This Coastal State’s Approach to Flooding May Be a Model for Illinois Communities

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Editor’s note: This is the second story examining government home buyouts. Read part one, which focuses on Illinois’ program, here.

WOODBRIDGE TOWNSHIP, N.J. - In an area once dotted with single family homes, a one-mile gravel path weaves through wetlands, thousands of native plants and rain gardens.

The New Jersey Turnpike quietly whirs in the background of the 30-acre restoration park, located on the edge of a neighborhood in the manufacturing and warehousing town of about 100,000, less than an hour from New York City.

In 2012, Superstorm Sandy swept through and damaged hundreds of homes. That
year, officials from Woodbridge worked with the state to buy and demolish 171 single-family homes through a program called Blue Acres.

After the homes were torn down and most families moved away, ecologists from Rutgers University designed the restoration area to absorb rainfall and flood waters from the three waterways that bound the park from the north, south and east.

The park – and how the state helped residents move out of a floodplain – is a blueprint for other states and communities facing recurrent flooding, climate experts say.

“One of the reasons that [Blue Acres] is pointed to so often is that because it is big and prominent and well funded,” said A.R. Siders, a climate researcher at the University of Delaware. “It is also able to do things that are creative.”

The state recently launched a pilot program to address a key concern after homeowners agree to a buyout: where they go next.

For decades, local, state and federal governments have worked with residents to buy their properties, tear down structures and turn the land into open space in order to mitigate flooding. Buyouts are a common practice in New Jersey, which faces coastal flooding in addition to riverine and urban flooding. It’s also happening in Illinois, where flooding is the state’s most prominent natural disaster, according to state experts.

Illinois’ buyout program has benefited thousands of residents, particularly when their options are limited. But the program faces inconsistent funding and is known for taking too long to get residents much-needed cash to move away. When they are able to leave, there’s no guarantee they’ll be able to afford to move to a flood-free area.

Read More: For Many Illinoisans in Flood-Prone Areas, Buyouts Are the Only Way Out

Blue Acres and New Jersey face similar problems, but they have the funding and resources to make it a more proactive, adaptive program, experts told Illinois Answers.

“It’s difficult to even define what success means in terms of a buyout,” said Anna
Weber, a policy analyst at the Natural Resources Defense Council in Washington, D.C.

But “there are a lot of really useful lessons that we can apply from Blue Acres to other programs,” she said. “There is a lot of deliberate learning and applying of lessons within the Blue Acres program ... and there’s a lot of opportunities to learn from the experiences of that program in other places around the country.”

**Blue Acres’ Model**

Since 1995, Blue Acres has purchased about 1,100 homes, the majority acquired after Superstorm Sandy in 2012, said Courtney Wald-Wittkop, who runs the program at the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection. The year after Sandy, the federal government allocated $300 million to acquire and demolish homes.

In addition to federal funding, every year since 2020 Blue Acres has received a portion of the state’s corporate business tax, thanks to voters who approved a constitutional amendment dedicating funds to environmental, conservation and preservation programs.

The yearly amount varies based on the revenue collected. In 2023, Blue Acres received $10 million, which will be spent over a few years, Wald-Wittkop said.

New Jersey’s state-based funding source “allows the program to be much more nimble and flexible, in some ways, than programs that are specifically relying, for example, on FEMA funding sources,” Weber said.

That consistent funding allows Blue Acres to move quickly on a sale so homeowners don’t have to wait for federal funding, Wald-Wittkop said. FEMA-funded buyouts take a median of more than five years, according to a study by the NRDC.

Blue Acres aims to complete sales within six to 12 months, Wald-Wittkop said, but factors such as funding availability, title complications and the homeowner’s responsiveness can slow the process. The homeowner can also appeal the appraised value, which can add time.
Many homes in or around the restoration area in Woodbridge Township, New Jersey, are elevated to prevent future flood damage. The restoration area, to the left, has been reclassified as an open space conservation and resiliency zone, which places stricter flood protection measures on residents who live there.

Siders, who studied Blue Acres as a part of her research on climate change adaptation policies, said it has been “able to overcome challenges that are really common in buyout programs.” For example, Blue Acres brought together civil engineers and real estate experts to speed up home evaluations, and it helped homeowners “who were underwater on their mortgages to be able to be eligible for the program, which normally they would not be.”

Blue Acres also assigns residents a case manager.

“The Blue Acres program has had a big focus on the resident experience in the form of case management, as well as what we might call wraparound services,” Weber said. Those services could include help working with the bank, finding a new home or assisting with the moving process – all things not included in federally funded acquisitions, she said.
Wald-Wittkop said case managers understand the needs of the homeowners, which helps speed up the process. She pointed to feedback from case managers, who noticed that some homeowners were hiring attorneys to handle simple closings, which was causing delays. Because of their input, program officials recommended the state use a title company to close on some properties on behalf of the homeowner, making the process more efficient.

Illinois’ Flood Hazard Mitigation Program, in comparison, does not provide case managers. It is one of two buyout programs in the state and is funded by state legislature allocation, which often runs dry. The other program is federally funded only after natural disaster declarations.

The Flood Hazard Mitigation Program in the Illinois Department of Natural Resources has one staff member, who works with another state agency to close on the homes. Blue Acres, on the other hand, has about 19 full-time positions, Wald-Wittkop said, and is part of the Office of Climate Resilience, which has about 40 staff.

Read More From This Series:

- [Flooding: Illinois’ Most Threatening Natural Disaster](#)
- [Chatham Flooding Mitigation Program Flounders, But Oak Park Sees Success](#)
- [‘Green Alleys’ Prevent Flooding, But Vulnerable Neighborhoods Must Wait](#)

Addressing the Lack of Affordable Housing

A common challenge with buyout programs is that residents are often left to find new – and hopefully affordable – housing on their own, Siders said.

The focus is often on getting people out of their homes, but not necessarily on where they go next. Buyout programs are very rarely tied to discussions about where new housing is being built, how much new housing is being built and affordability, she said.

“There’s kind of a disconnect there,” she said.
New Jersey is aiming to address this disconnect with a pilot program that will build affordable housing for Blue Acres participants and first-time homebuyers.

Launched in October 2023, the Smart Move Program seeks to “keep residents in New Jersey with affordable housing and put them in a safer location than where they currently were,” said Jim Mooney, who runs the program at the Department of Community Affairs.

After Hurricane Ida in 2021, the state invited local governments in 12 counties most affected by the storm to submit a development plan for an affordable housing project.

The development has to be outside the 500-year floodplain, contain at least six single-family housing units and serve mixed-income households. The department encouraged applicants to come up with innovative and resilient development ideas, Mooney said, like buildings with heat-absorbing glass or solar panels.

Two municipalities applied, and the department plans to announce awards in August, with the goal to begin construction in December, Mooney said.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development put $50 million into Smart Move, he said, and each project is eligible for up to $15 million.

Once the developments are built, Blue Acres participants and first-time homebuyers can apply for down payment assistance to purchase a home there. Blue Acres participants will be prioritized, Mooney said.

He’s hoping that it’s a “blueprint we can use for future programs.”

**How Woodbridge Transformed the Land**

After Sandy tore through the Watson-Crampton neighborhood of Woodbridge in 2012, “almost everybody agreed that it was time to get out,” Woodbridge Township Mayor John McCormac told the Illinois Answers Project.

The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection acted quickly, McCormac said, “so much that I think a lot of people started seeing houses coming down around them, and started thinking, ‘Why am I not doing this if my neighbors are doing it?’”
The state covers the entire cost of the buyout – including property appraisals, closings, environmental reviews and demolitions – but the local government can supplement with its own funding.

Woodbridge put $200,000 of its municipal funding into the buyout project, according to the mayor’s spokesperson, to help residents who needed assistance and to buy bank-owned homes, which are not eligible for buyouts. The town limited financial assistance to $20,000 for families who needed help with a new down payment or other moving costs.

Ecologists from Rutgers University installed no mowing signs to allow native, non-invasive grasses and plants to grow in the restoration area, replacing the impervious surfaces that previously covered the ground. Woodbridge has a strong tax base, McCormac said, which allows them to invest more in projects that smaller local governments may not be able to. “We have a very strong financial situation, strong surpluses,” he said.

Funding for the restoration area came from several sources: an additional $220,000 from Woodbridge, $25,000 from the New Jersey Corporate Wetlands.
Restoration Partnership, and $608,000 from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and Rutgers.

The township also paid a contractor $300,000 to install a one-mile trail, the mayor’s spokesperson said.

A trail network crosses Crampton Avenue in Woodbridge Township, where officials worked with the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection’s Blue Acres program to buy out 171 flood-damaged homes and turn the area into open space.

With most buyout programs, including in Illinois, the land acquired by the government often becomes open space without any utility.

“Woodbridge was incredibly proactive,” in deciding what to do with the spaces where homes were torn down, said Brooke Maslo, an ecologist at Rutgers University whose team led the restoration project.

The project was the first time Rutgers worked with a community to restore open space, and Maslo said they’re now trying to expand the model across New Jersey.

While the properties were being demolished, Woodbridge officials asked Maslo’s team to devise a plan for the land. Rutgers began with an ecological survey to
assess vegetation, habitat type and existing infrastructure. The ecologists also looked at socio-economic factors, such as property values, population and amenities.

Because the area is bordered by three waterways, it’s susceptible to flooding. To minimize impact, the park features engineered solutions like rain gardens and expanded wetlands, said Tom Flynn, the town’s floodplain manager.

Rain gardens are designed to capture the first half an inch of rainfall, Flynn said, but “they’re not designed to mitigate against your Sandy’s, your Ida’s, your major storm events.”

The wetlands act as a natural sponge that absorbs water. The vegetation surrounding the wetlands slows the speed of flood water and spreads the water more evenly across the floodplain, reducing flood heights.

Rutgers ecologists had to build the restoration area around existing infrastructure like gas lines. Wetlands can save significant amounts of damage, according to a 2017 study in
Scientific Reports. The study found that coastal wetlands in the northeastern U.S. reduced flood heights and avoided an estimated $625 million in damages from Sandy.

While the restoration area hasn’t been severely damaged by flooding since Sandy, the homeowners who chose to stay in the neighborhood still face the risk of flooding, Flynn said, and they are subject to stricter flood protection regulations, like elevating the house when undergoing other substantial renovations.

“If they’re going to stay here, we want to ensure that they’re safe,” he said.

Last year, Maslo and her team published a primer on creating flood-resilient landscapes that they are distributing to municipalities. It compiles over eight years of research and learnings from Woodbridge Township and other projects, which she hopes will empower more communities to take on restoration projects.

“We keep moving in this direction,” she said, “it’s going to be wildly successful.”

Trail signs in the park explain various wildlife species in the area. Raptors, carnivorous birds that prefer wooded and open habitats, are one of the many bird
species that live in the resiliency zone.