Vibrant NEO Champion Awards
CALL FOR ENTRIES

Background

Vibrant NEO is pleased to announce its seventh annual Vibrant NEO Champion Awards program. Vibrant NEO is a non-profit organization supporting implementation of Vibrant NEO 2040, an important community-based strategic development framework adopted in 2014 for the 12-county Northeast Ohio region. The framework has four major themes:

1. Strengthen Established Communities
2. Increase Transportation Choice
3. Preserve and Protect Natural Resources
4. Promote Collaboration and Efficiency

The 2025 Regional Champion awards will recognize initiatives – projects, programs, and policies – of communities, businesses, nonprofits, and civic groups that demonstrate leadership in the advancement of the Vibrant NEO vision and the four themes outlined above.

Winners will be recognized at an awards program to be held in late 2026 (date & location TBD) and will be encouraged to display the Vibrant NEO award logo in their advertising and promotional material. All entries which are exemplary of at least one of the four themes and nine vision statements will be archived on the Vibrant NEO website.

The size of the community or project is not a determining factor; we encourage small cities, villages, and townships to apply.

Entries that demonstrate a commitment to racial equity are strongly encouraged.

Entries and Eligibility

Projects, programs, policies and other related efforts that have been completed or are in development are eligible for consideration. Entries may be submitted by non-profit and for-profit organizations, governmental entities, and civic groups. Self-nominations are welcome.

Entries must demonstrate how they contribute to Vibrant NEO's regional sustainability goals. Judging preference will be given to initiatives that either involve, or positively affect, more than one jurisdiction (city, county, MPO), or more than one discipline (housing, transportation, natural resources, workforce development, economic development, etc.).

As Vibrant NEO is a regionally focused organization with broad long-range goals, we encourage entries that involve collaboration across political jurisdictions. All entries must demonstrate the potential for economic, social and/or environmental benefit for residents of one or more of the 12 counties: Ashtabula, Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, Lorain, Mahoning, Medina, Portage, Stark, Summit, Trumbull, and Wayne.

While we request one application per initiative, and one designated lead proponent per application, projects that integrate more than one theme, exemplify the vision statements, and are the result of collaboration of multiple partners, are encouraged to apply.

Entry Fees

There is no fee for entry in the awards program.

Deadline and Schedule

Entries must be submitted in digital form to vibrantneo@mpo.noaca.org.

Schedule of key dates:

Call for entries	August 15, 2026
Entry deadline	September 30, 2026
Judging	October 2026
Awards Program	Date & Location TBD

All applicants are strongly encouraged to attend the Champion Awards ceremony. A link to the registration page will be provided.

Awards Structure

All submitted awards will be reviewed by a panel of judges. We recognize that not all communities or organizations have equal resources. Accordingly, judges will consider nominees based on how they reflect the Vibrant NEO themes rather than the size of the project or policy in terms of money spent or population affected. Small cities, villages, and townships, or smaller scale projects, are encouraged to submit an entry.

Up to eight (8) awards will be given by the judges in two categories:

1. **Vibrant NEO 2040 Regional Sustainability Awards**
Awards may be given to submittals that further one or more of the four Vibrant NEO 2040 themes (see below).

2. **Vibrant NEO 2040 Regional Collaboration Awards**
Awards may be given to submittals that best exemplify the themes and vision recommendations from Vibrant NEO 2040, ***AND*** address multiple themes and/or include multiple jurisdictions or organizations in a way that has the potential for broader regional impact and scalability.

Judging Criteria

Each submittal will be reviewed by the judges in light of the four themes and supporting vision statements outlined below. ***To what extent does the project….?*** Applicants are encouraged to review the Vibrant NEO 2040 document for detailed descriptions.

***Theme 1*: Strengthen Established Communities**

- Create more options for people who want to live in diverse, inclusive communities of opportunity and high-quality education in ways that benefit people of color and others who have faced discrimination.
- Affirmatively further fair housing. Increase availability, affordability and quality of housing in quality neighborhoods
- Strengthen communities, enhance and build upon existing assets, and improve fiscal health of the public sector
- Create living wage jobs with benefits and career paths for residents of existing communities that have faced discrimination.

***Theme 2*: Increase Transportation Choice**

- Address historic disparity in access to jobs and housing. Ensure robust investment in transportation systems to address historical inequities and to connect people of color to quality jobs.
- Strengthen connections across the region in transportation networks, quality housing and jobs
- Prioritize access over mobility in designing transportation systems.

***Theme 3*: Preserve and Protect Natural Resources**

- Address environmental racism
- Demonstrate effective stewardship of resources and balance the natural and built environment to promote health and reduce health disparities.
- Protect open space, water quality, wetland, the riparian corridor and other natural areas, particularly in minority communities.
- Support sustainable agriculture and the local food system in Northeast Ohio
- Preserve our natural areas for future generations, provide outdoor recreation opportunities, and develop a regional approach to protecting air, water, and soil quality

***Theme 4*: Promote Collaboration and Efficiency**

- Increase collaboration among the region's governments to improve the quality of life across all communities
- Building on the region's positive legacy while eradicating systemic racism, which is defined as a form of racism, intentional or unintentional, that is embedded as normal practice within society
- Create an inclusive regional economy that is competitive, growing and fair in ways that benefit people of color and others who have faced discrimination.

Judging Process

Up to five judges will make up the judging panel and will be selected from across the region. They will rank the projects, and Vibrant NEO will then average these rankings. Decision of the judges is final.

Awards Notification

Winners will be privately notified prior to the event to ensure that they are able to participate in the ceremony.

Application Materials

Submittals should be in the form of one multi-page pdf document, plus digital images or supporting materials, as listed below. The entire pdf submittal should be a maximum of six pages, plus images or supporting materials.

- ☐ Application form, including a checklist showing the themes and vision statements exemplified in the initiative (Application forms are available on the Vibrant NEO website)
- ☐ A maximum three-page narrative (single spaced) including:
  - Brief description of the initiative
  - Description of how the initiative exemplifies one or more of the four themes and nine vision statements of Vibrant NEO 2040
  - Brief description of the initiative's regional significance for sustainability
  - How the initiative addresses racial equity
- ☐ Images and/or examples, depending on initiative type:

  Projects: Up to five images illustrating the project plan, site, vision, and use
  Programs: Up to five images illustrating the program in action, or as envisioned
  Policies: A digital copy of the plan or policy, code or plan language, or other documentation.
  Other: support documentation in digital form as appropriate.