



BUSINESS OF THE CITY COUNCIL CITY OF MERCER ISLAND

AB 6395
January 16, 2024
Regular Business

AGENDA BILL INFORMATION

TITLE:	AB 6395: Parks Levy Annual Progress Report	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Discussion Only <input type="checkbox"/> Action Needed: <input type="checkbox"/> Motion <input type="checkbox"/> Ordinance <input type="checkbox"/> Resolution
RECOMMENDED ACTION:	Receive report. No action necessary.	

DEPARTMENT:	Public Works
STAFF:	Jason Kintner, Chief of Operations Robbie Cunningham Adams, Management Analyst
COUNCIL LIAISON:	n/a
EXHIBITS:	n/a
CITY COUNCIL PRIORITY:	2. Sustain and enhance our natural environment, especially parks and open spaces, to benefit this generation and others that follow.

AMOUNT OF EXPENDITURE	\$ n/a
AMOUNT BUDGETED	\$ n/a
APPROPRIATION REQUIRED	\$ n/a

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this agenda bill is to present the Parks Levy Annual Report.

BACKGROUND

The 16-year renewal of the parks levy was on the November 8, 2022, General Election ballot for voter consideration, which passed by a 64.27% majority. The renewed parks levy continues funding for parks operations and maintenance while adding funding for playground replacements and Pioneer Park forest management. Annual parks levy funding increased from \$980,122 in 2022 to \$1,629,332 in 2023.

City staff committed to providing reports to the City Council annually on progress and impact of the parks levy.

ISSUE/DISCUSSION

The parks levy is split into three sections: the “base levy”, playground replacement, and forest management at Pioneer Park and Engstrom Open Space. Annual parks levy funding in 2023 was \$1,629,332.

Base Levy

The primary goal of renewing the parks levy was to maintain the existing funding to cover the full cost of operation and maintenance of Luther Burbank Park, and to maintain the existing levy funds that partially supported operations and capital projects in other developed parks, open spaces, and athletic fields. The levy includes \$989,923 for these purposes.

Luther Burbank Park

Luther Burbank park is a regional park destination and welcomes local users as well as those from neighboring areas. During the 2023 spring and summer peak seasons, Luther Burbank was staffed seven days a week to provide maintenance, safety, and sanitation services for park users. Daily tasks included emptying waste receptacles, cleaning the three restrooms, and removing litter throughout the park. Regular landscape maintenance included mowing, leaf blowing, line trimming, and hedge and tree trimming, as well as brushing trail edges and maintaining gravel trail surfaces.

The two playgrounds in Luther Burbank Park, which both receive very high use, were inspected regularly by certified staff playground inspectors. These inspections led to the installation of new engineered wood fiber chips around the playground structures and the replacement of hardware and a new slide.

Additionally, staff put extra work into maintaining the Luther Burbank Park swim beach, including swim lines and the seasonal restroom, and controlling an unusually high number of wasp nests throughout the park. Large rainstorms in the later part of the year necessitated additional maintenance of the stormwater system in the park, and the repair of several trails that were damaged during these rain events.

Open Space Vegetation Management

Funds from the levy, in combination with capital funding, were used to continue forest management across the City's twenty-three public open space properties. Collectively, these open spaces (excluding Pioneer Park and Engstrom Open Space) received significant restoration work in 2023: ivy removal from trees across 5 acres, 2,490 trees and shrubs planted, and maintenance of 1,100 previously installed native plants. These funds also supported the expansion of the City's volunteer program, which held 61 events across 13 of the City's open spaces.

Maintenance and Operations

The remainder of the base levy funding was used to continue the maintenance on more than 200 acres of park lands, including upkeep of sport courts, landscaping and lawns, restrooms, trails, and playgrounds in the Island's many developed parks. In addition, these funds, in conjunction with user fees, supported the maintenance of several athletic fields, including Island Crest Park and Homestead Field.

Playground Replacement

Manufactured play equipment has a typical useful service life of 15 to 20 years, depending on play equipment condition, wear, and usage. The Mercer Island parks system in 2023 included 18 playground structures, of which 15 of these structures require replacement through the life of the parks levy. The parks levy funds the replacement of all playground structures in need of replacement. \$414,355 was budgeted for this portion of the parks levy in 2023.

The playground at Roanoke Park is the first slated for replacement. In 2023, Berger Partnership, the City's consultant partner leading design and community engagement, began developing a concept that will include

site improvements for access and fencing in addition to play equipment replacement. A community survey to collect input on playground equipment options launched on December 20, 2023, and received more than 110 responses as of January 9, 2024. Survey results will inform a virtual public meeting scheduled for January 30, 2024. Depending on equipment lead times, the Roanoke Park playground replacement should be completed by summer 2024.

A partial playground replacement for Deane's Children's Park was planned for 2023 and included the climbing rock, swings, and castle structures. Deane's is a larger and more complex site than most playgrounds in Mercer Island's park system, particularly with the addition of the new Bike Skills Area. Due to the site characteristics, there is an opportunity to take a comprehensive approach to the overall design for this park, including significant ADA and access improvements as well as a more cohesive approach to the playground, restroom, and picnic shelter area. To meet these design standards, a larger public engagement platform is anticipated and will begin in 2024. Staff will look to incorporate additional site improvements into the project design and will include this project as part of the 2025-2026 Capital Improvement Plan.

Since the Deane's project was extended, staff accelerated other playground replacements in the levy schedule, beginning with First Hill Park, which was originally planned for design in 2025 and construction in 2026. Berger began evaluating the site in 2023, and staff anticipate that public engagement for this replacement will take place in early 2024. Similar to Roanoke, construction at First Hill will depend on equipment lead times; staff expect to complete construction by the end of 2024.

Forest Management at Pioneer Park and Engstrom Open Space

Pioneer Park and Engstrom Open Space provide 122 acres of forested park land, comprising 43% of the open space in the city. Management of these properties is guided by the Pioneer Park Forest Management Plan (Forest Management Plan) that was adopted in 2003 and updated in 2009. The Pioneer Park Forest Management Plan prescribes successive forest restoration tasks that, once completed, will result in a resilient, biodiverse native forest that provides innumerable social, economic, and ecological benefits for the Mercer Island community.

The parks levy will support the following tasks identified in the Forest Management Plan, with \$225,054 budgeted for this portion of the parks levy in 2023:

- Managing invasive tree species in the understory
- Removing ivy from the base of existing canopy trees, to promote the longevity of older forest trees
- Phase 1 of tree planting and maintenance
- Removing English ivy and other invasive plants from the forest understory

With the help of levy funding in 2023, the City was able to conduct first year comprehensive weed removal on 10.5 acres of Pioneer Park and Engstrom Open Space, second year comprehensive weed removal on 9.2 acres, and plant 617 native trees and shrubs in Pioneer Park. This is well above the 6.5 acres of first year removal that was predicted as an annual goal in the parks levy planning. First year comprehensive weed removal includes: removal of ivy from around trees (ivy rings), invasive tree removal and treatment, and ground ivy and herbaceous weed removal. This work was in addition to maintaining the parks' trail system with regular brushing, leaf blowing, and culvert maintenance, as well as re-gravelling muddy sections of trail to improve access.

This work was carried out by professional contractors, the City's seasonal Natural Resources crew, Washington Conservation Corps crews, and many volunteers. With the help of the Volunteer Coordinator and

Forest Stewards, the City hosted 22 events in Pioneer Park, working with 343 volunteers for over 717 total volunteer hours. This is close to double the number of volunteers and volunteer hours the City had in Pioneer Park in 2022. This year volunteers removed ivy from 84 trees and 15,528 square ft of the forest floor, planted 242 trees and shrubs, and repaired trails in the northwest quadrant.

In response to the increased funding from the Parks Levy, the Natural Resources team began to explore new avenues for accomplishing restoration work. Staff had discussions with restoration contractors that have successfully completed projects with the City in the past, to better understand challenges and barriers for bidding on these restoration projects. As a result, the City is piloting a new hourly-rate approach to restoration contracting, in addition to the previous lump-sum approach.

The City also won a contract with the Washington Conservation Corps (WCC) to hire a crew for 50 days in the fall and winter of 2023-2024. In November and December of 2023, these AmeriCorps crews worked to re-gravel muddy patches of trail, maintain ivy rings, decommission a small, redundant section of trail, plant 75 trees, and perform first year comprehensive weed removal on 1.9 acres in the southeast quadrant of Pioneer Park. Comprehensive weed removal was performed in areas where volunteers had started work to remove weeds, which allowed WCC to move more quickly through the site and complete a larger area.

NEXT STEPS

Staff will continue to complete public engagement regarding the design of Roanoke Park, Deane's Children's Park, and First Hill Park playgrounds. Additionally, staff are planning additional volunteer events for open space management and will add additional project development/design elements as a part of the upcoming capital improvement plan process.

RECOMMENDED ACTION

Receive report. No action necessary.