

Volunteers are the heart and soul of local community forestry programs. It is no secret that volunteers are essential to getting things in the community. Throughout the planning process, consider ways to engage volunteers in the implementation of the town forest recreation plan. For example, you might seek volunteers to help design and layout new trails, build benches or kiosks, conduct routine trail maintenance, deliver educational programs or walks, and in other stewardship projects in the forest. However, recruiting enough volunteers can be challenging. The following tactics can help your community develop a robust, engaged volunteer base. Remember, people volunteer for a variety of reasons, and with a wide array of skills and interests, offering multiple ways for volunteers to get involved is a vital component of successful volunteer recruitment.

Trail Collaborative – A trails collaborative is a group made up of representatives of all forest trail users—hikers, mountain bikers, snowmobilers, horseback riders, and even outdoor education programs. Trail collaboratives ensure that all user groups feel their voices are heard in the management of the forest. The trails collaborative would also take the lead on trail maintenance by tapping into their user group networks. Ideally, the trails collaborative members are also members of the local user group organizations such as the local VAST chapter or mountain biking club. This way, the Trail collaborative members are connected to additional potential volunteers for the forest.

Community Events – Hosting community events in the forest can help recruit volunteers. These events help people appreciate the forest, making them more willing to volunteer. Thanking the existing volunteers at these events is an excellent way to make the community aware of the hard work that goes into creating recreational opportunities in the town forest. Well-publicized community workdays can also attract new volunteers from the community. For races held in the forest, discounted entry fees can be offered for racers contributing a certain number of volunteer hours.

Organization Work Days – Likely, there are many organizations and other groups in the community interested in volunteer opportunities. Potential groups to reach out to include boys and girl scout troops, religious groups, or local businesses looking to give back to the community. Educational institutions such as high schools, technical schools, and colleges may have groups interested in volunteering, especially as it relates to their curriculum.

Posting Volunteer Opportunities – Volunteer opportunities should be posted online, at the trailhead kiosks, and other popular community forums. By posting at the trailhead kiosks, forest visitors associate their positive experience with the volunteer work that went into it. The volunteer opportunities posts should include non-trail maintenance needs as well, such as graphic design for the website or trail maps or volunteer trail counters. This ensures that all members of the community understand the full range of ways they can contribute to the town forest.

Thank Volunteers – Volunteers should be thanked personally and profusely, to encourage existing volunteers to continue their commitment and recruit new volunteers. This gratitude can be expressed at community events, the trailhead kiosk, online, and at community gathering places. It might look like a list of names, photos, and a thank you on behalf of the entire community. Local businesses may be interested in offering small rewards such as food, gift certificates, or other prizes.

Additional Resources

Upper Valley Land Trust (<http://www.uvlt.org/get-involved/volunteer/>)

American Hiking Society Volunteer Vacations (<https://americanhiking.org/volunteer-vacations/>)

Vermont Mountain Biking Association Reward Program (<https://vmba.org/reward-volunteers/>)