



City of Mercer Island
 Open Space Conservancy Trust
 2023 Annual Report to City Council

TRUSTEE APPOINTMENTS AND ELECTIONS

In 2023, the Open Space Conservancy Trust held meetings in January, April, July, and October. Meetings were held online via Zoom. The annual election of officers took place at the July meeting. Trustee Geraldine Poor was elected as Chair, Trustee Hillary Ethe was elected Vice Chair, and Trustee Marie Bender 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 2023, after piloting a seasonal volunteer coordinator position, we hired a limited term volunteer coordinator to continue 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 two staff for 6 months and one team leader for 9 months. At the end of 2023, program staff included:

- Sam Harb, Parks Operations Manager
- Lizzy Stone, Natural Resources Project Manager
- Andrew Prince, Urban Forestry Project Manager
- Jordan Fischer, Volunteer Coordinator
- Rebekah Graham, 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.

2023 Accomplishments

In 2023, restoration tasks were performed on over 20 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 2023 accomplishments:

Professional contractors

Restoration Task	Pioneer Park	Engstrom Open Space
Planting	275 trees	n/a
First year comprehensive weed removal (includes ivy rings, invasive tree removal and treatment, ground ivy and herbaceous weed removal)	8.8 acres	1.7 acres
Second year comprehensive weed removal (includes ivy rings, invasive tree removal and treatment, ground ivy and herbaceous weed removal)	8.3 acres	n/a

Volunteers

In 2023, 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 22 events on Trust properties, working with 343 volunteers for over 717 total volunteer hours. Volunteers removed ivy from 84 trees and 15,528 square ft from the forest floor, planted 242 trees and shrubs, and repaired trails in the northwest quadrant. The volunteer coordinator role received very positive feedback from the community and the position will be continued in the next year.

Seasonal Trails and Restoration Crew

In 2023, the seasonal Trails and Restoration Crew consisted of two to three crewmembers from April through September. 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 re-graveled muddy sections of trail. 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 2023, the City of Mercer Island contracted with the Washington Conservation Corps to bring on crews for a total of 50 days in fall and winter of 2023-2024. In November and December of 2023, crews worked on Trust property to re-gravel muddy patches of trail in Pioneer Park Northwest, maintain ivy rings, decommission a small, redundant section of trail in Pioneer Park NE, plant 75 trees, and perform first year comprehensive weed removal on 1.9 acres of Pioneer Park Southeast. 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. From 2009 – 2022, the benchmarks set in the Forest Health Plan served as a guide for restoration planning, though in recent years increasing costs of restoration contracting and challenges recruiting contractors slowed progress on these benchmarks.

In November 2022, the City passed an updated parks levy that increased funding for Pioneer Park restoration work. The levy establishes a new 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 2023, the Natural Resources program exceeded these new benchmarks by enrolling 10.5 acres of forest in first year comprehensive weed removal, 9.2 acres in second year removal, and by planting 617 native trees and shrubs on 2.2 acres of Trust property.

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

Table 1. Restoration Progress in Pioneer Park and Engstrom Open Space 2023

Restoration Task	Annual Proposed in Parks Levy (acres)	2023 Actual (acres)
Year 1 Comprehensive Invasive Species Removal*	6.5	10.5
Year 2 Comprehensive Invasive Species Removal*	9.2	9.2
Year 3 Comprehensive Invasive Species Removal*	-	-
Tree planting	1.6	2.2

**(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 2023, the Natural Resources team restarted the program after a 3-year hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to decreased involvement by community volunteers and limited staff capacity, the City implemented a pared down version of the program, placing just 5 letterboxes in the Southeast quadrant. Letterboxing booklets were distributed at the Mercer Island Community and Events Center (MICEC) and at volunteer events throughout the summer. Over 100 booklets were distributed throughout the season and 26 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 2023 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.

TRAILS

In 2023, the Natural Resources team continued to maintain trails by conducting regular trail brushing, leaf blowing, and culvert clearing, as well as re-graveling muddy sections of trail in all three quadrants. In December, a Washington Conservation Corps crew decommissioned a short, redundant section of trail in Pioneer Park Northeast, which had been discussed and approved in the April 2023 Open Space Conservancy Trust Board meeting.

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 has been assigned to outside legal counsel as of early 2024.

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 2023, two 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.