



**City of Mercer Island
Open Space Conservancy Trust
2021 Annual Report to City Council**

TRUSTEE APPOINTMENTS AND ELECTIONS

In 2021, the Open Space Conservancy Trust held meetings in January, March, July, September, and November. 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 Thomas Hildebrandt was elected as Chair, Trustee Carol Lynn Berseth was elected Vice Chair, and Trustee Geraldine Poor 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. The program is staffed by two three-quarter time employees and supervised by the Parks Operations Manager. Additionally, the program hires a seasonal trails and restoration crew, consisting of three-four staff for 6 months. In 2021, a staff transition led to a vacancy in the Natural Resource Project Manager position from late March through June. During this time, other members of the team fulfilled the urgent tasks associated with the role. At the end of 2021, program staff included:

- Sam Harb, Parks Operations Manager
- Lizzy Stone, Natural Resource Project Manager
- Andrew Prince, Trails and Urban Forestry Specialist

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.

2021 Accomplishments

In 2021, restoration tasks were performed on 31.5 acres of Trust properties. Work was performed by professional contractors and seasonal field staff. Due to staff transitions, increased local demand for restoration contractors, and contractor workforce limitations, bidding for many restoration contracts was delayed and/or postponed until 2022. Re-bidding this work in the second half of the biennium will allow for early season work to be completed more effectively and program funds to be used more efficiently. The following is a summary of 2021 accomplishments:

Professional contractors

Restoration Task	Pioneer Park	Engstrom Open Space
Invasive removal maintenance	3.3 acres	3.2 acres
Invasive tree treatment maintenance	2.4 acres	n/a
Ivy rings	2.3 acres	3.6 acres

Tree and shrub installation | (335 trees/ 165 shrubs) | n/a

Volunteers

Historically the City of Mercer Island has contracted with EarthCorps and Mountains to Sound Greenway Trust to lead community engagement and volunteer stewardship events at Pioneer Park and other sites throughout the City. In 2021, these partners significantly downsized their volunteer management services as a result of changing COVID-19 safety protocols and budget challenges related to the pandemic. As a result, there were no volunteer events on Trust properties in 2021. The City is working with partners and internal program staff to re-think the volunteer program, with the goal of providing regular engagement, education, and volunteer opportunities for the Mercer Island community in 2022 and beyond.

Seasonal Trails and Restoration Crew

In 2021, the seasonal Trails and Restoration Crew consisted of three crewmembers from April through September. The crew conducted planting maintenance on 12.7 acres in Pioneer Park, managed invasive weeds along trails, watered recent plantings, and conducted noxious weed monitoring, mapping and treatments throughout Trust properties.

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. Forest Health Plan timelines propose starting comprehensive ground ivy and invasive weed management in 2021. Challenges with bidding in 2021 delayed the start of this work until the second half of the biennium. In order to stay consistent with the Forest Health Plan’s proposed timeline, bidding in 2022 will include comprehensive removal for both 2021 and 2022 projected areas.

The following outlines actual progress made to date versus proposed benchmarks outlined in the 2008 FHP:

Table 1. Forest Health Plan Cumulative Progress in Pioneer Park, 2009-2021

Restoration Task	Proposed (acres)	Actual (acres)
Invasive tree treatment and maintenance*	200	217
Ivy ring creation and maintenance*	205	119
Tree planting	93	75
Plant maintenance (1 year post-planting + additional depending on site conditions)	89	81
Ground ivy and herbaceous invasive weed management	15.5	0

* 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 COVID-19 related challenges, the Letterboxing Program was paused in 2020 and 2021.

LEASH POLICY EDUCATION EFFORTS

Leash policy education efforts were paused in 2021 due to Parks Maintenance staffing shortages and transitions. The program will be picked up again in 2022 with the distribution of educational brochures and educational posts on the City's website and social media channels.

TRAILS

In 2021, the Natural Resources team was able to catch up on trail maintenance work on Trust properties that was delayed by the loss of the seasonal crew in 2020. One of the larger projects was the complete resurfacing of the Perimeter Trail in the SE quadrant, adjacent to Island Crest Way, and several sections of interior trails in the NW quadrant. Approximately 150 tons of gravel were applied on 1,800 feet of trail. The gravel was then graded and compacted, eliminating low, muddy areas in the trail.

Stair tread repairs and regular trail brushing continued as normal, with special attention paid to pruning fast-growing hazelnut branches in the NW quadrant.

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 2021, eight 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.