

# 2019 TOP RURAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES AWARD WINNERS



## SOIL SISTERS

Launched in 2012, Soil Sisters: A Celebration of Wisconsin Farms and Rural Life ([www.soilsisterswi.org](http://www.soilsisterswi.org)) is a community-organized Agri-tourism weekend celebrating and sharing our vibrant rural heritage through the lens of women farmers. This annual event (2019 dates: Aug. 2-4) involves over twenty women-owned farms in the Green County area and a team of over 25 collaborative partners, bringing positive economic development to communities such as Browntown and Blanchardville. The weekend schedule consists of on-farm workshops, culinary events and farm tours open to the public.



Soil Sisters started in true rural, grassroots fashion: Green County area women farmers committed to conservation and community connecting regularly via potlucks. Soil Sisters' has grown to now be the largest women-farmer led event of its kind in the country.

Beyond the economic and media outcomes of the August event, Soil Sisters' community impact ripples all year with potlucks and an exceptionally vibrant list serve of now over 225 area women offers daily exchanges of information and resources.

Soil Sisters increasingly serves to recruit new families to move to the area. Major features in media like Midwest Living, Modern Farmer, Living the Country Life help positively propel this outreach.

Soil Sisters exemplifies how Wisconsin can build on our long-standing agricultural roots by creating tourism opportunities that connect the public directly with farmers, while further supporting a group historically under-recognized: women.

Soil Sisters serves as an example that we don't need to necessarily create something "new" to attract rural economic development, but rather provide venues that enable communities to tell their authentic story. For Soil Sisters, creating Agri-tourism events for others to experience rural farm life – harvest a tomato, collect an egg, take a hayride – provide that portal.



## VERNON TRAILS

Vernon Trails is a 100% volunteer run non-profit organization committed to developing and maintaining roadways, sustainable trails, and outdoor recreational opportunities for human powered users. They are dedicated to providing and expanding outdoor recreational opportunities to the shared community in which they serve. Established twelve years ago, what started as a small group of outdoor enthusiasts, has evolved into an organized and productive movement for the Vernon County region.



### **Vernon Trails accomplishments include:**

- Advocated, collaborated, built, and maintained over 50 miles of shared use trails.
- Have created, participated in and executed over 100 community events.
- Actively promotes and creates youth opportunities to provide healthy active outdoor opportunities.
- Built an 18-hole disc golf course on the VFW land in Viroqua and have created winter Fat Biking at the same location.
- Formed agreements and strong partnerships with the land managing agents and several private land owners.
- Organized volunteer efforts from school groups, church groups, 4 clubs, Scouting groups, athletic teams, and the community at large.
- Collaborated with the Vernon County Forrester to address and assist in the containment or eradication of invasive species.

Eco tourism and silent sports has proven to have profound impact on local economies. By creating outdoor recreational opportunities for communities, you not only build a unified and a healthier community, you also can create more financial security for that community.

The work of Vernon Trails has and will continue to have a profound impact on our shared community. This initiative was made possible by building relationships with all aspects of the community, from the long-time residents, to the new residents, business leaders, local government, school groups, public and private land owners. Vernon Trails is instrumental to Vernon County's economic development, eco-tourism and the building of community.