



January 28, 2020

TO: Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs

FROM: Amy Cunningham, Deputy Director, Vermont Arts Council and coordinator of Vermont Creative Network

RE: Testimony on the creative sector and artistic assets of the Northeast Kingdom

Thank you for this opportunity to highlight the remarkable artistic and creative assets of the Northeast Kingdom.

As the state arts agency, we leverage state, federal, and private dollars to grant to artists, arts organizations, and community art projects. In the last five years, we made 67 grants totaling \$280,579 in the Northeast Kingdom. A full listing of those grants is submitted as a part of this testimony; here are a few examples chosen to represent the range of talent and creativity in this region of the state:

- The Canaan School received \$1,250 to support an artist residency program in their school to support a five-day maker and design residency with Cardboard Teck Institute that engages students in problem solving and flexible thinking.
- In 2019, writer Brett Stanciu was awarded a \$4,000 Creation Grant to complete a nonfiction narrative about heroin addiction in a small town in Vermont.
- Jeudevine Memorial Library in Hardwick has received a Cultural Facilities Grant of \$24,000 to support the construction an elevator to make their library physically accessible.
- Catamount Arts received multiple grants to support arts integration programming at two Head Start sites in the Northeast Kingdom and for general operating support as a part of our Arts Partnership program.

Arts and culture build the infrastructure for healthy, vibrant communities where people want to live, work, and raise their families. Vibrant arts institutions and cultural experiences—grounded in the authentic character of our towns and villages—are key to attracting younger residents, strengthening our communities, and securing Vermont’s economic future.

Since 2016, we have been honored to coordinate the efforts of the **Vermont Creative Network**. Part of that work has been documenting and analyzing the existing creative sector to identify the ways in which this sector can be amplified and to maximize its impact in Vermont’s economy and quality of life.

With support from the USDA and the Vermont Community Foundation, we completed a report and strategic action plan for the creative sector of the Northeast Kingdom, released in 2019. This project has generated enthusiasm in the region and a greater awareness statewide of the creative assets of the NEK. There is increased cohesion and understanding of what the creative sector encompasses and the

benefits of working collectively. Cultural leaders, funders, and community planners are armed with in-depth research and data about the strengths and challenges of the sector to inform decision making. There is an energy and enthusiasm for cross-sector collaboration in the NEK—bolstered by the NEK Collaborative’s great work—that is enabling this plan to move forward successfully. We are very optimistic about the long-term impact of this work as the NEK creative sector continues to implement the action plan.

Some of the recent progress in the Northeast Kingdom’s creative sector include:

- In October, the NEK creative zone co-hosted a mixer with Northeast Kingdom Young Professionals Network at the Burke Mountain Conference Center. Local creative entrepreneurs offered creative sector professional anecdotes—touching on successes and challenges.
- Do North Coworking -- a Northern Vermont University-Lyndon economic development initiative—offered its first rounds of the Co.Starters program. New and aspiring Northeast Kingdom creatives and entrepreneurs participated in this program, which matched them with experts to prototype and refine products; identify customers and develop a marketing message; learn accounting and tax best practices; and determine the best structure for their business.
- Catamount Arts, based in St. Johnsbury, brought its mobile stage to 33 events this summer, engaging 45,000 people in arts performances in places across the region that lack arts venues.

As rural communities across America race to find their inner creativity, the Northeast Kingdom has already found its own. As the state’s most rural & least wealthy region, the NEK has relied on a rich—some might call it quirky—type of ingenuity and craftsmanship within an equally rich natural environment. **The creative economy represents nine 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.** The Northeast Kingdom has most of the natural and structural assets and a strong enough core of creative enterprises to make its name synonymous with creativity and culture. Leading-edge niches for which the Northeast Kingdom is already well known outside of Vermont are in creative food production, staged performances, literature, and artisanal wood furniture.

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 newcomers. The key challenge is that the region must make these transitions AND maintain the features central to the region’s identity—the village-based, small farm-dominated, sustainability-concerned Vermont that people associate with the term “Made in Vermont.”