BACKGROUND
In November 2012, City voters overwhelmingly approved (74%) the $10-million-dollar Flagstaff Watershed Protection Project (FWPP). This forest treatment effort, involving city, state, and federal lands, is designed to reduce the risk of severe wildfire and subsequent post-fire flooding in the Río de Flag (Dry Lake Hills) and Upper Lake Mary (Mormon Mountain) watersheds. This report highlights significant accomplishments from July – Dec. 2016.

IMPLEMENTATION
In preparation for “Phase I” mechanical thinning along the base of Mt. Elden, temporary road construction is complete. The US Forest Service (USFS) has finished preparing the Phase I area in Dry Lake Hills and expects mechanical thinning operations to begin this summer. USFS fire crews have hand thinned and piled slash on approximately 32 acres in the area. Marking guidelines and prescription development are nearly complete for mechanical thinning units for “Phase II” in Dry Lake Hills, which includes steep slopes and Mexican spotted owl habitat. Approximately half of Phase II units have been laid out and trees have been marked. A site tour with Ponsee equipment representatives confirmed that steep slopes in the Dry Lake Hills can be treated using their specialized equipment. The City completed mechanical thinning treatments totaling 525 acres on Observatory Mesa and all slash (tree limbs, bark etc.) was chipped and transported to the Coronado Generating Station in Eastern Arizona. The chips are being mixed with coal to test the efficiency in generating electricity. Another 60-acres of hand thinning and 44-acres of prescribed fire were also completed on the Mesa. These forest treatments are the first step towards reducing the threat of severe wildfire and promoting a fire adapted ecosystem where future low intensity surface fires can play a historic ecological role that minimizes excessive debris on the forest floor and recycles soil nutrients that promotes diverse understory growth. A Digital Restoration Guide that marks units using a digitally formatted map is being tested to replace traditional painting to mark trees. Where applicable, this technology helps lower costs and increases the efficiency of forest thinning projects. Finally, a Forest Stewardship Plan is under-development for the Picture Canyon area, with completion anticipated summer 2017.

TRIBAL ENGAGEMENT
Brookbank Meadow, a 140-acre parcel that is owned by the Navajo Nation, is located in the middle of the Dry Lake Hills and is at the headwaters of Schultz Creek. Officials from the Navajo Nation met for a second site tour with the USFS and City. This visit has resulted in efforts to craft agreements to grant access through the parcel to conduct forest treatments on surrounding USFS lands. In addition, a forest stewardship plan has been completed that will guide the City in completing treatments on the parcel.

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OUTREACH
We held several events for key groups. Tours in the Dry Lake Hills were conducted with County Supervisors from across the state who were attending the annual County Supervisor Association Legislative Summit and with statewide officials during the annual Arizona Municipal Planners’ Association meeting. We also hosted several public events held during the Festival of Science that included an Observatory Mesa hike, a brown bag lunch presentation and an exhibit at Science in the Park. Several public Ranger Walks were held to illustrate FWPP’s progress. An Ecological Restoration class from Northern Arizona University (NAU) visited Observatory Mesa and saw first-hand thinning operations. At the Association for Fire Ecology Conference, a FWPP exhibit and poster presentation provided the opportunity to share the project’s success and challenges with other forestry professionals. A new kiosk poster located at key trail heads has been designed to update visitors who recreate in the forest. The poster includes information like locations of treatment operations and area and trail closures. Lastly, FWPP was highlighted during a presentation at the Colorado River Water Users Association Conference during a session entitled, “Safeguarding the Waters: Forest and Watershed Management.”

MONITORING
The City Monitoring Plan, a community-driven strategy, contains four capacity monitoring frameworks: 1) Fire Behavior, 2) Hydrologic Response, 3) Socioeconomic, and 4) Other Ongoing/Potential Monitoring Projects. The USFS’ FWPP Mexican Spotted Owl Monitoring Report 2016 was recently published and is posted on the Project’s website. In addition, another study in determining bat species composition and activity in varying tree densities on Observatory Mesa was also completed. Students from NAU’s School of Forestry collected monitoring data on Observatory Mesa last fall. This data assists in understanding how pre- and post-treatment conditions, like tree diameter distribution and the number of trees per acre, have changed. After treatments were completed on Observatory Mesa, photo points were established to track current forest structure and understory recovery. Similar photo points are also being established in the Dry Lake Hills to visually assess changes from pre- to post-treatment.

FWPP “IN THE NEWS”
The National Wildlife Federation featured an FWPP article, “Breaking the Fire-Flood Cycle – Forest Management to Reduce Floods in Flagstaff, Arizona” in Natural Defenses in Action: Harvesting Nature to Protect Our Communities report. The Kresge Foundation featured FWPP as one of the case studies in Case Studies – Climate Adaptation: The State of Practice in U.S. Communities. Finally, KNAU published an article, AZ Coal Plant Experiments with Burning Wood from Forest Restoration.

FINANCIAL INVESTMENT AND LEVERAGED FUND
To date, through cash or in-kind service contributions, partners have provided a little over $3.4 million to the Project; this is over and above the City’s $10 million commitment. The bulk of this additional investment has come from the USFS, but 13 other partners have also contributed to the project, demonstrating the widespread financial support the project has received.

SUMMARY
We continue to make steady progress and are committed to the goals of reducing the threat of severe fire, protecting two critical watersheds, and enhancing community well-being. We are excited to begin full-scale implementation in the National Forest in the Dry Lake Hills this year. We are devoted to the success of this innovative project that is designed to maintain the quality of life of our community. Thank you for your continued support!

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