



City of Mercer Island
Open Space Conservancy Trust
2024 Annual Report to City Council

TRUSTEE APPOINTMENTS AND ELECTIONS

In 2024, the Open Space Conservancy Trust held regular meetings in January, July, and October, with three special joint meetings with the Parks and Recreation Commission in March and April to develop an Open Space Zoning Code. Starting in March, hybrid meetings were held in the Mercer Island Community and Events Center and online via Zoom. In July a new trustee, Brian Gaspar, joined the board, replacing departing Trustee Craig Olson. Councilmember Jake Jacobson was appointed as the new City Council Liaison, replacing Councilmember Lisa Anderl. The annual election of officers took place at the July meeting. Trustee Geraldine Poor was re-elected as Chair, Trustee Hillary Ethe was re-elected Vice Chair, and Trustee Marie Bender was re-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 2024, the program hired a seasonal trails and restoration crew, consisting of two staff for 6 months and one team leader for 9 months. At the end of 2024, program staff included:

Sam Harb, Parks Operations Manager
Lizzy Stone, Natural Resources Program Manager
Andrew Prince, Urban Forestry Program Manager
Jordan Fischer, Volunteer Coordinator

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.

2024 Accomplishments

In 2024, restoration tasks were performed on 41 acres of Trust properties. Work was performed by professional contractors, seasonal field staff, volunteers, and Washington Conservation Corps crews. The following is a summary of 2024 accomplishments:

Professional contractors

Table 1. Professional Contractor restoration accomplishments in Pioneer Park and Engstrom Open Space 2024

Restoration Task	Pioneer Park	Engstrom Open Space
First year comprehensive weed removal (includes ivy rings, invasive tree removal and treatment, ground ivy and herbaceous weed removal)	11 acres	n/a
Second year comprehensive weed removal (includes ivy rings, invasive tree removal and treatment, ground ivy and herbaceous weed removal)	8.8 acres	1.7
Third year comprehensive weed removal (includes ivy rings, invasive tree removal and treatment, ground ivy and herbaceous weed removal)	8.3	n/a
Invasive Removal Maintenance (includes ivy rings, invasive tree removal and treatment, ground ivy and herbaceous weed removal on areas that have received 3 years of comprehensive removal before)	8.8	n/a
Planting Maintenance	200 plants	n/a
Watering	200 plants	n/a

Volunteers

In 2024, the City’s volunteer program provided regular engagement, education, and volunteer opportunities for the Mercer Island community. With the help of the volunteer coordinator and forest stewards, the City hosted 32 events on Trust properties, working with 377 volunteers for over 840 total volunteer hours. Volunteers removed 39,100 square ft of ivy from the forest floor and planted 296 trees and shrubs. There are now 10 active forest stewards working in Pioneer Park.

Seasonal Trails and Restoration Crew

In 2024, the seasonal Trails and Restoration Crew consisted of two crewmembers from April through September and a team lead from March through December. The crew conducted regular park checks to empty waste bins around the parks, brushed back trailside plants throughout the growing season, blew leaves from trails, and managed logs that had fallen over trails. Additionally, the crew conducted noxious weed monitoring, mapping, and treatments throughout Trust properties, watered previous years’ volunteer plantings, and supported volunteer events as needed.

Washington Conservation Corps Crew

In 2024, the City of Mercer Island contracted with the Washington Conservation Corps to bring on crews for a total of 57 days, 30 of which were spent on Trust property. In January and February, crews worked to add gravel to trails and re-grade areas with poor drainage. They also performed first year comprehensive weed removal on approximately 1.8 acres. In November and December, crews managed blackberry and ivy along the park edges, spread mulch in some of the grassy edges of the park, planted 525 native trees and shrubs, and performed first year comprehensive weed removal in approximately 2 acres of the park. Comprehensive weed removal was performed on areas where volunteers had started work to remove weeds, which allowed WCC to move more quickly through the site and complete a larger area.

Forest Health Plan Transition

The Natural Resources program utilizes management recommendations described in the Pioneer Park Forest Health Plan to direct restoration practices on Trust property and benchmarks set out in the 2022 parks levy to establish goals for the work. The parks levy establishes a timeline for restoring the health of Pioneer Park’s forests over its 16-year duration. In order to complete three years of comprehensive weed removal throughout Pioneer Park and Enstrom Open Space by 2038, the Natural Resources program must enroll on average 6.5 new acres of forest in first year treatment each year, in addition to follow up treatment on previously enrolled acres.

In 2024, the Natural Resources program exceeded these new benchmarks by enrolling 11 acres of forest in first year comprehensive weed removal, 10.5 acres in second year removal, 8.8 acres in third year removal (completed by contractors and volunteers), 8.8 acres in maintenance on previously enrolled acres, and by planting 821 native trees and shrubs on 2.3 acres of Trust property.

The following outlines actual progress made compared with proposed benchmarks set by the Parks Levy goals:

Table 2. Restoration Progress in Pioneer Park and Engstrom Open Space 2024

Restoration Task	Annual Proposed in Parks Levy (acres)	2024 Actual (acres)
Year 1 Comprehensive Invasive Species Removal*	6.5	11
Year 2 Comprehensive Invasive Species Removal*	6.5	10.5
Year 3 Comprehensive Invasive Species Removal*	8.8	8.8
Invasive Removal Maintenance*	3.4	8.8
Tree planting	1.6	2.3

**(includes ivy rings, invasive tree removal and treatment, ground ivy and herbaceous weed removal).*

LETTERBOXING PROGRAM

The Letterboxing Program is a collaborative effort between Parks and Recreation staff, OSCT Board Members, and community volunteers. In 2024, the Natural Resources team placed 5 letterboxes in the Northeast quadrant of Pioneer Park. Letterboxing booklets were distributed at the Mercer Island Community and Events Center (MICEC), at the Leap for Green celebration and afterwards at the front desk, at volunteer events throughout the summer, and at kiosks in Pioneer Park. Over 100 booklets were distributed throughout the season and 28 were returned to the MICEC. Participants that turned in their booklets were recognized with a certificate and prize packet.

LEASH POLICY EDUCATION EFFORTS

Leash policy education efforts continued in 2024 with distribution of educational brochures “The Dog Owner’s Guide to Mercer Island Parks” brochure, which provides park users with information about voice/signal control and the location of off-leash versus on-leash parks. In 2024, Mercer Island Police Department received four complaints about off-leash dogs and three reports of lost dogs in Pioneer Park.

INTERPRETIVE SIGNAGE UPDATES

A committee was formed to develop content for updated interpretive signage throughout Trust property. The committee, composed of Trustee Hillary Ethe, Trustee Marie Bender, and Trustee Carol Lynn Berseth, began working with staff to develop new content, sign infrastructure, and digital education resources for the parks.

TRAILS

In 2024, the Natural Resources team continued to maintain trails by conducting regular trail brushing, leaf blowing, and culvert clearing, as well as re-installing two sections of retaining structure in Pioneer Park NE and re-grading the trail to allow for better drainage. Washington Conservation Corps crews added gravel to several sections of trail and worked to address drainage issues where they were identified. The Natural Resources crew worked with the Parks Maintenance team to remove trees that had fallen across trails throughout the season, with a significant effort put into cleanup after an impactful November storm.

ENGSTROM OPEN SPACE TITLE TRANSFER

On September 20th, 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 paperwork was finalized by the City Attorney's office in 2024 and is ready for the Trust to accept the transfer in January of 2025. Staff will then submit transfer documentation to the county.

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 2024, five dead trees were removed from Trust properties to reduce risk of falling onto trails or private property. Staff continued to monitor park boundaries regularly for trees in need of pruning or removal.