

Request for Proposals
Feasibility Study for Potential Ceramics-Focused Expansion

Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, Summit, New Jersey

Issue Date: July 15, 2026

Proposal Due Date: September 9, 2026

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I. Introduction

The Visual Arts Center of New Jersey is seeking proposals from qualified arts, culture, and nonprofit planning consultants to conduct a feasibility study for a possible ceramics-focused expansion.

This RFP is being issued to a small group of firms with experience in cultural planning, institutional strategy, facility feasibility, business modeling, and arts organization growth.

The purpose of this engagement is to help the Art Center determine whether there is a clear strategic, programmatic, financial, and operational rationale for taking the next step toward expansion. At this stage, the Art Center is not seeking to select a site, approve a lease, begin design, or commit to construction. The goal is to make an evidence-based decision about whether additional space could advance the Art Center's mission, strengthen access and program quality, support earned income, and contribute to long-term sustainability. The final product of this engagement should help the Art Center and Board make a clear go/no-go/next-step decision.

Background

The Visual Arts Center of New Jersey, located in Summit, NJ, is a leading visual arts organization serving families, adults, schools, and community partners across the region. The Art Center offers studio classes, exhibitions, school and community programs, camps, and public programs for people of all ages. As an AAM-accredited museum and regional art center operating a 23,000-square-foot facility with museum galleries, studio classes, school partnerships, and community programs, VACNJ has the institutional experience, audience base, and operational capacity to evaluate expansion.

The current exploration of possible expansion emerged from the Art Center's most recent Strategic Plan. A Steering Committee was formed to study expansion more seriously, with ceramics emerging as the clearest current example of demand exceeding available space.

Project Context

The Art Center currently operates two ceramics classrooms, one with capacity for 12 students and one with capacity for 6 students. Based on current enrollment, waitlists, scheduling

constraints, and facility use, staff believe an ideal ceramics model may include three 12-person classrooms, a dedicated kiln room, glaze kitchen, clay storage, and dedicated student storage.

The Art Center's ceramics program has strong demand but is constrained by space, equipment, scheduling, kiln capacity, open studio availability, and the physical requirements of the medium.

The Steering Committee has discussed several potential geographic markets and corridors, listed in section III.c of this RFP. Current ceramics enrollment is regional rather than only Summit-based, with 77.2% of recent ceramics students coming from outside Summit's 07901 ZIP code.

The Art Center recognizes that a ceramics expansion would require more than classroom space. A successful facility would need appropriate plumbing, clay traps, ventilation, electrical capacity, kiln safety, loading, storage, ADA access, adequate parking, zoning compatibility, sprinklers/fire safety, and landlord tolerance for ceramic production. These requirements point to flexible commercial or adaptive-use spaces.

II. Purpose of this Engagement

The selected consultant will help the Art Center determine whether to move forward with a more formal facility planning or pre-construction phase.

The consultant should help answer the following questions:

1. Is the Art Center's preliminary business model realistic?
2. Which geographic corridors appear most promising from both a market-demand and facility-feasibility standpoint?
3. What are the greatest risks?
4. What additional due diligence is needed before any lease, design, campaign, or construction decision?
5. What type of consultant team should the Art Center hire next, if the project moves forward?
6. What decision framework should the Board use to determine whether the Art Center should proceed, pause, pilot, or stop?

III. Scope of Work

The selected consultant will be expected to complete the following work, making use of existing VACNJ data and external research. Beyond the kickoff meeting and any necessary clarification conversations, we do not expect the consultant to conduct formal interviews with staff, faculty, students, board members, or Steering Committee members:

a. Review Existing Materials

Review existing Art Center materials, including but not limited to:

- Steering Committee meeting notes
- Strategic Plan excerpts related to expansion
- Current ceramics enrollment, revenue, and expense data
- Preliminary expanded ceramics model
- ZIP code and catchment data
- Current waitlist and capacity information, based on VACNJ records.
- Current ceramics studio/class schedule
- Current ceramics faculty/staffing structure
- Current ceramics pricing
- Historical enrollment trends
- Existing notes on possible corridors, competition, and facility needs

b. High-Level Facility Criteria

Develop a high-level facility criteria document that can be used in a future real estate or architectural phase. This should include:

- ideal order-of-magnitude square footage range, including program, storage, kiln, circulation, and support spaces,
- classroom count and capacity,
- kiln and equipment assumptions,
- storage needs,
- parking and access requirements,
- loading needs,
- ADA considerations,
- adult/youth safety and circulation considerations,
- and any facility deal-breakers (for instance, zoning barriers).

The consultant should identify which corridors, listed in section III.c, appear most likely to offer feasible building types.

The consultant is not expected to provide architectural drawings or engineering analysis in this phase, but should help VACNJ define what must be tested by architects, engineers, brokers, and zoning counsel in the next phase.

c. Market and Corridor Assessment

Review and refine the current understanding of market demand. This should include:

- analysis of current enrollment patterns,
- review of geographic catchment data,
- assessment of under-reached geographic markets,
- drive-time analysis,
- consideration of adult learner and family markets,

- evaluation of preliminary pricing tolerance based on comparable programs, VACNJ data, and market context,
- risk of cannibalizing the Summit location,
- and identification of corridors with the strongest potential.

The consultant should assess the following corridors or recommend a refined list:

- Westfield / Cranford / Garwood / Clark
- Route 22 / I-78 practical facility corridor, including Mountainside, Scotch Plains, Berkeley Heights, and New Providence
- Livingston and nearby Essex/Morris access points
- Millburn / Short Hills
- Maplewood / South Orange
- Madison / Chatham
- Bernardsville / Basking Ridge / Somerset Hills

Note: The consultant should consider corridors not only by audience potential, but also by facility practicality. For example, a walkable downtown may be desirable from a visibility and community standpoint, but may offer spaces that are too small, too expensive, or technically unsuitable for ceramics. Conversely, edge-of-downtown, adaptive reuse, commercial, or flex spaces may be more feasible for kilns, ventilation, loading, storage, and parking. (See section III.b.)

d. Competition and Positioning

Conduct a preliminary scan of ceramics and arts education (both for-profit and nonprofit) competitors in the target corridors. The consultant should help determine:

- program type, price point, capacity, location, and apparent positioning of existing providers, if publicly available,
- whether existing providers prove demand or create market saturation,
- how VACNJ would need to differentiate,
- whether VACNJ's contemporary art, studio-school, technique-based, and institutional identity creates a distinct market position,
- and whether the competitive landscape supports or weakens the case for expansion.

e. Operating Model Review

Review and refine the preliminary ceramics operating model. The Art Center would like both a base model and a conservative model. This should include:

- class capacity assumptions,
- open studio assumptions,

- class pricing assumptions,
- staffing needs including admin support,
- likely ramp-up period,
- year-one, year-two, and year-three enrollment expectations,
- startup losses or subsidy needs,
- overhead assumptions including rent assumptions,
- and sensitivity analysis testing how changes in key assumptions would affect the project's financial viability.

f. Capital and Startup Budget Framework

Review the preliminary capital and startup assumptions and recommend what requires further study. The consultant is not expected to produce a bid-level construction estimate. However, they should help VACNJ identify:

- what cost categories are missing,
- what assumptions are most vulnerable,
- what contingencies should be considered,
- what soft costs may need to be included, and
- whether costs should be categorized as one-time startup costs or ongoing operating costs.

g. Risk Assessment

Prepare a clear risk assessment that includes:

- financial risk,
- real estate risk,
- staffing risk,
- demand risk,
- competition risk,
- cannibalization risk,
- zoning risk,
- capital fundraising risk,
- operational complexity,
- brand risk,
- and governance or decision-making risk.

h. Recommended Next Steps

Provide a specific sequenced roadmap for the appropriate next steps. The consultant should clearly define what additional consultants are needed, in what order, and why. The recommendation should identify "decision gates" for board consideration on whether VACNJ should, for example:

- hire a broker,
- hire an architect/pre-design team,

- hire a cost estimator or owner's representative,
- conduct a donor/capital campaign feasibility study,
- test a pilot or partnership model first,
- pause the project,
- or stop further exploration.

IV. Deliverables

The selected consultant should provide the following deliverables:

1. **Kickoff meeting** with VACNJ leadership and selected Steering Committee members.
2. **Market and corridor assessment** identifying the most promising corridors and the rationale for each.
3. **Preliminary competition scan** with positioning implications for VACNJ.
4. **Refined operating model**, including base and conservative scenarios with ramp-up assumptions over three years.
5. **High-level facility criteria document** to guide future broker, architect, or pre-design work.
6. **Capital and startup budget framework** identifying likely cost categories and areas requiring specialist review.
7. **Risk assessment** with recommended mitigation strategies.
8. **Recommended Next Steps/Decision Framework** for evaluating whether to proceed, pilot, or stop. Also, if moving forward, which specialists are needed next, when to bring them in, and what questions each one must answer.
9. **Final board-ready report**, including an executive summary, and a presentation summarizing findings and recommendations for the Steering Committee and full Board

V. What the Consultant Is Not Expected to Do

Because this is a preliminary feasibility phase, the selected consultant is not expected to perform all future project functions. The consultant may identify questions that should be tested by specialists in these areas, but is not expected to certify or resolve those questions in this phase. The consultant is **not** expected to:

- act as VACNJ's commercial real estate broker;
- certify the suitability of specific properties;
- identify and negotiate lease terms for specific properties;
- provide architectural drawings or test fits;
- provide engineering analysis;
- provide legal zoning opinions;
- provide bid-level construction estimates;
- serve as construction manager or owner's representative;
- conduct a capital campaign feasibility study.

VI. Desired Consultant Qualifications

The Art Center is seeking a consultant or consulting team with experience in:

- arts and cultural organization planning,
- nonprofit business planning,
- facility feasibility or cultural facility planning,
- market and audience analysis,
- earned income modeling,
- board-facing strategy and experience translating complex feasibility questions into board-level decisions,
- arts education or studio school models,
- and multi-site or expansion planning.

Experience with visual arts organizations, museums, art centers, studio schools, or community-based cultural institutions is strongly preferred. The consultant does not need to be based in New Jersey, but must be able to understand regional market dynamics and work with VACNJ to evaluate New Jersey corridors and communities.

VII. Proposal Requirements

1. **Firm overview**
Brief description of your firm and relevant experience.
2. **Understanding of the project**
Your interpretation of the opportunity, risks, and key questions.
3. **Proposed approach**
Work plan, methodology, and major phases including, but not limited to, number/type of meetings included, any recommended optional add-ons, and any item you've identified that you would not be able to answer in this phase.
4. **Project team**
Names, roles, bios, and relevant experience of team members.
5. **Deliverables**
Confirmation of proposed deliverables and any recommended modifications.
6. **Timeline**
Proposed schedule from kickoff to final presentation.
7. **Fee proposal**
Fixed fee or fee range, including expenses and optional add-on services.
8. **Relevant examples**
Three to five similar projects, preferably for arts, culture, museum, education, or community-based nonprofit clients.
9. **References**
Three client references.

VIII. Anticipated Timeline

RFP issued	July 15, 2026
Proposals due	September 9, 2026
Interviews, if needed	September 16, 2026
Consultant selected	October 1, 2026
Project kickoff	October 15, 2026

IX. Evaluation Criteria

Proposals will be evaluated based on:

- understanding of the Art Center's goals and constraints;
- clarity and practicality of proposed approach;
- realistic timeline;
- overall relevant experience and quality of team assigned;
- experience with earned income and operating models;
- understanding of market demand and audience analysis;
- ability to translate analysis into board-ready decisions;
- demonstration of how you will understand local market and real estate conditions;
- experience in advising on use of specialist consultants for project development;
- and overall cost/value.

X. Submission Instructions

Please submit proposals electronically (PDF preferred) to:

Melanie Cohn
Executive Director
Visual Arts Center of New Jersey
mcohn@artcenternj.org

Please use the subject line: *Proposal: VACNJ Ceramics Expansion Feasibility Study*

Questions may be submitted to Melanie Cohn at the email address above by August 27, 2026.

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