

# Building on a Legacy of Creativity

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Understanding and  
Expanding the Creative  
Economy of the  
Northeast Kingdom

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## Executive Summary

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A Report to the Vermont Arts Council and  
the Vermont Creative Network

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## Acknowledgements

This report was prepared for the Vermont Arts Council and the Vermont Creative Network by a team of consultants working through Community Roots, LLC. The team consisted of Michael Kane, Michael Kane Consulting; Stuart Rosenfeld, formerly with RTS, Inc.; Melissa Levy, Community Roots; Julia Dixon; and Stephen Michon, formerly with FutureWorks. The report was co-authored by Kane, Levy, Rosenfeld, and Dixon. Pamela Smith copyedited and formatted the initial draft report. The primary sources of funding were grants from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development, the Vermont Community Foundation, and the Vermont Arts Council.

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# Introduction

As rural communities across America race to find their inner creativity, the Northeast Kingdom (NEK) has already found its own. The creative economy represents 9.4 percent of all the jobs in the NEK, and the concentration of creative industries is 31 percent higher there than in the rest of the country. This report examines the current state of the NEK creative economy and recommends concrete actions to strengthen and expand the region’s creative core.

## Snapshot of the NEK’s Creative Economy

- ➔ High concentration of creative-sector enterprises, particularly in arts/crafts, design-oriented products, and artisan food/drink
- ➔ Entrepreneurship is prominent and strong for such a remote, rural region
- ➔ Creative enterprises are a “keystone,” affecting nearly every other economic sector in the region, from healthcare to high-tech

## Action Roadmap

- ➔ Establish a creative entrepreneurial and business development system
- ➔ Increase economic synergy between the region’s creative and outdoor tourism/recreation industries
- ➔ Strengthen the brand and marketing of the Northeast Kingdom
- ➔ Nurture, attract, and retain creative talent
- ➔ Expand opportunities for learning and collaboration



Spark collaborative work space in Greensboro.

The empirical old and imaginative ordinary must be integrated with the technological new and a transforming society.

# Background

Vermont's three most northeastern counties, named the Northeast Kingdom back in 1949, make up the state's most rural and least wealthy region. Therefore, perhaps more than any other region, the Kingdom has had to rely on an unusually rich—some might call it quirky—type of ingenuity and craftsmanship within an equally rich natural environment that is treasured and protected.



Burke, in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom.

The region's creative economy received a boost in the 1970s from an influx of well-educated back-to-the-landers leaving their nine-to-five jobs in the cities and migrating to Vermont, many to the Northeast Kingdom. They brought communal and environmental values and artisanal skills that matched and built upon those of many of the long-term Vermont residents. These newcomers brought or formed many of the regions

iconic arts organizations—Bread & Puppet Theatre, Catamount Arts, Circus Smirkus, and Kingdom County Productions. More recently, newcomers translated and expanded that creativity to culinary and technology-based sectors, to foods, beverages, the media, and the internet.

People in other places now are discovering what the people in the Northeast Kingdom intuitively have known for some time: that creative placemaking is the twenty-first century version of the “strong business environment” that municipal leaders once believed drove growth. As rural communities across America race to find their inner creativity, the Northeast Kingdom has already found its own.

In this context, the Vermont Creative Network, an initiative of the Vermont Arts Council, undertook a study of the creative economy in the Northeast Kingdom. This report examines what already exists and what could be, and what it would take to strengthen and expand the region's creative core.

A key challenge is how best to use the region's creative assets to generate wealth and raise incomes. The report concludes with a variety of strategies to do just that by further developing and building upon the region's creative people and businesses.

The recommendations are based on what has been discovered, suggested, and/or found successful in other places with similar demographic characteristics. The challenges in the Northeast Kingdom are to find the resources to adapt those strategies deemed most valuable, to use the recommendations to trigger and imagine other ideas, to further spur the economy, and to support the organizational mechanisms needed to develop promising ideas in the most efficient and equitable manner.

# How many are employed in the creative economy?

The creative economy is defined as the enterprises, organizations, and individuals whose products and services are rooted in artistic and creative content. Combining all employment in creative industries and creative occupations in other industries shows the following:

- ➔ The creative economy represents 3,327 individuals (**Figure 1**), which is 9.4 percent of the total workforce in all industries (35,500)
- ➔ The concentration of creative industries in the Northeast Kingdom is 31 percent higher than the concentration of creative industries across the entire U.S.

**Table 1: definitions**

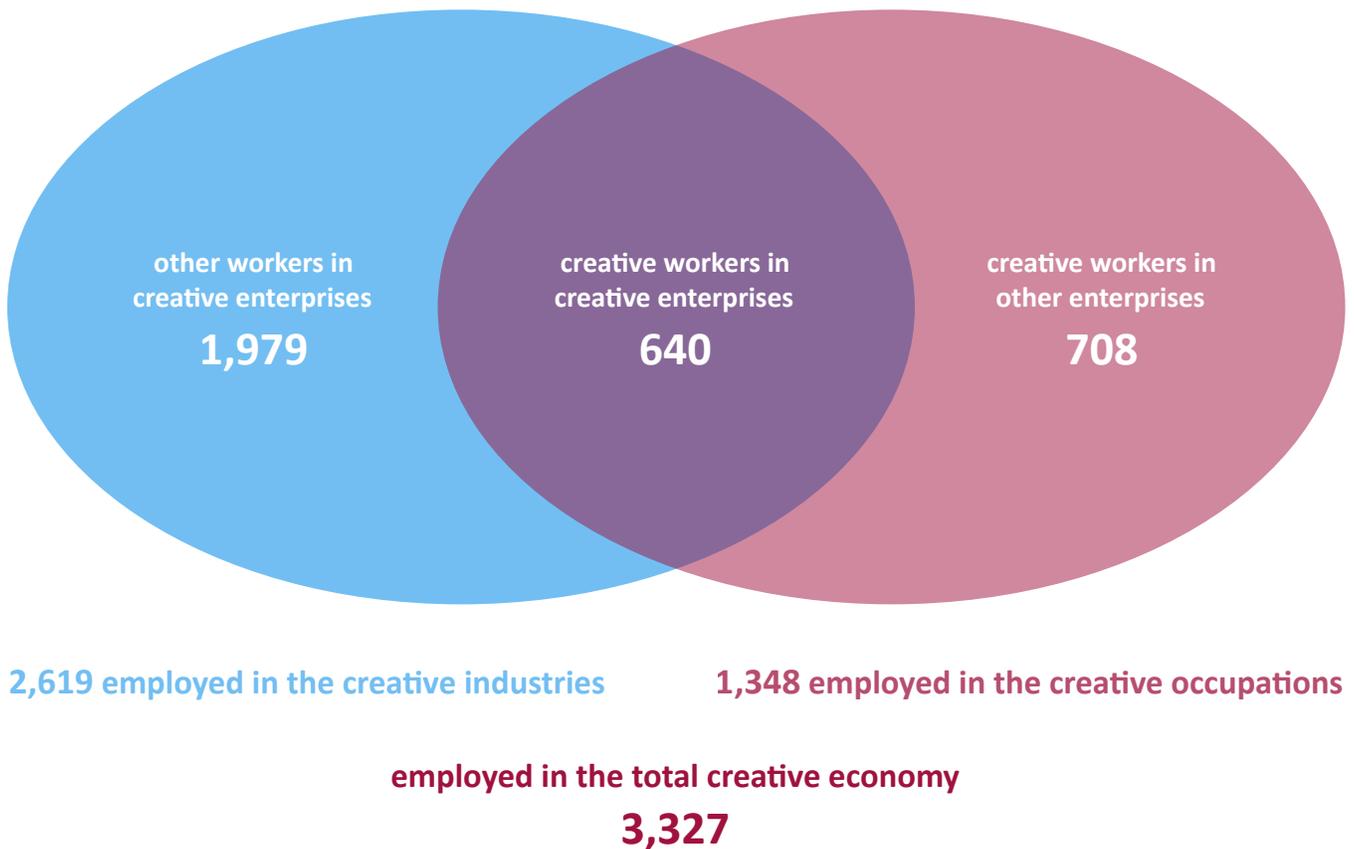
Term	Definition
<b>creative enterprises</b>	Businesses whose production, distribution, and/or services have their origins in artistic, cultural, creative, and/or aesthetic content
<b>creative industries</b>	Industry sectors in which the majority of businesses match the definition of a creative enterprise or directly contribute value to those sectors, e.g., suppliers, subcontractors
<b>creative occupations</b>	Jobs determined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics to require imagination, and/or artistic expression
<b>creative economy</b>	The combination of employment in creative industries and in creative occupations in enterprises not classified as creative
<b>creative segments</b>	Sectors of the economy sorted and merged into categories that reflect common characteristics based on their markets, form of creative content, or consumer experiences

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Although 2,619 workers are employed in creative industries and 1,348 work in creative occupations (Figure 1), 640 of these are working both in creative occupations and in creative industries. Thus, the sum of those employed in all creative industries and occupations combined is reduced by the 640 individuals included in both categories.

The share of the workforce in the NEK's creative economy is much larger than expected and larger than found in most similar national and international studies, particularly those conducted in sparsely populated regions. This may be due to the influx of creative people into the region since the 1970s, feeding the creative sectors and the growth of recreational tourism.

**Figure 1: size of the creative economy in the Northeast Kingdom in 2017**



# How is the creative economy distributed?

The creative economy covers a broad range of industries, some of which directly produce or perform art and others that use artistic creativity to differentiate their products and create valued experiences. To understand the creative economy, this study groups industry segments into the seven segments shown in [Table 2](#).

Each of the seven segments is measured in terms of (a) those employed in businesses that pay into the U.S. Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages program; (b) self-employed who consider that work their primary source of income; and (c) extended proprietors who work but not full-time—generally they either are retired, in school, or have an additional source of employment.

**Visual arts and fine crafts** include businesses that produce and distribute artistic and cultural content. This segment rests at the center of the creative economy, containing some of the purest forms of creativity, the originators of unique intellectual property. The segment is dominated by self-employed and part-time artists, and its scale is due largely to intermediary establishments such as those that sell art and crafts, fine arts schools, and photography studios.

**Culture and heritage** is perhaps the most undercounted segment based on conventional national data. Many heritage sites and museums have no employees, some relying on volunteers. Others may be embedded in the sectors representing municipalities, state government, or educational institutions. Similarly, historic preservation is embedded in other conventional sectors of the economy.

**Table 2: jobs in creative industries by segment and type of employment in 2017**

segment	employed	self-employed	extended proprietors	total jobs	percent of all creative industries
visual arts and fine crafts	63	46	265	374	14.3
culture and heritage	62	0	7	69	2.6
design	669	73	157	899	34.3
literary arts	14	15	41	70	2.7
performing arts	85	31	112	228	8.7
artisan foods	441	22	188	651	24.9
film and media	150	23	155	328	12.5
<b>total creative industries</b>	<b>1,484</b>	<b>210</b>	<b>925</b>	<b>2,619</b>	<b>100</b>

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**Design** encompasses architecture, landscape architecture, interior design, and design-driven consumer and business products and communications. Employment is dominated by large furniture companies, but the region’s reputation for wood products is enhanced by the smaller artisanal furniture and woodworkers. Recently new opportunities appear imminent from the rapid growth in communications design sectors that fuse technology with design.

**Literary arts** includes the art, reproduction, and distribution of the written word, including writers, publishers, bookstores, and libraries. Literary arts appears to be a small proportion of employment because it’s dominated by individuals, not large employers. Yet it makes an outsized contribution to defining the region and generating much of the region’s reputation in the arts.

**Performing arts** include music, dance, and theatrical performances, support services to transport and stage productions, and publicity and ticketing systems. Much of its value is derived from the region’s performance troupes and musicians and the numerous regional and

**Claire Van Vliet and Janus Press** hold a special place among regional publishers and bookmakers. Founded sixty-five years ago, Janus Press has been a nationally and internationally recognized publisher of special edition, fine-crafted books. Because of Claire’s pioneering work in bookmaking, she received a MacArthur Fellow genius grant in 1989. Her press’s books have been purchased by the National Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Museum, and Library of Congress. The quality and color of the paper, the design and artistic images used, and the hand-binding process together turn the books into fine art.

Among the more successful and unusual manufacturers is **Burnt Impressions** in Danville, a business started by a local entrepreneur that sells toasters able to convert photos into images transferred to toast. One of its most popular products is the Jesus Toaster. Soon after its initial release, The Jesus Toaster was featured on CNN, ABC, and Fox News.

community-based organizations that support them. Many of the segment’s greatest economic impacts are indirect, coming from its influence on the region’s reputation and its ability to attract and influence the spending patterns of tourists and visitors.

**Artisan foods** comprise specialty food producers and eating establishments that create unique culinary experiences. The dominant employment in specialty foods and culinary arts comes from its creative eating establishments and larger specialty food producers, particularly in artisanal cheeses. But it is perhaps better known for its artisanal beers and spirits, an attraction for young bikers and hikers.

**Film and media** represents firms that produce, distribute, and support film, radio, television, music, newspapers, and computer and video gaming. This segment is best known for its film industry, the most creative component. The scale of the segment, however, is heavily skewed towards the media—print, radio, and television—which represent the largest employers.

# What's needed to expand the creative economy?

Creative industries depend on support from a variety of services, organizations, activities, and financial, spatial, associational, and educational resources. The strength of the creative economy is, to some extent, linked to the quality and quantity of the infrastructure that supports it, both from within the region and across the state.

The support infrastructure includes:

- ➔ regular opportunities for networking and sharing knowledge and experiences to spur innovation and creativity
- ➔ access to formal and informal education for creative businesses and occupations and encouragement of appreciation for the arts and creative products
- ➔ accessible places and spaces to perform, work, and exhibit creative endeavors
- ➔ festivals, fairs, and exhibits that serve as marketplaces for creative goods and activities
- ➔ resources for business and technical assistance and to encourage and support planning, business startups, and expansions

The challenge facing the Northeast Kingdom is to find the means and resources to meet the needs of a population that is spread across large numbers of small towns and villages.

The goals and actions recommended here are intended to further strengthen the Northeast Kingdom's creative industries while taking into account the rural nature of the region and the needs of less advantaged communities. Each of the goals is followed by a series of possible actionable recommendations. Recognizing that there are far too many actions to pursue, we expect the team to establish priorities and make necessary modifications to match needs and available resources.



Spark collaborative work space in Greensboro.

# Goals and Recommended Actions

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## Framework

- ➔ The Northeast Kingdom’s creative economy, already one of the region’s key economic engines, is proportionally larger than expected based on similar studies, has a variety of strengths, and shows even greater potential.
- ➔ The support system for the creative economy is quite strong and has multiple components both in the region and outside at a statewide level.
- ➔ The goals and recommended actions take into account the Northeast Kingdom Collaborative’s TriSector and Leadership Development Task Forces and recommendations. Much of what follows is consistent with the intent and direction of those efforts.
- ➔ Growing and strengthening the Northeast Kingdom’s creative economy and taking it to the next level will require strong leadership, as well as sustained organizational capacity and support. The leadership and organizational capacity and support will clearly be found in the Vermont Arts Council and its Creative Network, as well as the Northeast Kingdom Collaborative and many of the region’s principal creative organizations.
- ➔ To date, financial support has come from the Vermont Arts Council, the Vermont Community Foundation, Northern Community Investment Corporation (NCIC) and others. In the future, funds for the creative economy will have to be solicited from federal programs as well as from the investors group that was organized by the Northeast Kingdom Collaborative earlier in 2018.
- ➔ More than a hundred people were interviewed for this report and close to fifty participated in focus group discussions. These participants—and others in the NEK community—will need to be informed and engaged in order to implement these recommendations effectively.

The following **goals and recommendations** are intended to help make the creative economy an even stronger component of the Northeast Kingdom’s economy.

## 1 Establish a Creative Entrepreneurial and Business Development System

Creative ingenuity and imagination are clearly present in the region, and the recommendations that follow are intended to nurture that creative and entrepreneurial spirit in the Northeast Kingdom, take it to a new level, and, in the process, create more jobs and employment opportunities for Northeast Kingdom residents. To help make this happen, we recommend that the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, Northern Vermont Development Association, and NCIC coordinate and strengthen creative business and entrepreneurial services and activities.

### A. Develop a CO.STARTERS program

**CO.STARTERS** is a proven ten-week collaborative process that is already operating in a hundred and nine communities across the country. It assists, encourages, and supports aspiring entrepreneurs who have a concept and a potential market. It applies business model successes in other high growth industries to creative industries. The Center for Rural Entrepreneurship is positioned to adapt this model to a rural region and support it.

### B. Expand access to and participation in makerspaces

Makerspace has become the dominant brand name for experimenting with creative goods. Such spaces meet the needs of tinkerers but also those hoping to design products with market potential that can be turned into successful businesses. The region already is home to two strong examples, **The Foundry** and **Spark**. Broadening the outreach of these two and considering similar spaces in, for example, Newport, would engage a wider network of users.

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### **C. Extend services to micro-enterprises and those self-employed**

Meeting the needs of the smallest firms requires special attention, either in the form of subsidies or collective services in which firms share costs. The region needs to sharpen its focus on creative businesses—share the costs or aggregate the needs for groups of creative firms so that they can be better served by existing providers.

### **D. Identify opportunities for convergence between the agricultural and food economy and the creative economy**

One of the strengths of the region’s food production cluster is the creativity of its branding, packaging, and marketing. In addition, the region’s culinary arts depend on creative entrepreneurs and chefs. This convergence between food and agriculture and the creative economy makes collaboration between the organizations serving each imperative. Possible actions include integrating arts and/or design into secondary and postsecondary agricultural education,

and creating public art on the farms as a magnet for agritourism.

### **E. Establish a creative economy investment fund**

The fund, perhaps started with as little as \$100,000, could help underwrite the development, prototyping, and market development costs of entrepreneurs who have product and new business ideas in the industries of outdoor recreation, biking, clothing design, wood products, artisan crafts, etc.

## **2 Increase economic synergy between the region’s creative and outdoor tourism/recreation industries**

The number of visitors to Jay Peak, Burke Mountain, Kingdom Trails, and the Burke Mountain Academy is about 750,000 a year and growing. These visitors are expressing increased interest in arts and related activities and experiences. A well-designed partnership could help the outdoor recreation industry maintain its growing customer base and expand market opportunities for creative enterprises.



St. Johnsbury Athenaeum

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### **A. Form a strategic partnership between the two economic sectors**

The first step is to bring representatives from Jay Peak, Burke Mountain, Burke Mountain Academy, and Kingdom Trails together with representatives of the creative economy to discuss and prioritize opportunities and determine how best to make them happen.

### **B. Undertake the production of new art and design-infused products**

Artists and designers should conduct focus groups or surveys to learn what sorts of products and what price range would most appeal to recreational visitors. Then artists/crafters, some in collaborations with designers, would create products that reflect or apply to various recreational or tourism activities could be sold at galleries, general stores, studios, visitor centers, and recreational facilities.

### **C. Establish a cultural hosts/ambassadors program and certification system**

Employees who interact with tourists are potential sources of information who can influence not only where visitors go but also how long they stay and what they spend money on. By training and possibly certifying those on the front line of eating establishments, hotels, and shops as cultural hosts/ambassadors, visitors could ask them about places to visit, events to attend, and local history and culture.



Levitt AMP concert at Dog Mountain in St. Johnsbury

## **3 Strengthen the brand and marketing of the Northeast Kingdom**

The challenge is to develop and market the relationships between place, innovation, and art. Following are several recommendations.

### **A. Support the Northern Forest Center's branding and marketing plan**

Follow the plan to update the Northeast Kingdom tourism brand platform including identifying potential market segments, developing creative assets, maintaining a dynamic tourism marketing website and social media, and developing and tracking metrics that measure outreach and impact.

### **B. Organize a regionwide summer arts festival**

A summer arts festival could increase the region's attractiveness as a summer destination by providing a calendar of events at venues across the region and building organizational and programmatic capacity to host events among arts organizations, local chambers of commerce, and nonprofits.

### **C. Organize an annual or bi-annual literary conference**

The conference, which would highlight the region's literary legacy, would be organized by the literary community and Creative Writing Program at Northern Vermont University. It would target writers, poets, students, literary agents, publishers and others, from around the country.

### **D. Develop a source for regional events that reaches within and outside of the region**

Develop a coordinated and comprehensive digital and printed information source that would bring more visibility to the region's creative offerings to the many people who come to the Northeast Kingdom for outdoor recreation or cultural tourism.

### **E. Convert existing vacant buildings into spaces for creative business and commercial enterprises**

This would begin in the region’s population fulcrums, St. Johnsbury and Newport. Two buildings in St. Johnsbury already vacant include 56,000 square feet of space that could be developed for use by creative people and enterprises. Newport has a vacant lot that was to have been the Renaissance Block. By targeting space for use by creative businesses, these communities could build on their creative assets and re-establish their economic influence.

## **4 Nurture, attract, and retain creative talent**

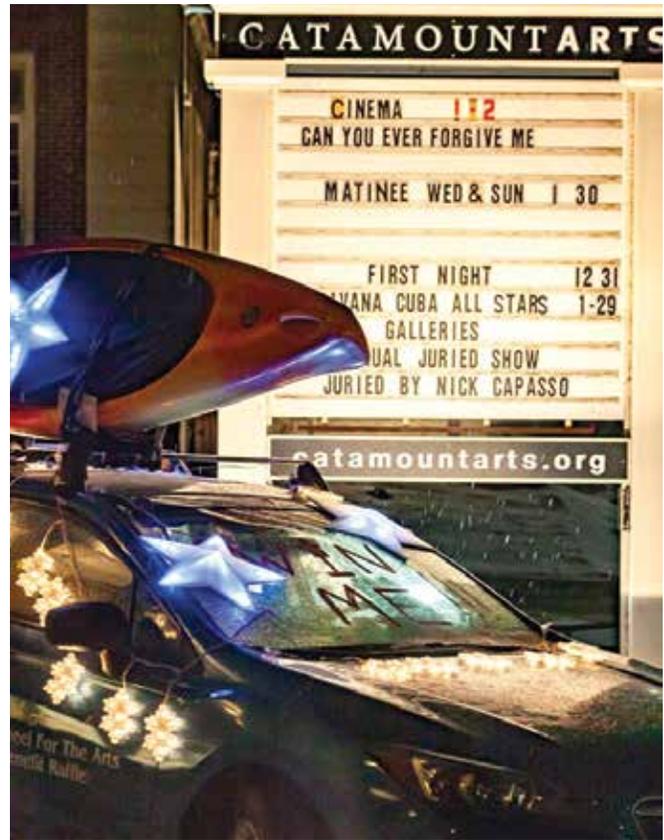
Rural areas historically have bled talent. The most educated and creative people have been the first to look for opportunities in urban centers. Therefore the region must produce talent and convince as many as possible to remain. Since schools are the major providers of talent, the links between those choosing creative career paths in secondary and postsecondary education and the region’s economy are crucial.

### **A. Increase completion of career and technological education (CTE) programs for creative career paths**

Although schools offer an array of courses for creative careers, there are relatively few completers of sequenced curricula in CTE that lead to careers in creative fields. Some is intentional, as a result of policies to integrate arts with academics and avoid specialization. But without completing even the minimum of three courses required for a “CTE completion,” students may not know enough to choose their future path.

### **B. Encourage and support more work-based learning, including paid internships**

This requires businesses and school systems to commit the time and resources to create the opportunities and to mentor and monitor students’ progress. Programs have been most successful



Catamount Arts in St. Johnsbury

where faculty have close ties to businesses and where funding is available to compensate interns and businesses.

### **C. Provide access to courses and workshops on business skills for the arts**

It may make sense to offer a portfolio of classes, courses, and workshops on starting and operating a sustainable business model for creative work. It could include, for example, topics like accessing capital, building effective websites, displaying work, and finding and reaching new markets. Educational programs in the arts have been weak on business skills, and career centers ought to be encouraged to include business courses in their programs.

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#### **D. Organize a “Stay to Stay” weekend in conjunction with Vermont Tourism Division**

These events are aimed at attracting talent. Prospective newcomers select a region where they might be interested in living, including an excursion and lodging accommodations. The weekend includes access to networking receptions and meetings with people who can facilitate a move to Vermont.

### **5 Expand opportunities for learning and collaboration**

Among the most important but often undervalued economic assets of the creative economy are social capital, opportunities to interact and build the levels of trust that lead to collaboration, free exchange of ideas, and enhanced networking. In areas with more dispersed populations, this requires more structure and planning than in densely populated areas.

#### **A. Encourage and expand networking at coworking and maker spaces**

An advantage of shared workspaces among companies and individuals is the opportunity to offer advice and assistance to one another and share the uncoded knowledge that comes from practical experience. To encourage this, shared spaces ought to include a meeting room, coffee area, planned weekly meetings, and events organized around common needs and interests.

#### **B. Develop relationships with creative economies in regions already involved in such initiatives**

Learning from the successes and experiences of other creative regions can help accelerate the Northeast Kingdom’s learning curve and ultimately benefit both regions. Formal relationships would lead to sharing particular strengths and successes, addressing common weaknesses/problems, and collaborative art shows or performances.

#### **C. Establish cultural and economic sister region relationships with comparable non-U.S. regions**

This more ambitious action is based on building relationships with one or two non-U.S. rural regions with similar demographic and economic characteristics. Such exchanges could lead to exchange programs for students and working creatives, exchanges of markets, and innovations stemming from exposure to different ideas.

#### **D. Organize community networking events**

With a dispersed population, networking events must be organized and scheduled well in advance. In addition to developing social relationships, the ultimate goal is an exchange of ideas and exploration of new business products and opportunities. This can be aided by inviting speakers or designing themed events. It will be especially important to undertake aggressive outreach and recruitment efforts aimed at young people and to provide activities and topics that attract them, such as innovative applications of social media.

#### **E. Match/underwrite support for creatives to participate in professional conferences and trade/art shows**

Participation in state, national, and international professional and industry events is an important source of new ideas, markets, and business relationships. The costs of travel, registrations, and booths, however, can be prohibitive for individuals and small businesses. Perhaps some level of matching funds would encourage greater participation. The amount could be based on the degree to which the knowledge gained and/or connections made would be shared and ultimately serve the region.

# Conclusion

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The Northeast Kingdom has the key ingredients many other areas are attempting to develop: communities infused with history, culture, and art; a shared bond with place; a topography that attracts young talent and tourists; and the beginnings of an organizational infrastructure that supports those assets.

The region is already well-known outside of Vermont in leading-edge niches such as creative food production, staged performances, literature, and artisanal wood furniture. It also has room to grow in its local market, with an increasing number of recreation-based, experience-oriented tourists.

The region's economy is continuing to change in ways that favor creative industries and that generate economic opportunities and cultural amenities that appeal to young people and career changers. A challenge is that the region must make these transitions and maintain those features that are central to the region's identity—the picturesque, village-based, small farm-dominated, sustainability-concerned Vermont that people associate with the term “Made in Vermont.”

From the American Association of Dowers headquartered in Danville to the Museum of Everyday Life situated in Glover, the empirical old and imaginative ordinary must be integrated with the technological new and a transforming society.



Jasper Hill Farm in Greensboro



Levitt AMP concert in St. Johnsbury

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