14 November 2014

**An Open Letter to the Community**

The Flagstaff Watershed Protection Project (FWPP), a $10 million bond to protect two key community watersheds and approved by 74% of the voters in November 2012, is moving steadily forward. As the City Project Manager, I wanted to provide an update on our efforts as well as an overview of our engagement with the Coconino National Forest, our primary partner on this ground-breaking and important project.

The City of Flagstaff is a member of the US Forest Service’s (USFS) interdisciplinary team (IDT) and we have been working together in developing the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) that is required before work can begin on the National Forest. The USFS Project Manager, Erin Phelps, and I regularly communicate with one another regarding various aspects of the project. We participate, as equal partners, in interactions with the public. The FWPP Executive Team (City Manager, key city staff, representatives from the USFS, State, and County) meets on a monthly basis to review progress, discuss issues, and reach agreement on important decisions.

In addition, the City chairs the Project’s inter-agency Communication Team, charged with developing and disseminating information on the effort. To assist, we’ve formally engaged the Greater Flagstaff Forests Partnership to provide presence, leadership, and staffing for several key components of the project.

The City is constantly aware and engaged in all aspects of the Project, whether it’s planning or on the ground implementation, and any City funds that are used for this project must have our approval.

During the past few months, we’ve conducted a number of Open House events and field trips, and received over 100 letters on the draft EIS during the comment period, with over 500 individual comments within those letters. Those comments are being analyzed and responded to by the IDT and play a crucial part of the next step: drafting a decision. The responses will be released as part of the Final EIS, anticipated spring 2015. We appreciate both the interest and support the community has shown for FWPP.

Comments revealed that cable logging within the project area is a concern for reasons related to erosion, large tree retention and impacts to scenic and recreational values. We’ve listened, and as part of our due diligence, traveled to other areas in the Southwest where cable logging has occurred or is currently in practice. During our visits to these sites, we spoke with many past and present subject matter experts and with the people who implemented these forest treatments. Our investigations have revealed that with the current technology and with the standards planned for FWPP, soil impacts from cable logging should be less than ground-based mechanical thinning operations.

In addition, the cable corridors proposed in FWPP would average no more than12-feet in width (tree bole to tree bole) and would have residual tree canopies that extend over much of the resulting corridor. This would reduce the anticipated visual impacts. We are not advocating for cable logging at the expense of other viable options, but we are comfortable with this as a tool that has potential application in areas suited to its use. If incorporated into the final decision, we feel it can be managed appropriately to address concerns while also meeting the project’s purpose and need.

Comments also revealed concern about possible impact to critical wildlife habitat, particularly the Mexican spotted owl (MSO). The 2012 US Fish and Wildlife Service’s (FWS) MSO Recovery Plan allows for hazardous fuels treatments to be conducted within Protected Activity Centers (designated protected sites where owls have been observed) because of the potential threat catastrophic wildfire has for additional habitat loss. We believe the more proactive we are with forest treatments, the greater the protection of the MSO and other wildlife that we value.

In order to definitively address the effect forest treatments have on MSO habitat and populations, the City is partnering with Northern Arizona University’s Ecological Restoration Institute (ERI) and the FWS to fund and conduct field studies tied to the MSO Monitoring Plan for the EIS. Although the City and ERI are funding the initial work related to the habitat component side of the Monitoring Plan, the study will be ongoing and additional funding will need to be secured. We invite any individual or group interested in this issue to assist us in finding funding sources we need to continue this important work.

The slow pace of on-the-ground-work is another area we often hear about. We knew following the election that the first two years of work would be largely out-of-view and focused upon the enormous, but necessary, planning effort required before we could launch major field operations.

We are pleased to announce that the planning effort is progressing as planned: formal consultation with the FWS will begin soon, the Final EIS and draft Record of Decision (ROD) are expected to be released spring of 2015, and initial discussions on project implementation are underway. What is remarkable is the speed at which this occurred. Two years is a long time, but it is considerably faster than the pace of other federal projects in the area. We owe the USFS, and the Coconino National Forest in particular, a great deal of thanks for prioritizing this project and the unprecedented pace in which they are moving through the planning process.

Although most of the focus has been on planning, we are showing progress with on the ground treatments (thinning of trees and prescribed fire) on nearly 1,000 acres in the past year. These treatments have occurred on City and State lands, as well as on USFS land where previous environmental analyses had been completed.

In addition, we’ve hosted site visits by one company who specializes in steep terrain ground-based operations, and another whose expertise is in helicopter operations. The purpose was to have outside subject-matter-experts examine the site and provide feedback: we are pleased to announce that both felt that such work is not only possible, but very practical. This is another example of our continuing efforts to ensure that whatever alternative is selected in the Final ROD can be implemented to meet all concerns.

In addition, other important work has also been completed, such as the rebuilding of Forest Road 420 (Schultz Pass Road), boundary line surveys, and wildlife, archaeological and noxious weed surveys, necessary for full-scale implementation to occur on National Forest land. As you can see, although the focus has been on planning, we’ve progressed when and where we could with substantial on the ground accomplishments.

Another question raised by many is if the City’s $10 million is paying for the entire effort, or are others also contributing funds. We are pleased to announce that since January 2013, we’ve been able to account for nearly $2 million in additional funding that has been leveraged and contributed to the Project. The ability to leverage almost 20% the initial funding in the first two years illustrates the support the project is receiving from a mix of federal, state, Non-Governmental Organizations, and grant funds and clearly demonstrates the wide-spread interest and support for our effort and the desire to see us succeed.

This month, the Rural Policy Institute (RPI) at NAU completed a report for us entitled *FWPP Cost Avoidance Study*. Using the approach they pioneered in the 2013 *Schultz Fire Full Cost Accounting Report*, RPI examined the economic impact to the Flagstaff community should a similar fire occur within the FWPP watersheds.

The study shows that the community's initial $10 million investment in FWPP is very wise in light of the $1.2 billion predicted damage/loss that would occur if the FWPP watersheds experienced uncharacteristically severe wildfires.  It is important to note that this is a conservative figure, as several factors that were omitted from the analysis would increase this cost.  The full report can be viewed on the FWPP website ([www.flagstaffwatershedprotection.org](http://www.flagstaffwatershedprotection.org)).

In closing, the City is fully committed to working cooperatively with the USFS on this project. Like many of you, I also have concerns as FWPP moves forward.

Mine, however, center on what we know will happen if the forest is left untreated, and if we delay acting on this known danger. The inevitable fire, which could easily burn through either the Dry Lake Hills or the Mormon Mountain project area in a single day, would be followed by all-too common damaging floods that would wreak horrific damage to the ecosystem, watersheds and our community. The immediately adjacent Schultz Fire and subsequent flooding (2010-present) are proof of what awaits us if we do not firmly act now.

FWPP is truly a cooperative venture. We take very seriously our responsibility to deliver what was approved in Nov 2012, when nearly three-fourths of City voters passed the bond necessary to implement this project, and we are continually working toward that goal.

While the USFS retains decision authority for all actions on the National Forest, the City retains the funding authority. We recognize that for FWPP to succeed, it requires our combined attention, focus, effort, and partnership. Together, we – the City and the USFS – are committed to make that happen.

Sincerely,

Paul Summerfelt

Wildland Fire Management Officer

FWPP Project Manager – City of Flagstaff