



URBAN WATERS LEARNING NETWORK

Keywords: civic & community engagement, environmental justice & diversity, flooding, partnerships, watershed planning



About the Organization:

The [Friends of the Rio de Flag](#) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose goal is to protect, restore, clean up and improve the Rio de Flag and its tributaries to maximize their beauty, educational, recreational, and natural resource values, including the riparian habitats they provide.

Location:

Flagstaff, AZ

Contact Information:

Chelsea Silva
Former Executive Director
Friends of the Rio de Flag
P.O. Box 151
Flagstaff, AZ 86002
(801) 214-8513
deflagrio@gmail.com

Matt Muchna
Former Outreach Coordinator
Friends of the Rio de Flag
P.O. Box 151
Flagstaff, AZ 86002
(928) 533-6767
mjmuchna@gmail.com

Jared Vollmer
Regional Urban Waters Program
Lead
U.S. EPA Region 9
75 Hawthorne St.
San Francisco, CA 94105
(415) 972-3447
vollmer.jared@epa.gov

Centering Environmental Justice to Strengthen Community Partnerships

Friends of the Rio de Flag (FoRio) is a small nonprofit organization in Flagstaff, AZ working on education, restoration, and river planning within their watershed. With an EPA Environmental Justice Small Grant awarded in 2017, FoRio worked strategically to strengthen relationships in the community by centering environmental justice in their work. FoRio formed partnerships with the City of Flagstaff as well as with residents of the historically segregated Southside Neighborhood where stormwater flooding is a problem.

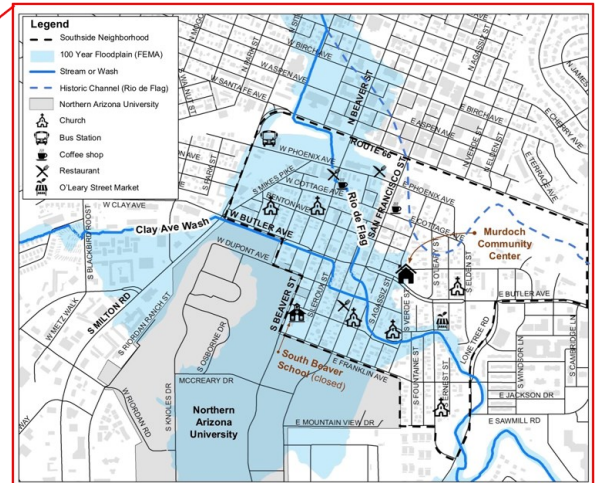
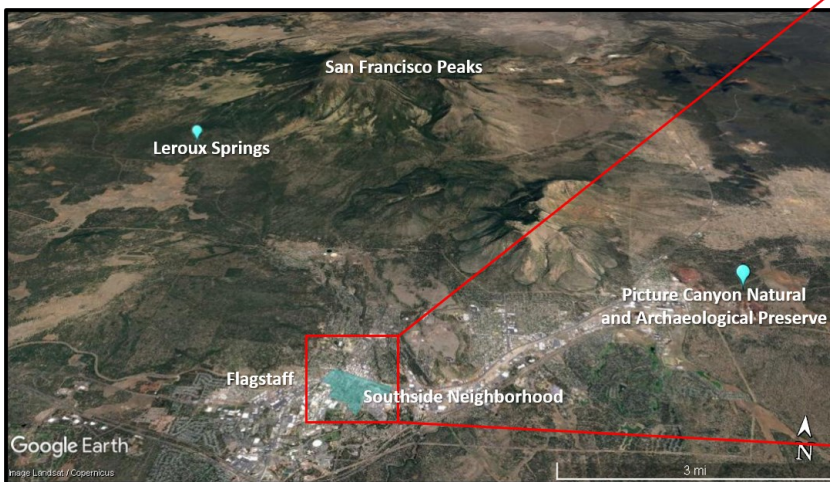
The Rio de Flag, Flooding, and the Southside Neighborhood

The Rio de Flag originates at Leroux Springs in the San Francisco Peaks' volcanic field in Arizona. The river is mainly fed by large rain and snowmelt events and flows to the southeast through the City of Flagstaff. Archeologists identify the Sinagua and Anasazi people as the original settlers and the ancestors to the Navajo and Hopi Nations, who continue to have an important presence in the region today. It was not until 1876 that European settlers occupied the area bringing with them the railroad and tourism. Since then, the history in the Rio de Flag watershed shows a frequency of floods about every one-to-thirteen years. After a large flood disrupted downtown Flagstaff in 1903, the river was diverted into the Southside Neighborhood which at the time was racially segregated and majority Black. Stormwater flooding continues to be a problem there today, more than 100 years later.

The current population of the Southside fluctuates because of students from Northern Arizona University. Of the roughly 5,000 year-round residents, the neighborhood is characterized by 40-75% black, indigenous, and people of color residents, 80% low-to-moderate income households, and about 20% owner-occupied residences. In 1983—in part due to the Rio de Flag channel diversion—the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) designated much of the Southside Neighborhood as being within the 100-year floodplain. As a result, residents are required to purchase costly flood insurance and properties have devalued.



A monsoon storm in July 2018 resulted in a 100-year flood event in the Southside Neighborhood of Flagstaff, AZ. Photo: Tom Bean



The Rio de Flag originates in springs of the San Francisco Peaks and flows through Flagstaff, AZ. Because of a river diversion in 1903, much of the Southside Neighborhood is within the FEMA designated 100-year floodplain. Map on the right from Friends of the Rio de Flag.

In February 2020, a long-considered Army Corps of Engineers [Flood Control Project for the Rio de Flag](#) received \$52 million in federal funding. Working with the City of Flagstaff, the plan includes increasing the capacity of the Rio de Flag channel to accommodate the 100-year flood event, creating under- and above-ground floodway features, and shifting the current floodway to reduce stormwater runoff in the Southside Neighborhood. The project has the potential to change the FEMA 100-year floodplain designation in much of the community.

Friends of the Rio de Flag: Strengthening Partnerships

“Social and environmental movements are interconnected.”
~Matt Muchna, Former Outreach Coordinator, FoRio

Addressing the structural causes of flooding may not be an insurmountable goal; assuring that improvements in the Southside community are equitable is more difficult. As advocates for the river and the communities that live near it, Friends of the Rio de Flag (FoRio) is a nonprofit organization that aims to protect, restore, and clean up the Rio de Flag

Watershed. Funded by an [EPA Environmental Justice Small Grant](#) in 2017, FoRio hired a project manager and outreach coordinator to engage, educate, and build capacity in the Southside Neighborhood. As a small organization, FoRio strategically used the funding to strengthen partnerships within their community and advocated for river planning that benefits the community in an environmentally just way.

Public Meetings, workshops, and events:

- [Workshop 1](#): Nov 16, 2017
- [Past Present and Future Workshop](#): June 23, 2018
 - [Storytelling Excerpts](#)
- [On-the-Street meetings](#): 5 in Aug 2018
- [Stormwater meeting](#): Aug 18, 2018

FoRio established partnerships with the [City of Flagstaff](#) (CoF), [Southside Community Association](#) (SCA), [Coconino County](#) Emergency Response, and Southside residents, using the services of the [Southwest Decision Resources](#) facilitation team. Together, the groups set out to understand how Southside residents experience the river and associated flooding.

Information was gathered through door-to-door and online surveys in the community—with a total of 129 [responses](#) and three resident [interviews](#)—and multiple public input meetings, workshops, and walking tours. This work also informed the City of Flagstaff's [Southside Neighborhood Plan](#), which became effective on September 30, 2020.



Community members engage in meetings, walking tours, and clean-up events in the Southside Neighborhood of Flagstaff, AZ. Photos: Tom Bean

Feedback from the surveys, interviews, and workshops varied. Given the large turn-over of residents in the Southside Neighborhood in recent years, many people were not familiar with the history of the neighborhood or the effects of flooding. Long-time residents, on the other hand, have fond memories of the river. While they are anticipating positive results of the flood control project, they want to maintain their connection to the river in the Southside. They also indicated that keeping the river free from trash and invasive weeds was a high priority.

In response, FoRio created informational [brochures](#), wrote articles and blogs, and created a website for the SCA to educate more recent residents about the history of the area. With funding from the grant, the SCA hired an intern to help with organizational capacity-building. FoRio also hosted clean-up events, engaging 30 local residents and collecting five bags of recycled material, 40 bags of trash, and 50 pounds of glass.

FoRio in the News: Articles and Blogs

- [Stormwater in Southside; where do we go from here?](#)
- [Flagstaff's relationships to floods](#)
- [Flagstaff flood control project nears completion, on paper if not in reality](#)
- [Environmental Justice through Strong Partnerships](#)
- [Reflecting on an Internship with Friends of the Rio de Flag](#)

Continuing the Work

The work cultivated by the EPA Environmental Justice grant catalyzed this small organization with growing capacity to work collaboratively with diverse stakeholders. With backing from the SCA and other community partners, FoRio applied for and was awarded a Bureau of Reclamation [WaterSMART Cooperative Watershed Management Program](#) grant in 2018 that has furthered the work of watershed planning for the Rio de Flag. While there is more work to be done, FoRio set the stage for river management planning to move forward with an environmental justice lens.

“When rivers are important to us, they bring a connection to nature and place of solace and peace. Everyone should be able to have and experience that.”
~Chelsea Silva, Former Executive Director, FoRio



For more information about the Learning Network, visit
www.UrbanWatersLearningNetwork.org
Coordinated by Groundwork USA and River Network
Funded by U.S. EPA
October 2020

