

# TOWN OF VERNON

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## Vernon Resident Don Bellingham Honored for Founding Vernon Greenways Volunteers

**VERNON, Connecticut** – Vernon is known for its spectacular network of trails, which have grown increasingly popular in recent years. And while the trails are heavily used by hikers, walkers, cyclists and others, they remain in remarkably good shape thanks to the hundreds of volunteer hours provided each year by the Vernon Greenways Volunteers.



*Don Bellingham*

The Greenways Volunteers, usually dressed in green t-shirts or sweatshirts when they are at work on the trails, perform a variety of tasks. They keep the trails clean, perform maintenance such as weed whacking, maintain planters, and repair and level portions of the trail damaged by heavy rain, runoff and other natural forces.

The volunteers also envisioned and commissioned installation of a mural where the trail passes under I-84. The Greenways Volunteers continue to maintain the mural and seek donations to replace it every few years.

For more substantial maintenance issues, they regularly patrol the trails and report dangerous conditions to the Parks and Recreation Department so that it can dispatch staff to tackle big jobs.

The Vernon Greenways Volunteers have been at work since 2004 and their efforts have become indispensable.

Don Bellingham, a Vernon resident and avid hiker, started the Vernon Greenways Volunteers in 2004. Recently retired, he was looking for an opportunity to volunteer his time.

What he created has grown into a volunteer force of well over 100 people that provides an essential service to those who use and enjoy Vernon's approximately 40 miles of trails.

Bellingham, now 80, has turned over leadership of the Vernon Greenways Volunteers to a new team and has “retired” for a second time. For all of his work, he was recently honored by the organization he founded, Vernon Mayor Dan Champagne, state Rep. Kevin Brown of Vernon and the Parks and Recreation Department.

“There is much that makes Vernon special and the Greenways Volunteers bring two of these elements together – our incredible volunteers and our spectacular trails,” Vernon Mayor Dan Champagne said. “I and our entire community are grateful to the Greenways Volunteers for all they do and to Don for his vision and commitment to Vernon.”

Bellingham created the Greenways Volunteers in 2004. As he sought volunteer opportunities, he discovered the Hockanum River Linear Park Committee.

“I was really into trails,” he said. “That appealed to me.”

He noticed the “adopt a highway signs” along state roads and in a meeting with staff from the Vernon Parks and Recreation Department asked if Vernon could do something like that with the town’s parks.



*Don Bellingham, left, Mark Leighton and Vernon Parks and Recreation Director Marty Sitler admire the cake for Don.*

He was assigned the task of finding a way to do such a program on the local level and in September launched the Vernon Greenways Volunteers. Bellingham and four others went to work maintaining the trails.

“People would come by and ask us what we were doing,” Bellingham recalled. “We’d say we’re the Vernon Greenways Volunteers and we work on the trails to try to make them better.” People began to sign up and eventually the group grew to well over 100 members.

Vernon Parks and Recreation Director Marty Sitler said the work the Greenways Volunteers perform each year is essential to keeping Vernon’s trail network safe and inviting to all who use it.

“If it wasn’t for the work this group does, the hours you put in, the trails would not be what they are today,” Sitler said at a recent gathering of Greenways Volunteers to honor Bellingham. “The park maintenance division supports you by delivering equipment and materials to your work sites and handling heavier work. Your daily presence on the trails helps us set priorities and address projects that preserve the trails for all to enjoy.”

But at the end of the day, the Greenways Volunteers play a crucial role, Sitler said.

“People rave about and complement our trails and that’s because of you,” Sitler told the volunteers. “Every town needs a group like you guys.”

Mark Leighton, who took over as president of the Vernon Greenways Volunteers after Bellingham stepped back, said Bellingham has built a strong foundation for the organization and its continuing efforts.

“What Don has done over the years is just mind boggling,” Leighton said. “Hopefully we can continue to carry out Don’s vision. If we can do half as good as Don has done over the last 19 years, I’ll consider it a huge accomplishment.”

As Bellingham goes into his second retirement, he said he is confident he is leaving the Greenways Volunteers in capable hands.

“I’m very, very happy with where we are and I’m so happy this organization is going to not only continue but flourish under new management,” he said.

To honor Bellingham, Mayor Champagne read a proclamation from him and the Town Council and state Rep. Kevin Brown read a proclamation from Vernon’s delegation to the State Capitol. The Greenways Volunteers board also honored Bellingham with a plaque featuring a silver shovel.

The inscription on the plaque, read by board member Dennis Plevyak, highlights Bellingham’s service and notes he is founder of the Greenways Volunteers, 19 years of dedicated service as founder, and was “president, organizer and inspirational leader ... (in) maintaining the trails in Vernon for all to enjoy.”

*For more information about or to join the Vernon Greenways Volunteers, please visit [www.vernongreenways.org](http://www.vernongreenways.org).*

### **About the Town of Vernon**

The Town of Vernon is a celebrated place to live, work and visit. From its beautiful parks and lakes, to its vast trails and historic homes and buildings, Vernon is a resilient and thriving community that promotes the health and wellbeing of its residents and values the natural environment. With a resident population of more than 30,000 and occupying 18.03 square miles, Vernon combines a balanced appreciation of history, and a strong economic base for growth, both residential and commercial. Located 15 minutes east of the Connecticut capital of Hartford, and 25 miles from the City of Springfield, Massachusetts, the Town of Vernon is strategically located in “New England’s Knowledge Corridor” with close proximity to some of the top colleges and universities in the country.

Designated a certified Sustainable Community, the Town of Vernon offers a wide range of benefits and services to its residents. The Town of Vernon is a full-service municipality that practices a management philosophy of continuous quality improvement. To learn more about the Town of Vernon, please call (860) 870-3670 or visit [www.vernon-ct.gov](http://www.vernon-ct.gov).

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