

Foxbeach, Staten Island, New York: One Community's Drive for Change Leads to a Neighborhood-Wide Buyout

Background

In a city dominated by high rises and crowded streets, Staten Island lies apart. For its residents, Staten Island provides a refuge with its abundant open spaces, expansive lots, and suburban character. Though still substantially less populated than New York City's other four boroughs, the city's "forgotten" borough has grown rapidly over the last half century. The island's bungalows – once primarily intended for weekend escapes – transitioned into permanent residences as new infrastructure increased the ease of access to the island. Since the completion of the Verrazano Bridge in 1964, the population of the island more than doubled to 500,000. The rising cost of housing throughout the rest of the city further pushed residents from the city's core into lower cost housing on the island, much of it located on flood-prone areas along beaches or wetland.

The Hazard

Surrounded by water and situated on wetlands, the borough's residents have withstood a seemingly scheduled series of basement-flooding storms with a "dog bites man" regularity and lack of news impact. While this routine turned some locals callous toward the danger at their doorsteps, particularly destructive Nor'easters or hurricanes have occasionally catalyzed calls for improved protective measures and even buyouts. After an especially damaging Nor'easter in 1992 destroyed hundreds of homes and portions of the Island's seawall and protective berm, a group of citizens formed a Flood Victims Group, which unsuccessfully pushed for permission to build back the berm and construct levees. Despite the continued storms, life on the Island continued as normal – occasional basement flooding and all - until 2011.

Take-Aways in Brief:

- The back-to-back destruction wrought by Hurricanes Irene and Sandy changed the post-Sandy recovery conversation from one of rebuilding to one of relocation. Many residents no longer felt safe and worried about the long-term costs of rebuilding and increased flood insurance rates.
- Existing social infrastructure, the Flood Victims Group, put in place after a previous storm allowed the community to move quickly after Sandy to develop a consensus on buyouts. This also established a first mover advantage, with Foxbeach receiving comparatively expedited government support and funds.
- This buyout push received tremendous support from committed local leaders who put in the substantial hard work necessary to catalyze the buyout process.
- The buyout process presented a clear path, developed collaboratively and transparently, which allowed it to receive community-wide support.
- Through perseverance, skilled networking, and a touch of luck, community leaders formed ties with key state officials who proved instrumental for implementing the buyout process.

At that moment, life for many Staten Island residents changed forever. In August 2011 Hurricane Irene swept through New York causing massive devastation, extensive flooding, and hundreds of millions of dollars of damage across the state. At the time, Irene was New York State's most destructive hurricane in over 40 years. While greatly impacted, most on Staten Island rebuilt as usual; one resident explained, "If Irene was the 100-year storm, why would we have expected another one?" Then, less than a year and half later, Hurricane Sandy wrought unprecedented destruction on the city. Ninety mile per hour winds accompanied by a 14-foot storm surge led to massive evacuations, power outages, and infrastructure damage. Sandy destroyed thousands of homes in the greater New York metropolitan area, shut down the stock exchange for the longest period in over a century, and took the lives of 58 New Yorkers, 24 of them on Staten Island, more than any other borough. When the mega-storm finally blew over, thousands of New Yorkers were faced with the task of rebuilding their homes, their business, and their lives.

Coastal Transformation Process

Post-Sandy, something within the Staten Island community shifted; many residents, who had in the past firmly advocated for rebuilding, now pushed for a different approach: buyouts. In the weeks after the storm, members of the old Flood Victims Group went door to door through their particularly hard-hit community of Oakwood Beach to distribute pamphlets advertising a meeting at the local St. Charles Church to discuss their recovery options. While residents were still suffering from the impacts of Sandy, the overall mood of the room was calm, with residents there to support one another. Joe Tirone, a Staten Island resident and business owner, arrived at the meeting with a plan: after researching FEMA's buyout program, he stood up at the first community meeting, explained the buyout process, and asked who would want to relocate. Everyone in the room raised their hands.

Following the first meeting, residents decided to form the Oakwood Beach Buyout Committee, which spent the next several months working tirelessly to realize buyouts for the community of Foxbeach, an approximately 60 acre (27-block) neighborhood of 165 homes within the town of Oakwood Beach. The Committee met weekly to work for the buyouts and held monthly community meetings at St. Charles. Joe Tirone and other members of the Committee started by reaching out to officials in areas such as Nashville, Tennessee that had received FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grants to learn more about the process of applying. The Committee then lobbied the New York City government to support a grant application, but that effort garnered little support. A meeting between Joe Tirone and Christine Quinn - New York City Council Speaker at the time - proved a pivotal turning point. Quinn won over locals by personally responding to the Committee and agreeing to participate in a media-free meeting. At this meeting, she advised the Committee to explore other possibilities, rather than lobbying the city government.

Moving forward, the Committee shifted its lobbying efforts to target state officials, particularly Governor Andrew Cuomo, and building connections with local, state, and federal officials to create momentum and support for the buyout. Randy Douglas, Supervisor of upstate New York Essex County, proved especially helpful. The Committee initially connected with Douglas to learn more about buyouts, as he had post-disaster experience with upstate communities impacted by Irene and Tropical Storm Lee.

The Committee also worked with Matthew Nelson at the federal Department of Housing Urban and Development (HUD) to explore state-level community development block grants (CDBG). The fruits of these two relationships, coupled with the Committee's buyout plan, formed the cornerstone of the New York State's New York Rising Program, which coordinated federal HUD and FEMA funds to facilitate state reconstruction and buyout efforts.

Following the creation of the buyout program, Foxbeach residents were able to submit voluntary, individual buyout applications and, if approved, receive 100% of their homes' pre-Sandy value with additional bonuses of up to 15% of the total home price pending other factors, such as relocation within New York City. The State originally offered residents a 10% bonus if their entire block relocated but decided to end this policy due to concerns about driving communities apart and infringing upon the voluntary nature of the buyouts. Instead, residents located within designated Enhanced Buyout Areas (areas that had already started organizing) received the 10% bonus for relocating regardless of their neighbors' decisions.

Following approval of the Foxbeach buyout, the State approved buyout assistance for portions of two other Staten Island neighborhoods, Ocean Breeze and Graham Beach. However, the State delayed declaring these neighborhoods as Enhanced Buyout Areas until more than a year after Sandy – November 2013 for Ocean Breeze and March 2014 for Graham Beach. This created substantial uncertainty for the residents in the period between Sandy and the declaration, making community-scale retreat in these neighborhoods more difficult so far. Residents in these area have accepted buyouts in a piecemeal fashion, having already spent their savings on extensive repairs to their homes, becoming involved with the City's Build it Back program, or gaining a renewed sense of safety.

Results

Of the several hundred original homeowners in Foxbeach, less than a dozen remain, mostly those too behind on their mortgages to afford buyout offers without a debt forgiveness component. The vast majority of former Foxbeach families relocated individually, with only a few extended families seeking to buy property close together. Many residents relocated to other parts of Staten Island, in part due to the 5% buy out bonus for remaining in the borough. Others moved to different parts of the city or left New York State entirely.

Overall, life has improved for the relocated Foxbeach residents, with most expressing no apparent regrets. While the former residents miss the life afforded by the island, they appreciate their newfound life of safety and diminished worries about the next storm. State authorities have either scheduled the bought-out residences for demolition or already removed them. It is still uncertain whether the government will revert these bought-out areas to a natural state or convert them into drainage basins as part of an Army Corps of Engineers' protective seawall. This lack of certainty has caused anxiety among bordering residents, many of whom already feel left behind by the buyouts, frustrated by the loss in value of their homes, and fearful about the regrowth of fire-prone phragmites (reeds). This sentiment is highly localized, with residents only a few blocks away either unaware of these issues or comforted by the presence of the bought-out area as a buffer from future storms.

Lessons: Why Here?

Many of Staten Island's residents, who have now relocated to other parts of the city and beyond, loved life in the borough. Unlike other more transient parts of the city, most of Staten Island's neighborhoods had residents with multi-generational connections to the borough, which helps explain residents' decisions to build back their properties storm after storm, year after year. The decision to actively fight for buyouts after Sandy was in response to a truly monumental experience. The back-to-back waves of destruction caused by two incredibly powerful storms, Irene and Sandy, catalyzed the drive to move. Residents no longer felt safe, with many reporting severe stress during subsequent flooding from storms after Sandy. The extended family networks in the borough compounded the sense of loss from the storms; many know a friend or a friend of a friend who had lost their life to Sandy. In addition, residents began to question the economic viability of continued life on the Island. When Sandy hit, many on the Island were still living in houses undergoing extensive repairs from Irene, and the thought of another round of repairs on houses (many of which were still undervalued from the 2008 financial recession) coupled with increases in cost of flood insurance seemed too daunting. In addition, while the borough's elevated streets, protective infrastructure, and frequently damp basements provided a constant reminder to residents that they lived in a floodplain long before Sandy and Irene, the destruction wrought by Sandy transformed this from an abstract threat into daily reality.

Residents of the Foxbeach community within Oakwood Beach advocated for buyouts before other communities, in part due to the inordinate property damage they had sustained. The 1992 Nor'easter damaged a protective seawall and berm, both of which were never fully rebuilt despite resident requests. A 2008 brush fire, sparked by invasive Phragmites further damaged the berm, eroding its capacity to protect against floods. The lack of robust protective barriers increased the local destruction of Irene and Sandy.

The experience of the 1992 Nor'easter also contributed to Foxbeach's success in organizing rapidly after Sandy. Many of those involved in the 1992 Flood Victims Group still lived in the neighborhood and re-established the organizational and social infrastructure previously in place to form the Oakwood Beach Buyout Committee. The local church, St. Charles, facilitated the strong cohesion of the Foxbeach community by providing an accessible, shared public meeting space. The unification of the community throughout the buyout process allowed it to speak with one voice and project a strong political message.

Finally, Foxbeach reacted quickly and effectively post-Sandy due to strong community leadership, including those on the Buyout Committee such as Joe Tirone. Residents received much of their information from community leaders, like Tirone, who became informal liaisons with the government. Some of these leaders effectively partnered with the government to advocate for their neighbors, broadly shared information with their constituents, and built broad coalitions to holistically advocate for buyouts. Other neighboring Staten Island communities failed, partially through a lack of solid partnerships, unsuccessful coalition building, and more tenuous communication channels among residents. Residents of neighborhoods that did not have pre-existing social infrastructure were often too scattered to collectively meet to reach buyout decisions in the immediate aftermath of the storm. Additionally, those communities that entered into the buyout process later were less cohesive, with some residents no longer interested in moving as home values bounced back, anti-government sentiment grew, and the memory of the threat faded.

The Effective Transformation

Foxbeach's leaders, through perseverance, charisma, and some luck, established relationships with a coalition of "strong characters." Christine Quinn won the community's trust through her responsiveness, compassion, and common sense attitude, providing them with valuable insights; Matthew Nelson imparted the knowledge necessary to successfully advocate for HUD funding through the state; and Randy Douglas provided the Buyout Committee important information, deftly navigated the politically sensitive divide between New York City and State post-Sandy, and personally befriended Governor Cuomo.

In addition, while the City proved reluctant to facilitate buyouts, preferring reconstruction to relocation, the City's scale was a good fit with relocation, as residents were likely to move back within city limits. And even when this was not the case, the loss of several hundred residents in a city of millions would have a minimal impact on revenue collection and, in fact, could be a net gain, given the potential tax drain tied to Foxbeach's demand for ongoing infrastructure repairs and other city services.

State agencies also spent valuable time answering resident questions and assuaging concerns. Particular care was taken to reassure several “old-timers” that properties bought out with HUD funds could not be redeveloped into gentrified communities, as this was a common fear with locals wanting to see their land revert back to nature, not transformed into beachfront mansions. Members of the Buyout Committee also assisted by going door-to-door and explaining to their neighbors that their land could not be redeveloped.

The Challenges

Despite initial challenges when discussing retreat with city officials, Foxbeach residents relocated largely successfully and appear satisfied to have moved on with their lives. For those left, the story is quite different. The majority of the remaining Foxbeach community members cannot afford buyouts due to upside-down home mortgages and would need home-swap or mortgage assistance to relocate. Furthermore, the State rejected buyout bids submitted by five other Staten Island communities, and two, Ocean Breeze and Graham Beach, remain in a state of limbo due to a drawn out, uncertain buyout process. While successful on a small-scale, it has proven harder for the state and federal governments to coordinate and fund larger-scale buyout efforts on Staten Island. Moreover, funding for buyouts has become increasingly scarce, with much of the remaining funds available through HUD, which primarily offers buyouts at the post-storm price of a home, rather than the pre-storm value.

In addition, with the memory of Sandy receding, buyouts have become increasingly politicized, with some residents continuing to rally around buyouts and others fighting against them, seeing them as a federal government attempt to take over private property.

The city’s own *Build it Back* Program, which focuses on rebuilding, has also begun competing with state and federal buyouts. Moreover, private builders have started to buy large tracks of property and develop them into large, beachfront houses – sending contradictory signals to homeowners and creating a confusing myriad of options for remaining residents.

While the value of houses on the Island has started to increase, many residents who remain still feel unsafe following the tragedy brought by Hurricane Sandy. At the same time, new residents, unscathed and thus unconcerned about the possibility of future storms, have started flocking to the large, newly constructed houses developed on the Island. Only time will tell if the residents who remained on the Island, along with their new neighbors, will fare better than those who left their flood-prone community behind.