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# Environmental group eyes Campen Creek restoration

After Steigerwald success, Lower Columbia Estuary Partnership hopes to improve creek in Washougal's Mable Kerr Park

By Doug Flanagan | September 28, 2023 1:38 pm | [comments](#)



Contributed photo courtesy Lower Columbia Estuary Partnership A Lower Columbia Estuary Partnership employee works among the monoculture of reed canary grass northeast of the Campen Creek wetland in Washougal in January 2022. (Contributed photo courtesy of the Lower Columbia Estuary Partnership)

([Doug Flanagan](#)/Post-Record)



Campen Creek shows signs of erosion south of the pedestrian bridge in Washougal's Mable Kerr Park in 2023.



Lower Columbia Estuary Partnership employees survey Oregon white oaks at Mable Kerr Park in Washougal in July 2023. (Contributed photo courtesy Lower Columbia Estuary Partnership)

From June 2020 to May 2022, the Lower Columbia Estuary Partnership (LCEP) led an effort to complete the largest habitat restoration project on the Columbia River to date, creating more than 100 acres of wetland, reforesting 250 acres of riparian habitat, planting more than 500,000 trees and shrubs, reconnecting 965 acres of Columbia River floodplain, and adding 1.1 miles of trails at the Steigerwald National Wildlife Refuge in Washougal.

“The habitats, particularly the vegetation, are really starting to take off,” LCEP restoration program lead Chris Collins said earlier this month. “People who visit the refuge over the next couple months (will) really start getting an idea of what those habitats are going to look like over the coming decade. We’re really starting to see all the work out there pay off, so we’re excited about that.”

Now, the Portland-based environmental protection nonprofit coalition of public and private groups is literally looking upstream to ensure that the refuge continues to thrive for generations to come.

The LCEP has launched a construction project that will restore a 2,000-foot portion of Campen Creek within Washougal’s Mable Kerr Park.

“We’re excited about continuing to work in this community and implementing a project that’s going to continue the success of (the Steigerwald Refuge) project,” Collins said. “Obviously, the Steigerwald reconnection project was a big success in and of itself, and we will do everything we can to ensure that that success continues. You make a big investment like that (into) a critical habitat area, and you want to think about what’s feeding that. It is kind of a natural evolution — the next thing you want to do is look up into the watershed.”

The project will reconnect the creek to its floodplain, expand the park’s wetlands, improve habitat for salmon and lamprey, decrease downstream flood risk, improve public trails, and improve water quality within the restored portion of Steigerwald Lake National Wildlife Refuge.

Campen Creek is less than one-quarter mile upstream from the Steigerwald National Wildlife Refuge and serves as a tributary to Gibbons Creek, which runs through the refuge.

“For us, it’s important to look upstream into the watershed and think about what else we can do to improve the health of Gibbons Creek, which is the stream that feeds the refuge,” Collins said. “The healthier Gibbons Creek is, the higher likelihood that Steigerwald Refuge will continue to be healthy and that project will continue to be a success.”

The public will also benefit from the project, according to Collins.

“Right now, there’s over 150 dead trees in the park that are standing but at risk of blowing over, and some of them are close enough to the trail where they could blow over onto the trail, so that’s a public safety issue,” he said. “We will remove a good portion of those trees and incorporate them into the restoration as habitat features.

“And we’ll also improve the trail networks that will bring visitors. I think everyone recognizes that (the park is) already a great place to go and experience nature, but we’ll improve that. The trail system will weave around and into some of these restored habitats, and people will get a good look at them, and they’ll also be able to watch them come back to life over the next decade or two.”

The project could take roughly two years to complete, according to Collins.

“It’s a much smaller construction effort, obviously, than Steigerwald was,” he said. “We are working through final design and permitting over the next six to eight months, so we hope by next summer to have a clear, detailed plan of what we’re going to do, how we’ll restore the site, and then all the permits associated with that. And while we’re finishing those designs, we’re also looking for funding for the construction phase of the project. We don’t have a firm construction schedule, but the best guess at this point is that we’ll (start) construction in the summer of 2025.”

LCEP is leveraging some of its remaining funds from the Steigerwald project for the design and permitting for the Campen Creek project, according to Washougal City Manager David Scott.

“The City has been coordinating with LCEP to assist in ensuring a successful project,” he said. “The LCEP has been a great partner, and we are excited that they are moving this project forward.”

The City “will assist as needed to help LCEP successfully complete the project,” reviewing the project for regulatory compliance and issuing necessary approvals, according to Scott.

“The City is excited as this project promises not only to enhance a portion of the trail and bolster public access, but also help to restore the historical Campen Creek floodplain,” he said.

“Reconnecting the floodplain will improve water quality, support stormwater management, reduce peak flows, provide greater habitat complexity and stream conditions for wildlife, increase community recreational access, and provide environmental education engagement.”

Simultaneously, the LCEP will add stormwater features to Washougal High School’s parking lot, the largest impervious surface in the watershed.

“(We’re planning to) treat runoff from a portion of the high school’s roof and the entirety of the parking lot, as well as some of the surrounding neighborhood streets,” Collins said. “It’s about eight acres of impervious area that our new stormwater facilities will capture the runoff from and treat it before it enters Campen Creek and then obviously flows down to Gibbons Creek and Steigerwald. That (work will) very directly involves the school district. We are pursuing funding that will allow us to continue to work with the school district, and have kids come out and plant trees and be a part of that restoration.”