



Request for Proposal

By the Northeast Kingdom Collaborative

Consultant for NEK Vitality Project: Systems Modeling for Regional Decision Making

Issued: October 1, 2026

Due: October 16, 2026

Deadline for questions: October 7, 2026

Responses to questions shared with all prospective respondents: October 9, 2026

Anticipated notification of selection: Week of October 19, 2026

Anticipated contract start: November 1, 2026

Anticipated project period: November 1, 2026 - October 31, 2027

Project Description:

The NEK Vitality Project will result in economic development throughout Vermont's Northeast Kingdom (NEK) by providing regional leaders, businesses, nonprofits, municipalities, and economic development organizations with a powerful decision-support tool that improves the effectiveness of economic development investments. The project will develop a system dynamics modeling and simulation tool that enables stakeholders to evaluate how investments in regional priorities influence economic outcomes over time. By helping decision-makers identify the interconnected nature of regional challenges, the project will support more effective allocation of public and private resources. This enhanced planning capacity will support ongoing business and organization development efforts, grant applications, infrastructure planning, and coordinated regional investment strategies.

The project is also designed for long-term sustainability. Upon completion, the Northeast Kingdom Collaborative will receive the fully developed simulator, scenario briefs, technical documentation, and staff training necessary to maintain and utilize the tool into the future. As the region's neutral convener that holds the agreement with USDA Rural Development for the NEK's Rural Economic Area Partnership (REAP Zone) designation, the NEK Collaborative is well positioned to integrate the simulator into its ongoing economic and community development activities, including regional planning and stakeholder convenings.

The NEK Collaborative will contract with a consultant to provide the specialized expertise required for system dynamics modeling, data collection, and technical documentation. This consultant will design and facilitate the system dynamics modeling process, synthesize stakeholder input, develop and calibrate the regional model, conduct scenario analysis, and build the interactive simulator. The consultant will also prepare supporting documentation, training materials, and scenario briefs to ensure the tool is accessible and usable by regional leaders after project completion.

The project will begin with stakeholder engagement and data collection, including a public launch at the NEK Together conference on November 4, 2026. Input gathered will be used to identify key regional priorities and relationships that influence economic vitality. The consultant will translate this information into an initial system dynamics model that reflects the interconnected nature of the emerging priorities.

The draft model will be refined through a series of stakeholder convenings, allowing participants to review assumptions, ground-truth findings, and ensure the model accurately reflects local conditions. Following validation, the consultant will develop the interactive simulator and prepare scenario analyses that demonstrate the potential impacts of different investment choices over time.

The project will conclude with delivery of the completed simulator, scenario briefs, technical documentation, and training sessions for NEK Collaborative staff and regional leaders. All project products, data, and documentation will be transferred to the NEK Collaborative, ensuring the organization has the capacity to maintain and utilize the tool beyond the grant period. Through this approach, the project will create a lasting regional planning resource that supports business development, economic development planning, grant applications, and coordinated investment strategies throughout the Northeast Kingdom.

Project Background:

Vermont's Northeast Kingdom (NEK), comprising Caledonia, Essex, and Orleans Counties, is one of the nation's most rural and economically distressed regions and is designated by USDA Rural Development as a Rural Economic Area Partnership (REAP Zone). The region encompasses 55 municipalities, each with populations lower than 5,000, across 2,027 square miles and faces persistent challenges including geographic isolation, population decline, an aging workforce, youth outmigration, housing shortages, and elevated poverty. The region has also been affected by repeated major flooding events over the past three years. As the region's neutral convener and the holder of the NEK's REAP Zone agreement with USDA Rural Development, the NEK Collaborative partners across sectors to identify regional priorities. Housing and economic vitality have emerged as the region's most urgent priorities; however, these issues are deeply interconnected. Housing shortages limit workforce recruitment, workforce shortages strain businesses, and population decline impacts economic sustainability. The NEK currently lacks a shared tool to evaluate how investments in one sector may influence outcomes across the broader regional system.

This project will address these gaps through the NEK Vitality Project, developing a system dynamics modeling tool for the region. Using regional data and stakeholder input through community engagement, the tool will allow businesses, organizations, and regional leaders to

test and compare investment scenarios and better understand their long-term impacts on regional priorities. The project will strengthen collaborative decision-making among the region, municipalities, businesses, nonprofits, and economic development organizations by providing a shared, data-informed framework for planning and investment.

Scope of Work & Key Deliverables:

The project will build a shared regional decision-support simulator tool that helps regional leaders, businesses, nonprofits, municipalities, and economic development organizations better understand and address the interconnected factors that influence economic vitality in the Northeast Kingdom. The project consists of seven primary tasks with deliverables:

For each task, the lead role and anticipated schedule are drawn from the approved grant work plan. Respondents should describe how they would carry out the contractor role in each task and may propose refinements to the approach within this overall structure.

1. Task #1 NEK Together & Project Launch

- a. *Lead: NEK Collaborative / Support: Selected Contractor – November 1 – November 30, 2026*
- b. The NEK Together convening is the Northeast Kingdom's premier regional gathering, bringing together municipalities, businesses, nonprofits, institutions, and residents to strengthen collaboration and determine shared regional priorities. Scheduled for November 4, 2026, in Essex County, the convening will provide a welcoming space to celebrate successes, build relationships, exchange information, and identify opportunities for greater coordination across the region. NEK Together will also serve as the public launch of the NEK Vitality Project and the starting point for the project's engagement and data-collection work. NEK Collaborative staff will organize and lead the convening and design structured sessions that capture how participants understand the region's interconnected challenges, such as housing, workforce, and related priorities. The selected contractor will support session design and synthesis so that participant input is captured in a usable, documented form.
- c. **Deliverable:** a documented set of regional priorities, local context, and relationship inputs that seed the regional model and shape later planning scenarios, plus broadened regional awareness of and participation in the project.

2. Task #2: Regional Data Foundation & Parameterization

- a. *Lead: Selected Contractor / Support: NEK Collaborative – November 4, 2026 – February 28, 2027*
- b. This task builds the quantitative foundation for the regional model. The selected contractor will assemble a documented database of model parameters and functional relationships covering demographics, housing, workforce, and other priority areas for Caledonia, Essex, and Orleans Counties, and will close known data gaps including current county-level employment measures, county-level workforce-program funding, and updated post-2020 county population projections. During this period the contractor will also integrate the qualitative

and quantitative input gathered at NEK Together. NEK Collaborative staff coordinate access to local and regional data holders.

- c. **Deliverable:** a transparent, well-sourced parameter database that any future analyst can inspect and update, with all sources and assumptions documented.

3. Task #3: System Dynamics Model Development & Calibration

- a. *Lead: Selected Contractor / Support: NEK Collaborative – January 1 – May 31, 2027*
- b. Using the parameter database and the relationships identified through stakeholder engagement, the selected contractor will develop a working system dynamics model of regional vitality that represents the interlocking dynamics of housing, workforce, and related regional priorities. Because the region is undergoing simultaneous structural shifts in broadband availability, land-use regulation, and other factors, calibration will draw on benchmarks from comparable rural regions as well as local trends, with all assumptions documented and open for stakeholder review. The model is designed to produce structured, inspectable reasoning about how regional choices interact over time, not point predictions, giving the NEK Collaborative and its stakeholders a shared, transparent basis for evaluating development strategies.
- c. **Deliverable:** a calibrated, documented system dynamics model with a clear record of structure, data sources, and assumptions.

4. Task #4: Stakeholder Ground-Truthing & Model Refinement

- a. *Joint Leads: NEK Collaborative and Selected Contractor – March 1 – June 30, 2027*
- b. The NEK Collaborative and the selected contractor will jointly conduct two to three structured review workshops with regional stakeholders. These workshops will test whether the model's structure and behavior match real on-the-ground experience. NEK Collaborative staff convene participants and facilitate the sessions through the region's existing networks; the contractor presents the model, gathers feedback, and incorporates it through documented revisions. This step grounds the model in local reality and builds the stakeholder trust and ownership needed for the tool to be used in actual planning and business-development decisions.
- c. **Deliverable:** a refined, stakeholder-validated model accompanied by a record of the revisions made and the input behind them.

5. Task #5: Regional Vitality Simulator & Decision-Support Tools

- a. *Lead: Selected Contractor / Support: NEK Collaborative – May 1 – August 31, 2027*
- b. The selected contractor will deliver a production version of the interactive NEK Regional Vitality Simulator: a publicly accessible, browser-based tool that lets users adjust intervention levers, apply scenario presets reflecting the priorities surfaced through engagement, and compare scenarios side by side. Alongside the simulator, the contractor will produce short, sector-level scenario briefs that translate model results into plain-language implications for the region's businesses and regional economic and community development organizations. NEK Collaborative staff guide the design priorities so the tool fits regional users' needs.
- c. **Deliverable:** a working public simulator and an accompanying set of plain-language sector scenario briefs.

6. Task #6: Capacity Transfer & Sustainability

- a. *Joint Leads: NEK Collaborative and Selected Contractor – August 1 – September 30, 2027*
- b. This task ensures the tool outlives the grant period. The selected contractor will train NEK Collaborative staff to operate, interpret, and present the simulator independently, and will deliver complete technical documentation (model structure, parameter sources, assumptions, and update procedures) so the tool remains easy to maintain over time. All tools, data, and documentation transfer to the NEK Collaborative.
- c. **Deliverable:** trained NEK Collaborative staff, full technical documentation, and transfer of all project assets to the NEK Collaborative.

7. Task #7: Project Debut, Regional Trainings & Final Reporting

- a. *Lead: NEK Collaborative / Support: Selected Contractor – September 1 – October 31, 2027*
- b. Building on the capacity transfer in Task 6, the NEK Collaborative will bring the completed simulator to the region. NEK Collaborative staff will host a public debut session introducing the tool to regional stakeholders, followed by a series of hands-on training sessions that equip regional leaders to use the simulator in their own planning, business-development, and grant-seeking work. Delivered through the Collaborative's existing regional networks, these sessions turn the tool from a deliverable into active regional practice and reinforce the project's long-term sustainability. The selected contractor will be available to provide technical support to the debut and training sessions as needed.
- c. **Deliverable:** a public debut session and a series of regional-leader training sessions, with the simulator in active use across the region's municipalities, businesses, and development organizations, and completed final performance reporting.

Project Performance Measures:

The success of the NEK Vitality Project (as distinct from the evaluation of proposals, described below) will be measured through the following performance measures:

1. Development and Implementation of the simulator tool
 - Completion and public launch of the simulator.
 - Successful training sessions for the simulator tool by the NEK Collaborative staff and regional leaders.
 - Successful transfer of all tools and resources to the NEK Collaborative for ongoing use.
2. Stakeholder Utilization
 - Number of businesses, municipalities, nonprofits, and economic development organizations using the simulator to support planning, business development, grant applications, infrastructure investments, and other economic development activities.
 - Number of regional projects, plans, or funding proposals informed by simulator analysis.

3. Economic Development Impact
 - Improved regional decision-making through the use of data-informed investment strategies that support the retention of existing jobs and the creation of conditions that enable future job growth and business expansion throughout the NEK
4. Project Sustainability
 - Continued use of the simulator by the NEK Collaborative and regional partners beyond the grant period to guide economic development planning, resource allocation, and coordinated investment strategies.

Proposal Evaluation Criteria:

Proposals will be reviewed by a selection committee designated by the NEK Collaborative. Proposals will be scored on the following criteria:

1. **Technical approach and methodology (30 points):** soundness of the proposed system dynamics modeling approach; plan for assembling and documenting data; approach to calibration, stakeholder validation, and transparency of model assumptions; approach to building and delivering the simulator.
2. **Relevant experience and qualifications (25 points):** demonstrated experience with simulation or quantitative modeling, regional or community economic analysis, and stakeholder engagement; qualifications and availability of the proposed personnel; quality of references.
3. **Understanding of the project and the region (15 points):** demonstrated understanding of the project goals, the intended users of the tool, and the development challenges facing rural regions such as the Northeast Kingdom.
4. **Work plan and capacity (15 points):** feasibility of the proposed schedule; clarity of roles between the consultant and NEK Collaborative staff; plan for training and knowledge transfer.
5. **Cost (15 points):** reasonableness of total cost relative to the scope; clarity and completeness of the cost proposal.

The NEK Collaborative may request interviews, presentations, or written clarifications from one or more respondents before making a selection. Selection will be based on the proposal that offers the best overall value to the project, not solely on lowest cost.

Available Funding:

The NEK Collaborative anticipates a total contract value of \$57,600 for the seven tasks described above, funded through a USDA Rural Business Development Grant. Cost proposals should be presented as a fixed price by task, with estimated hours and hourly rates shown. Respondents may propose a total above or below this figure with justification; proposals will be evaluated on overall value to the project.

Contracts are invited (but not required) to describe any cost-share and/or in-kind contribution they would offer the project.

Submission Requirements:

Interested consultants must respond by October 16, 2026 at 4:00 p.m. Eastern.

Please submit your responses to Abby Long, Executive Director of the Northeast Kingdom Collaborative, by email at abby@nekcollaborative.org

Please submit a single PDF that includes the following components:

1. **Letter of interest** (signed) identifying the responding organization, primary contact, and a brief statement of interest and relevant experience.
2. **Understanding of the project and technical approach:** the proposed methodology for each of the seven tasks, including the modeling platform and software to be used, the approach to data collection and documentation, the approach to calibration and stakeholder validation, and how the simulator will be built, hosted, and maintained. Identify any software licenses or recurring costs the NEK Collaborative would incur to operate the simulator after the project ends.
3. **Work plan and timeline** showing the sequence of activities by task and the expected points of collaboration with NEK Collaborative staff.
4. **Team qualifications:** resumes or CVs for all proposed personnel and their roles on the project. If you intend to subcontract with other consultants, include their roles, relevant experience, and resumes.
5. **Relevant experience:** brief descriptions of up to three comparable projects (e.g., simulation or quantitative modeling, regional or community economic analysis, decision-support tools, or stakeholder-engaged planning).
6. **References:** a minimum of three (3) professional references, with contact information, for relevant work completed within the past five (5) years.
7. **Cost proposal:** total cost and a breakdown by task showing estimated hours, hourly rates, and any other direct costs (e.g., travel). Note any assumptions underlying the cost proposal.
8. **Disclosures:** a statement identifying any actual or potential conflict of interest, including any financial or personal relationship with NEK Collaborative staff or board members, or a statement that none exists; and a certification that the respondent and any proposed subcontractors are not debarred, suspended, or otherwise excluded from participation in federally funded contracts (see SAM.gov).

Please note that funding for the NEK Vitality Project: Systems Modeling for Regional Decision Making was made possible in part with a Rural Business Development Grant from USDA Rural Development. All work related to this grant must be completed by October 31, 2027. The USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

All information submitted becomes property of the NEK Collaborative upon submission. The NEK Collaborative reserves the right to issue supplemental information or guidelines relating to the RFP as well as make modifications to the RFP or withdraw the RFP. The NEK Collaborative reserves the right to reject any and all submissions received as a result of this solicitation, to negotiate with any qualified source, to waive any formality and any technicalities or to cancel the RFP in part or in its entirety if it is in the best interest of the NEK Collaborative. This solicitation of proposals in no way obligates the NEK Collaborative to award a contract.

Contract Requirements:

The NEK Collaborative will negotiate contract terms upon selection. All contracts are subject to review by the NEK Collaborative's legal counsel. The contract shall not start until the successful applicant enters into a written contract with the NEK Collaborative. The NEK Collaborative is not liable for any cost incurred by the consultant prior to issuance of a contract. The consultant must comply with all State and Federal covenants required by virtue of the funding source or contained or referenced in all the NEK Collaborative's subcontracts including, but not limited to the following provisions: The NEK Collaborative anticipates a fixed-price contract with payments tied to acceptance of task deliverables. All deliverables, data, model files, source code, documentation, and training materials produced under the contract will become the property of the NEK Collaborative.

- Insurance Coverage
- Indemnification
- Workers Compensation
- Civil Rights and Equal Opportunity
- Americans with Disabilities Act
- Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) obligations
- Audit and Record Retention
- Lobbying restrictions
- Debarment and suspension certification
- Conflict of interest disclosure
- Federal contract provisions required under 2 CFR 200, Appendix II

Contact for Questions:

For additional information or clarification regarding this RFP, contact Abby Long, Executive Director, Northeast Kingdom Collaborative abby@nekcollaborative.org

Questions must be submitted by email no later than October 7, 2026. To ensure all respondents have access to the same information, written responses to substantive questions will be shared with all known prospective respondents and posted at www.nekcollaborative.org by October 9, 2026. Respondents should direct all communication regarding this RFP to the contact above.

For more information on the Northeast Kingdom Collaborative please visit www.nekcollaborative.org

Thank you for your interest and consideration.



Abby Long
Executive Director