



City of Mercer Island Open Space Conservancy Trust 2025 Annual Report to City Council

TRUSTEE APPOINTMENTS AND ELECTIONS

In 2025, the Open Space Conservancy Trust held regular meetings in January, April, July, and October, as well as one special joint meeting with the Parks and Recreation Commission in November to develop a recommendation for e-bikes in parks. Hybrid meetings were held in the Mercer Island Community and Events Center and online via Zoom. In July, Councilmember Daniel Becker was appointed as the new City Council Liaison, after Councilmember Jake Jacobson's passing in the spring. The annual election of officers also took place at the July meeting. Trustee Hillary Ethe was elected as Chair, Trustee Carol Lynn Berseth was elected Vice Chair, and Trustee Marie Bender was re-elected Secretary. After the November special meeting, Trustee Brian Gaspar's seat on the board was vacated. The seat will be filled in 2026.

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 2025, 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 2025, program staff included:

Sam Harb, Parks Operations Manager
Lizzy Stone, Natural Resources Program Manager
Andrew Prince, Urban Forestry Program Manager
Jordan Fischer, Volunteer Coordinator
Jaime Boggess, Trails and Restoration Team Leader

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.

2025 Accomplishments

In 2025, restoration tasks were performed on 34.5 acres of Trust properties. Work was performed by professional contractors, seasonal field staff, and volunteers. The following is a summary of 2025 accomplishments:

Professional contractors

The City contracted out work on 33.5 acres of Pioneer Park and Engstrom Open Space in 2025. In order to achieve established goals for weed removal on Trust Property, the City contracts out comprehensive weed removal in three year cycles, where weeds are removed from the same area for three years in a row. After the initial three year removal cycle, the areas that have received this treatment are maintained every 4-5 years. Ivy removal around trees (ivy rings) and weedy tree treatment are also performed in some areas in preparation for future comprehensive removal.

In 2025, contractors carried out first year comprehensive weed removal on 5.8 acres of Pioneer Park NE, which included 2.3 acres of steep slope leading down to the ravine and watercourse that passes through the Northeast quadrant and Engstrom Open Space. Contractors carried out second year weed removal on 11.0 acres of Pioneer Park, third year comprehensive weed removal on 8.8 acres of Pioneer Park and 1.7 acres of Engstrom Open Space, and maintenance on 3.2 acres of Engstrom Open Space. Additionally, a contractor completed ivy rings on 3.0 acres of Pioneer Park NW.

Volunteers

In 2025, 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 21 volunteer events and 13 educational events on Trust properties. There was a total of 328 volunteers for over 644 total volunteer hours. Volunteers removed 24,013 square ft of ivy from the forest floor and planted 473 trees and shrubs. The educational events engaged an additional 121 participants and included Mindfulness Walks, Plant ID walks, Owl Walks, among others. There are now 6 active forest stewards working in Pioneer Park

Seasonal Trails and Restoration Crew

In 2025, the seasonal Trails and Restoration Crew consisted of a crewmember from May through October, a crewmember from July to December, and a team leader from March 2025 through February 2026. The crew worked on a variety of restoration and trails related tasks on Trust property throughout the year. Restoration tasks carried out by the Natural Resource Crew included:

- Installing 330 native plants along the NE border of Island Crest Way
- Spreading mulch and wildflower seed along the same Island Crest Way border
- Watering previous years' plantings from crews and volunteers
- Conducting noxious weed monitoring, mapping, and treatments throughout Trust properties
- Supporting volunteer events, as needed.

Forest Health Plan Progress

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 Engstrom Open Space by 2038, the Natural Resources program must enroll an average of 6.5 new acres of forest in first year treatment each year, in addition to follow up treatment on previously enrolled acres.

In 2025, the Natural Resources program progressed towards these new benchmarks by enrolling 5.8 acres of forest in first year comprehensive weed removal, 11 acres in second year removal, 10.5 acres in third year removal (completed by contractors and volunteers), 3.2 acres in maintenance on previously enrolled acres, conducting ivy rings on 3 acres and by planting 803 native trees and shrubs on 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 2025

Restoration Task	Annual Proposed in Parks Levy (acres)	2025 Actual (acres)
Year 1 Comprehensive Invasive Species Removal*	6.5	5.8
Year 2 Comprehensive Invasive Species Removal*	6.5	11
Year 3 Comprehensive Invasive Species Removal*	8.8	10.5
Invasive Removal Maintenance*	3.4	8.8
Tree planting	1.6	1.2

**(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 2025, the Natural Resources team placed 5 letterboxes in the Northwest 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 35 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 2025 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 2025, Mercer Island Police Department received the following reports in Pioneer Park: two complaints about off-leash dogs, one found dog, one dog hit and injured by an e-bike, and one report of a dog bite to another dog.

TRAILS

In 2025, the Natural Resources team continued to improve and maintain trails on Trust property. The seasonal Natural Resources crew carries out maintenance and improvements to the trail system, with support from full time Parks Maintenance team staff.

Some improvements that took place in 2025 include:

- installing check steps along Salal trail in the Southeast quadrants
- adding non-skid surfaces to the stairs in the Northeast quadrant
- installing a railing along a staircase to encourage use of the stairs
- adding rock steps and gravel to an uneven section of the Northeast quadrant
- installing a drain under the Dogwood trail in the NW quadrant.

These improvements were in addition to regular trail brushing, leaf blowing, and culvert clearing, as well as working with the Parks Maintenance team to remove trees that had fallen across trails throughout the season. One donation bench was installed by the Parks Maintenance team in the northeast quadrant.

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 accepted by the Trust and finalized with King County in 2025.

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 2025, about 15 trees were removed from Trust properties – mostly along SE 68th ST to reduce risk of dead or dying trees falling across the road or utility lines. Staff continued to monitor park boundaries regularly for trees in need of pruning or removal.