

Moving to Higher Ground

HARRIS COUNTY, TX – During Memorial Day weekend in 2015, flood warnings were issued in many parts of Texas as record amounts of torrential rains were unleashed on already saturated grounds. Many residents in harm's way had to flee their homes and seek temporary shelter, while hundreds of other homeowners previously in the high-risk flood plain were no longer threatened.

They had been able to move from homes previously subject to repetitive flooding thanks to the Harris County Flood Control District's (HCFCD) Voluntary Buyout Program. Buyouts, also called acquisition and relocation projects, allow residents to voluntarily sell their repetitive loss properties to the county and receive fair market value before disaster strikes again. The houses are cleared from the floodplain, which is returned to its natural state.

"Nearly 550 homes would have flooded during the May event had they not been purchased via the District's Voluntary Home Buyout program," said HCFCD Acquisition Program Manager James Wade. "Approximately \$12.4 million in flood damages were avoided as a result of these 550 buyouts."

The acquired homes were located within the high-risk floodplain and subject to repetitive flooding. Structures in this situation were typically built years before detailed maps and studies were available and floodplain management regulations adopted by the county and cities.

The initial start of the program was in 1985, although federal funds were not granted until the early nineties. The state and federal partnership began in 1995.

Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) buyouts or acquisition projects are administered by the state. The federal portion of the cost is 75 percent and the non-federal share is 25 percent. To be eligible, the participating property must be located in a community that participates in the National Flood Insurance Program (NFIP), and has a FEMA-approved Hazard Mitigation Plan. Additionally, the property must be within a mapped special flood hazard area, subject to repetitive flooding and the purchase must be cost beneficial.

Since 1995, more than 2,000 structures have been purchased. About 1,100 properties were funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency's HMGP and more than 900 homes were acquired with district funds. An additional 30 structures were purchased by the United States Army Corps of Engineers.

The application process took one to two years from the date application was submitted before a determination was made concerning eligibility. Since the buyouts occurred, the area is now deed restricted and cannot be developed with permanent structures in the future.

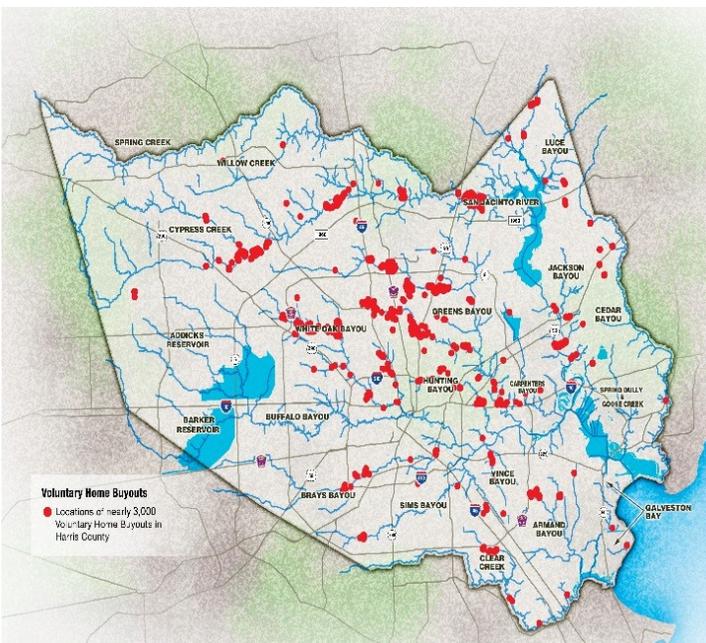
A major benefit was that the buyout program enabled affected families to relocate to higher ground. The safety risk for homeowners, as well as first responders, was eliminated. The buyouts saved the government money because flood insurance payments and federal assistance payments were reduced. After the homes were purchased and demolished, the floodplain was restored to its natural and beneficial function for storm water storage. Finally, open spaces were available for use as community amenities, such as parks, gardens and playing fields.

The Harris County voluntary buyout program was a win-win situation to everyone involved.

For additional information visit: <https://www.hcfcd.org/our-programs/property-acquisition-program/voluntary-acquisition/voluntary-home-buyout/>



Before and after photos of acquisition in Harris County
(Photo courtesy of James Wade)



Red dots indicate location of nearly 3,000 Voluntary Buyouts in Harris County.
(Photo courtesy of James Wade)