

EDC Public Forum - 3/12/14

I'd like to introduce you to the **Vernon Volunteers' Collaborative**, a group of 11 town organizations that work in the area of the **arts, history, preservation and beautification**. They are non governmental, non profit, volunteer organizations that contribute to making Vernon a special place to live and work. Each in their own way contributes to our Community Character.

You are probably familiar with most of the organizations, but even among ourselves we found we often didn't know or misunderstood what each does. The organizations are the:

Friends of the Hockanum River Linear Park
Friends of the Vernon Arts Commission
Friends of Valley Falls
New England Civil War Museum
Northern Connecticut Land Trust
Strong Family Farm
Tolland County Agricultural Center
Vernon Community Arts Center
Vernon Garden Club
Vernon Greenways Volunteers
Vernon Historical Society

The idea behind the Collaborative is simple: The resources of these groups are limited, as are the number of dedicated volunteers, but they deal with similar challenges. Wouldn't it be more effective to work together, share our experiences and ideas, and develop approaches better done together than individually?

We have been meeting each month since December at the R House Restaurant and have identified nine common challenges for which we are developing strategies.

These nine Challenges are :

Coordinating event schedules
Creating and maintaining websites
Working with the town
Increasing membership
Recruiting volunteers
Effective promotion and advertising
Fund raising
Developing effective boards
Property management

We have arrived at the point where we are ready to 'come out' as a group and let the town know what we are doing. Some of you received the press release or announcements we sent out last week, or might have seen articles in the paper or online.

How does the Collaborative help you, the Economic Development Commission, achieve your objectives?

Attending your meetings the past few years I've listened as you explore ways to improve Vernon's image and promote the town to businesses.

Quoting from your EDC website for businesses interested in coming to Vernon: "The Town of Vernon is a great place with a high quality of life, desirable residential neighborhoods and schools. . . . A variety of cultural, recreational, and commercial activities are available throughout town offering goods and services, employment and amusement. Vernon is a dynamic combination of neighborhoods, open spaces, parks, recreation areas, hiking trails, lakes & waterfalls, Historic Village & Historic Downtown, retail shops & eateries, museums, amusements, and more."

In December you wrote a letter to *Connecticut Magazine* showing your concern for how those outside town see us.

You are trying to identify and promote what makes Vernon a special place to live and work in order to attract young homeowners and businesses. You mention cultural activities, open spaces, hiking trails, historic villages and downtown and museums. The organizations of the Collaboration represent, and in some cases, are the things you are using to promote Vernon. That makes us your partner in enhancing and promoting Vernon's image.

One of our nine challenges is to help the individual organizations better promote themselves. This means being more visible by participating in existing events in town, improving our advertising, taking full advantage of the Internet and creating our own new events. For our organizations this will bring more people to their events, and help them enlist new members and volunteers.

And as our profile rises so will it affect, in a positive way, Vernon's image.

The Plan of Conservation and Development, which much of your 3 Year Plan is based on including the 'development and promotion of Vernon's Brand,' has a section on our Community Character. The Vision for our Community Character is that, "Vernon will retain those natural features, cultural features, and elements that make us unique. We will build community spirit by engaging more residents in planning for our future."

It's our Community Character that make Vernon a special place to live and work and that differentiates us from other area towns. Boosting our Community Character for the benefit of the town is what the Vernon Volunteers' Collaborative hopes to do.