



City of Mercer Island
Open Space Conservancy Trust
2022 Annual Report to City Council

TRUSTEE APPOINTMENTS AND ELECTIONS

In 2022, the Open Space Conservancy Trust held meetings in January, April, July, and October. Meetings were held online via Zoom in order to minimize risk of COVID-19 exposure. The annual election of officers took place at the July meeting. Trustee Carol Lynn Berseth was elected as Chair, Trustee Geraldine Poor was elected Vice Chair, and Trustee Hillary Ethe was elected Secretary.

MERCER ISLAND PARKS AND RECREATION, NATURAL RESOURCES PROGRAM

The Natural Resources program is tasked with managing forest restoration, tree risk mitigation, and trail construction and maintenance on Trust properties. In 2022, the Natural Resources team shifted staffing from two three-quarter time positions to two full-time positions, a Natural Resources Project Manager, and an Urban Forestry Project Manager. Both positions are supervised by the Parks Operations Manager.

In 2022, the team piloted a seasonal volunteer coordinator position to lead restoration and trails related volunteer events throughout the City’s parks and open spaces, including many events on Trust Properties. Additionally, the program hired a seasonal trails and restoration crew, consisting of three staff for 6 months. At the end of 2022, program staff included:

- Sam Harb, Parks Operations Manager
- Lizzy Stone, Natural Resources Project Manager
- Andrew Prince, Urban Forestry Project Manager

FOREST HEALTH AND MANAGEMENT

Background

Forest management on Trust properties is directed by the Open Space Vegetation Management Plan 10-Year Evaluation and Update, the Pioneer Park Forest Management Plan adopted in 2003, and recommendations outlined in the 2008 Pioneer Park Forest Health Survey. These plans emphasize the importance of protecting existing tree canopy and maintaining a resilient forest ecosystem by controlling invasive species and planting native species. Activities outlined in the plans include invasive tree treatment, ivy ring creation, ground ivy and herbaceous weed management, targeted maintenance around newly installed plants, and planting native trees and shrubs.

2022 Accomplishments

In 2022, restoration tasks were performed on 21 acres of Trust properties. Work was performed by professional contractors, seasonal field staff, and volunteers. The following is a summary of 2022 accomplishments:

Professional contractors

Restoration Task	Pioneer Park	Engstrom Open Space
Planting maintenance and watering	(335 trees/ 165 shrubs)	n/a
Invasive tree treatment maintenance	8.3 acres	n/a
Ivy rings maintenance	8.3 acres	n/a
Ground ivy and herbaceous weed removal	8.3 acres	n/a

Volunteers

In 2022, the City piloted a seasonal volunteer coordinator position on the Natural Resources team, with the goal of providing regular engagement, education, and volunteer opportunities for the Mercer Island community. With the help of the volunteer coordinator, the City hosted 11 events on Trust properties, working with 179 volunteers for over 425 total volunteer hours. Volunteers removed ivy from trees and the forest floor, planted trees and shrubs, and repaired trails in the southeast and northwest quadrants. The volunteer coordinator role received very positive feedback from the community and the position will be expanded in the next year.

Seasonal Trails and Restoration Crew

In 2022, the seasonal Trails and Restoration Crew consisted of three crewmembers from April through September. The crew conducted planting maintenance on 5 acres in Pioneer Park, maintained ivy rings in 3 acres of Pioneer Park and Engstrom Open Space, managed invasive weeds along trails, and conducted noxious weed monitoring, mapping, and treatments throughout Trust properties.

In addition to their restoration and trail work, the seasonal Trails and Restoration Crew worked with the Parks Maintenance crew to complete a project to limit off-street parking along 84th Ave SE, near the intersection with SE 66th St. To aid in native plant establishment and habitat restoration, compacted gravel was broken up and mixed with wood chips several months before installing native trees and shrubs along the park edge. Semi-permanent parking delineators were also installed to clarify park boundaries.

Forest Health Plan Progress

The Natural Resources program implements the management recommendations and benchmarks outlined in the Forest Health Plan. The benchmarks serve as a guide to managing forest health on Trust properties. Between 2009 and 2014, the Natural Resources program was able to get ahead of schedule due to a favorable bidding climate and lower contracting costs. Beginning in 2015, the regional demand for qualified restoration contractors increased and restoration costs increased significantly. Implementation of the Forest Health Plan has slowed during the last two biennia, but Natural Resources staff continue to advance restoration priorities while addressing challenges and making effective use of available resources. The Forest Health Plan proposed starting comprehensive invasive species removal work in 2021 and enrolling 15.5 acres each year. Due to contracting costs and limited contractor availability, the first round of comprehensive removal was started on 8.3 acres of Pioneer Park in 2022.

The following outlines actual progress made to date compared with proposed benchmarks outlined in the 2008 Forest Health Plan:

Table 1. Forest Health Plan Cumulative Progress in Pioneer Park, 2009-2022

Restoration Task	Proposed (acres)	Actual (acres)
Invasive tree treatment and maintenance*	217	209
Ivy ring creation and maintenance*	223	130
Tree planting	93	75
Plant maintenance (1 year post-planting + additional depending on site conditions)	93	90
Ground ivy and herbaceous invasive weed management	31	9

* Invasive tree treatment and ivy rings require a first round of treatment, followed by additional maintenance treatments as weeds grow back. Acreage listed shows both first and second round treatments combined.

LETTERBOXING PROGRAM

The Letterboxing Program is a collaborative effort between Parks and Recreation staff, OSCT Board Members, and community volunteers. Due to delays caused by COVID-19 and staffing changes, the program has been on hold since 2020. The Natural Resources team plans to restart the program in 2023.

LEASH POLICY EDUCATION EFFORTS

Leash policy education efforts were restarted in 2022 with educational posts on the City's website and social media channels, as well as distribution of educational brochures. In 2022 there were no law enforcement issues related to off-leash dogs in Pioneer Park or Engstrom Open Space.

TRAILS

In 2022, the Natural Resources team continued to maintain trails by conducting stair tread repairs and regular trail brushing. In addition to regular maintenance, the Trails and Restoration crew replaced water bars to redirect water flow on the Salal, Fir, and Perimeter trails in the SE quadrant.

In June, the Mercer Island Mountain Bike Alliance hosted a volunteer event to re-gravel and fill potholes on trails in the NW quadrant in partnership with City staff.

ENGSTROM OPEN SPACE TITLE TRANSFER

On September 20, 2022, the City Council passed a resolution to direct the City to transfer the title of Engstrom Open Space to the Open Space Conservancy Trust. The title transfer will be completed in early 2023.

SPECIAL EVENTS POLICY

In 2022, staff suggested several updates to the Pioneer Park and Engstrom Open Space Special Events Policy for the Trust's consideration. Staff worked with the Trust to update several outdated items in the policy, including fees, staff costs, and accepted conduct on Trust lands.

URBAN FORESTRY

Tree risk mitigation continues to be a primary focus of urban forestry efforts in Pioneer Park. Certified staff arborists make recommendations each year to remove dead, dying, or structurally defective trees to reduce the risk of trees failing and causing injury, property damage, or interference with utility lines or roadways. Trees are retained through corrective pruning or as wildlife snags when possible, but tree removals are occasionally necessary. In the case of whole tree removals, the wood from the tree is left to decompose on site as habitat and to improve soil conditions. Dead and dying trees continue to make up the majority of tree removal work. In 2022, seven trees were removed from Trust properties to reduce risk of failure. Staff continued to monitor park boundaries regularly for trees in need of pruning or removal.