

NEK Community Broadband - 2020 Year in Review

The Northeast Kingdom Communication Union District is commonly referred to as NEK Community Broadband. It was formed in March of 2020, and now includes 32 towns. Ours is one of them. Every town has one primary representative on the Governing Board who was appointed by its select board. The organization's purpose is to ensure that every e911 address in the Kingdom can access robust reliable internet service speeds. This is a long-term process which will take years to fully realize.

Funding will come through state and federal grants, subsidized loans, and the fees from internet subscribers for services provided. Financial resources will not include taxes from member towns. In fact, NEK Community Broadband is legally prohibited from using tax dollars directly, and this prohibition includes debts.

First Year Successes

In our first year, NEK Broadband has formed a governing board, hired a clerk and administrator, raised \$743,000 in grant funding, and completed an initial feasibility study that provides a roadmap for pilot construction projects next year.

Working quickly to take advantage of COVID Relief Funds, we were able to partner with Kingdom Fiber to provide fiber service infrastructure to 100 previously unserved residences. As of January, 42 of these homes in Albany, Craftsbury, Greensboro, Hardwick, and Irasburg have been connected. NEK Community Broadband was also able to share information about a Line Extension program established through the CARES act, engage in legislative advocacy on behalf of our communities, and build relationships with electric utilities which will help with future projects.

Recent Updates and Future Plans

Recent federal funding to two telecommunications companies, Consolidated Communications and National Rural Telecommunications Cooperative, will improve internet service in many areas of the Northeast Kingdom. As NEK Community Broadband develops its five-year plan, it will work on filling in the gaps of areas that will not be served by those two companies.

NEK Community Broadband will focus on fiber optic infrastructure because it provides the fastest, most reliable internet service for the long term. In 2021, we will begin with a \$4-5 million dollar build-out of our fiber optic network.

Of course, what we all want to know is: when will there be fast internet at my home? The five-year plan we create in 2021 will give us a much clearer picture of when specific addresses might be served. In alignment with our mission, we are committed to finding a just balance between fiscal responsibility and prioritizing service to the most rural areas that are underserved - or unserved - by the national, for-profit internet companies in our area.

Getting additional federal and state support for rural infrastructure will help more homes get served faster; so please talk to your elected representatives about how important this is for your household or business.

Why is NEK Community Broadband vital?

These days, reliable, fast internet is a necessary utility for business, work, school, and healthcare. Commercial internet providers have not stepped up to serve the most rural areas of the state and country, just as happened when the infrastructure for electric service was being created in the 20th century. In some ways similar to the electric co-ops that were created back then to fill the need, Communication Union Districts around Vermont are working successfully to fill the internet needs of 21st century Vermonters and beyond.

Where to Learn More

Website: nekbroadband.org

Facebook: [nekcommunitybroadband](https://www.facebook.com/nekcommunitybroadband)

The Annual Report is available in the Town Report or through the Town Clerk's office.

In the future, updates on progress will be shared through local newspapers as well as online.

Summary of Successes

- 32 towns have joined as of January, 2021.
- Governing board created: executive, finance, communication, and technical committees. Bylaws and policies established.
- Administrator and Clerk hired.
- Completed initial feasibility study which provides a roadmap for pilot construction projects next year.
- Began building extensive relationships with electric utilities in our district.
- Joined the Vermont CUD Association (VCUDA).
- Shared information about a Line Extension program established through the CARES act.
- Conducted legislative advocacy on behalf of our communities.
- Raised \$743,000 through a variety of grants and match programs. (Overall funding will be through state and federal grants, subsidized loans, and fees from internet subscribers for services provided.)
- Established a partnership with Kingdom Fiber using COVID-relief funding to connect up to 100 homes in Albany, Craftsbury, Greensboro, Hardwick, and Irasburg. As of January, 42 homes have received new fiber service.
- **Plans for 2021:** After developing a detailed five-year plan, we will invest \$4-5 million to expand our NEK fiber optic network.