

Forest Health and Water Supply Protection Project Ballot Measure



Exit Poll Results

May 2013

Overview

On November 6, 2012, Flagstaff, Arizona voters overwhelmingly approved a \$10 million bond — Question 405, “Forest Health and Water Supply Protection Project” (hereafter the Watershed Project). This municipal bond project, backed by secondary property taxes, will finance up to \$10 million to support planning and implementation of forest health and water supply protection projects on 14,446 acres of U.S. Forest Service and State lands primarily outside Flagstaff city limits. This bond authorization is the first payment for watershed services (hereafter water resources) project implemented on national forest lands in the United States that was subjected to voter approval and financed through municipal bonds. Exit polling was conducted by Northern Arizona University (NAU) researchers to understand underlying dimensions of voter support or opposition to payments for water resources.

Methods

Survey questions were developed from water resources literature and previous research. The survey instrument was randomly administered face-to-face at polls on Election Day (n=721) and via phone (n=415) to early voters, who comprised about 50% of the electorate, for a total sample size of 1,126 of the 21,763 voters. Data was statistically adjusted to accurately reflect the balance of early voters and election day voters. Response rates were 51% and 43% for the exit poll and phone survey, respectively.

Who Supported the Bond?

Question 405 passed with 73% of city voter support and crossed demographic factors and party affiliation. Approximately 74% of men and 73% of women supported the measure in addition to strong majorities of Democrats (84%), Independents (82%) and Republicans (55%). Supporters and opponents did not differ in age or if they were renters or homeowners.

Voter Awareness of Ballot Measure

More than 80% of both supporters and opponents reported knowing “some” or “a lot” about the ballot measure. However, majorities of supporters and opponents were unaware that their secondary property tax rates, and overall property taxes, would not increase with the passage of the ballot measure. Opponents incorrectly believed that property taxes would increase with this measure (73%).

Voter Evaluation of Watershed Project Design

Voters’ evaluation of the perceived effectiveness and management of the proposed Watershed Project strongly distinguished supporters from opponents. Supporters strongly believed that implementation of forest treatments would be effective in positively enhancing water resources (e.g., water supply, flood regulation, and/or water quality) (Figure 1, page 2). More than 84% of supporters “somewhat” or “strongly agreed” that the City of Flagstaff partnering with the U.S. Forest Service was a model of how to accelerate needed forest restoration around Flagstaff. Finally, supporters strongly agreed with the statement “the Forest Service will be accountable to the City of Flagstaff for work accomplished with the bond monies” under this management model and proposed partnership.



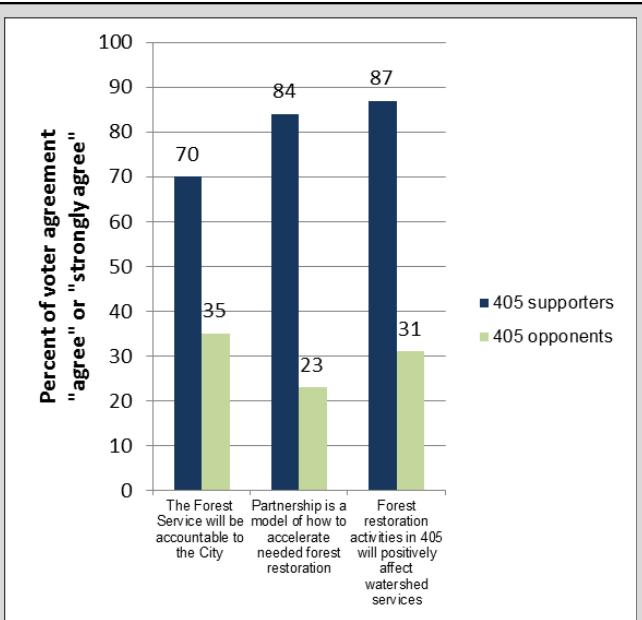


Figure 1: Voter beliefs about implementation effectiveness and management of the Watershed Project

Voter Opposition

Opposition to the Watershed Project was primarily characterized by beliefs related to: 1) the high cost and low utility of the property tax, 2) that the monies would not be managed wisely or effectively, 3) the Watershed Project would not produce the desired outcomes, and 4) opposition to forest thinning (Table 1).

Reason	%
My taxes already too high	55
Flagstaff and USFS will waste the money	37
Cannot afford to pay	30
Forest restoration is not solution to water supply threats	19
Opposed to thinning the forest	17
Private industry should pay for restoration	15
Unfair for citizens to pay for watershed projects	15
Federal government should pay for restoration on federal lands	12

Note: percentages add to more than 100% due to multiple responses

Voter Support

Support for the Watershed Project was characterized by voter desire to protect water resources and the value of investing now to reduce the risks of catastrophic fire and post-fire flooding. Supporters also believed that the investment will be effectively administered to produce clear outcomes (Table 2).

Reason	%
Will reduce the risk of post-fire flooding	55
Prop 405 will protect city water resources	54
Should invest now to avoid future costs	36
FLG and USFS will use money efficiently	34
This will reduce risk of catastrophic fire	33
Investment will have clear outcomes	32
Federal government does not have sufficient resources	16

Note: percentages add to more than 100% due to multiple responses

Conclusions

A strong majority of Flagstaff voters passed the Watershed Project ballot measure. Although voters generally believed that their tax rates and overall property taxes would increase, the ballot measure still drew strong support from across political parties. Support was grounded in a concern about fire and drought as threats to local water supply and strong beliefs about the effectiveness of forest treatments and the partnership model of the city and the U.S. Forest Service working together. *With supporters and opponents having distinct perceptions regarding the efficacy and efficiency of the proposed project, implementation will need to demonstrate to voters that the City and the U.S. Forest Service are working effectively together to reduce risks and enhance water resources. Communicating the effectiveness of watershed treatments will help confirm the vote of confidence in the project by supporters, and help assuage concerns among those in opposition.*

