community. Ask for donations to create funding opportunities for younger entrepreneurs.
- Publicize existing opportunities (tax-abatement programs, revolving loan fund, etc.). Many resources are already here—people don't know about them.
- Identify funding to hire a support person for the region that could help coordinate resources and serve as a point person.
- Establish a coordinated communication process for projects in the NEK.
- Support vertically structured business models that can benefit more local owners/producers.
- Find ways for businesses to share resources to increase purchasing power (for example, to reduce energy costs).

What is your best idea for the future of the NEK? (Participants were asked to write down the best idea from the evening on a sticky note and stick on a flip chart as they were leaving)

Newport June 18 2015

- Build new and update infrastructure to attract a diverse audience
- Central support for grant funding and how to locate funds to advance great ideas
- Communication and increase access
- Improve communication and collaboration across people and groups with shared interests
- Positive workforce information
- Real collaboration between organizations. Real impact collectively. Willingness to move this concept to real action.
- Intergenerational partnerships
- Agribusiness
- Housing
- Seed grants
- Make/celebrate farming as cool business
- Diverse economy. Build employee owned small and medium sized businesses.
- Healthy community initiative
- Transportation
- Arts and culture

- Creation of a public/private equity fund to create small diverse businesses
- Private college in Newport with 800-1200 students
- Food distribution hub
- Broadband infrastructure throughout the kingdom
- Have major institutions in the NEK provide racially and culturally competence training to their employees on a regular basis. This would support all goals of the current strategic plan.

Canaan June 30 2015

- Broadband and cell phones
- Connect pole to premise high speed broadband and ubiquitous cell service
- Need to change recreation easements on Plum Creek lands
- Help set up a summer camp for kids - why send our kids away for the summer when we could build a wonderful program here and attract kids to our area for camp?
- Help our parks and recreation capitalize on our tourism
- Help us develop a creative economy in the area by providing cell phone and broadband services
- Utilize the VT adult education system to help people obtain a high school diploma as well as job skills
- Talk to Merck farm and forest in Dorset, visit Allysum in Rochester - it is very popular. Food preservation, composting toilets, take 5 persons from town on a tour
- like the Vermont Food Systems summer study tour, trade liberalization, food security and the environment, the neoliberal threat to sustainable rural development by Carmen Gonzalez
- Viable non profits
- Cell phone services, broadband service, education for young youth, drug rehab, community college courses
- Use no electric or other power - rain pumps can be used to pump up. Do it right and you can move water 500 or more feet up then let it fall and use the energy. There is a specialist who does this - mark fuller
- Power plant
- Collaboration with NH on several events
- Cell phone and high speed internet access
- Small business tax breaks

Hardwick July 15 2015

- Address needs of lower income people first and most
- Focus on education
- Better channels for information sharing, communication, more ways to strengthen ties among community members who currently never interact
- Education!
 - vocational programs for every scope of work needed for the region
 - farming (not just dairy)
 - management
 - arts
 - programming and computer techs
 - employers have jobs, new fields are being created - we need graduates that are able to do those jobs
- School board field trips to show off our resources
- Communication
- Education businesses in the new sharing economy and utilize tools available to leverage long-term success
- School board field trips
- Mentoring - for youth and entrepreneurs - especially for farming and food

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