

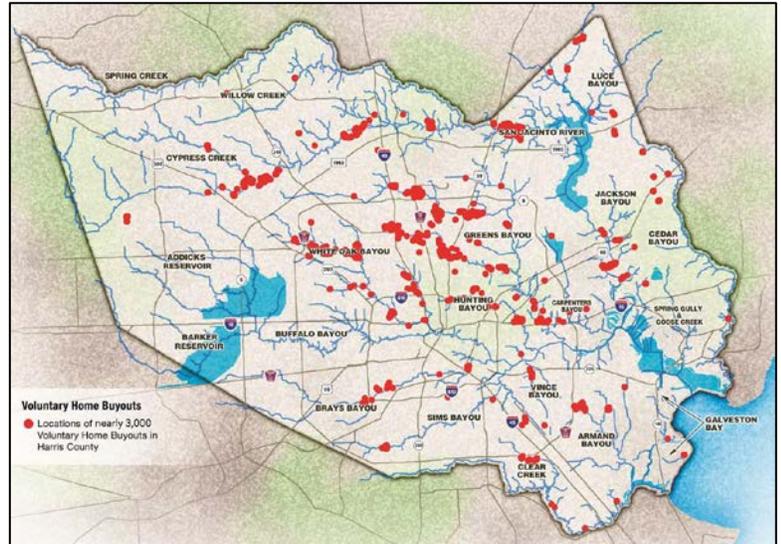
Buyouts a Win-Win for Harris County and Residents

HOUSTON, TX – While many efforts combat flooding, property acquisitions or buyouts rank as the best way to prevent flood damage.

Harris County, Texas, has used this mitigation measure to purchase more than 3,000 structures. Of those, 2,000 were acquired with funding through FEMA’s Hazard Mitigation Assistance Program.

“Our buyout program was initiated in 1985,” said Ataul Hannan, director of planning for the Harris County Flood Control District. “In 1985, the county maps were introduced. Flood-prone areas were identified and the county began looking into possible solutions to flooding in those areas.”

According to Hannan, homes were built deep in flood-prone areas where structural projects occur—such as channel modifications or detention ponds—to reduce flood levels would not be beneficial. These structures were built long before floodplain management regulations were adopted.



Map shows the location of approximately 3,000 homes acquired in Harris County’s voluntary home buyout project.

Photo courtesy of Ataul Hannan, director of planning, Harris County Flood Control District.

Before the buyout program was introduced, the only recourse for residents, if insured, was to file a claim for damage with the National Flood Insurance Program. From 1978 to 2010, the total number of NFIP claims for Harris County was 72,192, with a payout of about \$2.5 million.

The county developed what is referred to as an “ideal buyout criteria” that included:

- homes hopelessly deep (several feet) in the floodplain
- homes subjected to riverine flooding (bayous, creeks, and streams overtopping their banks)
- severe repetitive loss properties
- cost of acquiring and demolishing the property is less than the cost of the estimated future flood damage to the property

Hannan looked at the aftermath of three major flooding events in 2015 to validate the success of the county’s buyout program. The four-year drought and dry conditions ended in Harris County in 2015 with two minor floods, two major floods, Tropical Storm Bill, and six other significant rainfall events.

“These events clearly revealed the progress we made,” said Hannan. “We needed to know how well the buyout project was working. We went with the data and developed a process of analysis using GIS (Geographic Information Systems), to validate the success of the project.”

Central and southwest Harris County experienced widespread flooding in May 2015 and again on Halloween weekend. All told, about 6,450 homes flooded as a result of the two storms.

The Harris County Flood Control District estimated federally funded projects prevented the flooding of at least 4,000 homes in Harris County.

Because of the Harris County Flood Control District's home buyout projects with FEMA, the district said damage was limited.

- Memorial Day Flood: about 6,335 homes flooded; an estimated 500 homes spared
- Halloween Flood: about 400 homes flooded; 150 houses spared
- Tax Day Flood: about 7,000 homes flooded; about 1,500 spared

Harris County faced widespread flooding once more in April. Hannan proudly displayed the statistics on the number of homes that would have flooded had they not been acquired – an astounding 1,500.

“Since the beginning of our voluntary buyout program, over 2,000 structures have been purchased with FEMA grants, over 900 properties with district funds and over 30 with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers fund,” he said. “This resulted in the restoration of over 1,000 acres to their natural and beneficial function as a floodplain and millions of dollars in flood damage avoided.”

The Harris County Flood Control District reminds residents affected by flooding that buyouts do not provide immediate recovery assistance; the primary purpose is to remove residents from harm's way and to eliminate flooding damage. Properties acquired through the program are cleared away and used to widen bayous, to create recreational green spaces, or to preserve natural, unoccupied floodplains.

“As we educate residents on the buyout process, we tell them participation is strictly voluntary. We also let them know the level of activity in the buyout program is influenced by the availability of federal funds to support the district's program,” Hannan said.

FEMA, through the Texas Division of Emergency Management and the Texas Water Development Board, has provided funding under four grant programs: Flood Mitigation Assistance, Hazard Mitigation Grant Program, Pre-Disaster Mitigation, and the Severe Repetitive Loss Program.

For additional information visit:

- hcfcd.org/our-programs/property-acquisition-program
- fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/85455
- fema.gov/media-library-data/20130726-1516-20490-8060/acquisition_sow.pdf.