

Lower Onion Creek Flood Mitigation Buyout Project Gets Kudos from Homeowners

TRAVIS COUNTY, TX – In 2013, floods hit Austin in the early hours of Halloween morning killing five people and damaging more than 500 homes. Some parts of the city received nearly 10 inches of rain in 24 hours. Austin’s rivers, creeks, and streams rose to historic levels. Onion Creek and several adjacent neighborhoods were overwhelmed with flood waters from the storm.

But, thanks to a prior acquisition project, partly funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP), 323 properties had already been removed from the flood’s path. This still left a total of 532 homes at risk.

“The hardest-hit neighborhoods in the Onion Creek watershed originally consisted of 855 properties subject to flooding in a 100-year flood event, said Kevin Shunk, Physical Engineer and Certified Floodplain Manager with the city of Austin Watershed Protection Department Engineering Division. “In addition to the Halloween Flood of 2013, this area of lower Onion Creek also had experienced flooding in 1998 and 2001.”

In 1998, the city began partnering with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) to evaluate several flooding problems in Austin, Sunset Valley, and Travis County, including lower Onion Creek. USACE began a comprehensive study, evaluating structural and non-structural solutions. Because of the depth and extent of the floodplain in the area, the study determined that acquiring the flood-prone properties and relocating the residents would be more effective than more extensive structural solutions to the flooding problem.

After Hurricane Rita in 2006, 114 properties were acquired by the city using a \$7.8 million FEMA grant. An additional 209 were acquired with funding from other sources. Immediately following the Halloween Flood of 2013, the city pulled together funding to offer recovery buyouts to many of the remaining 533 properties, the majority of which were deemed substantially damaged.

“Cost savings from completed projects elsewhere in the city and other planned projects were indefinitely delayed so that their funding could be used for these buyouts,” said Shunk. “A flood like the Halloween storm, one of the largest ever in the city of Austin, tends to clarify a city’s flood-risk priorities and prompt community, government, and political action. The city has worked hard to capitalize on this focus through the acceleration of the floodplain mitigation buyout project in Onion Creek.”

FEMA provided \$1.5 million for the acquisition of 10 of the 533 properties. Under FEMA mitigation guidelines, the acquired homes must be razed, and the cleared property left as permanent open space. In September 2014, the Austin City Council authorized \$60 million in funding for the Watershed Protection Department to buy out additional properties in the 100-year floodplain. On March 5, 2015, the council authorized the department to begin voluntary buyouts for 232 houses.

“We are approaching this area in phases. Homeowners were given the opportunity to let us know when they wanted to be bought,” said Shunk. “Phase 1 includes those who asked to be bought right away and whose houses had damage from the Halloween Flood. Everyone in Phase 1 has been given a ranking based on depth of flooding. When two houses had the same amount of flooding, the house with the highest risk was placed first. We will start the buyouts with houses one through 15, and believe we will have contacted all Phase 1 properties before the summer of 2016.”

Shunk noted the Halloween Flood of 2013 confirmed that the earlier buyouts, which moved residents out of harm’s way, are an effective way to protect people from flooding. He added that most of the residents who have been through the buyout process have given the department positive feedback.

While buyouts are an important way to reduce the risk of future disasters, FEMA does not buy houses directly from the property owners. Acquisition or buyout projects, while 75 percent funded by FEMA, are administered by the state and local communities who work together to identify areas where buyouts make the most sense.



Individuals may not apply directly to the state, but the community may sponsor an application on their behalf.

For additional information on the Lower Onion Creek Flood Mitigation Buyout Project, visit:

<http://www.fema.gov/application-development-process/hazard-mitigation-assistance-property-acquisition-buyouts#0>
and <https://www.austintexas.gov/department/watershed-protection>.



The Halloween Flood of 2013 damaged more than 500 homes (Photo courtesy of the City of Austin Watershed Department Engineering Division)



A map of the Onion Creek Buyouts Project Areas (Photo courtesy of the City of Austin Watershed Department Engineering Division)