

Staten Island Managed Retreat: Community Driven Decision-Making

Saneta deVuono-powell



Center for Community Investment
June 2021



Before 2012 when Hurricane Sandy hit, the residents of Oakwood Beach were primarily homeowners who had lived in the area for generations, like many other predominantly white working-class communities in Staten Island. By the end of 2013, they were piloting New York State’s first urban managed retreat project.³ Oakwood Beach was a small tight-knit coastal neighborhood on the South Shore of Staten Island. The South Shore was once part of the wide tidal salt marsh meadows that were filled in to allow for development, which eliminated the island’s natural buffer against flooding. Without this buffer, the region became prone to flooding.

While the damage of Hurricane Sandy was felt by residents throughout New York, Staten Island was hit especially hard. Forty-three of the 53 people who died when the storm hit the city lived in Staten Island. The communities in the South Shore had dealt with ongoing flooding and sewage problems for years, going so far as to form the Oakwood Beach Flood Victims Committee to study flooding and advocate for coastal protection in the aftermath of a hurricane that hit the community in 1992. In 1993, a sense that New York City did not care about the residents of Staten Island led them to pass a non-binding referendum on secession by a 2-1 margin.

After Hurricane Sandy hit, the mayor of New York announced the “Build it Back” program to provide rebuilding support for families whose homes had been destroyed. But rather than rebuilding, the residents of Oakwood Beach opted to move. As the community met in the wake of the hurricane, some of the original members of the Flood Victims Committee brought up a buyout, which had originally been raised in 1992. This time, they found widespread support for the idea. The newly formed Oakwood Beach Buyout Committee began researching options and talking to local politicians.

When the committee first approached the city about relocation, they were met with resistance. Both Mayor Bloomberg and Senator Charles Schumer were strongly opposed. “We cannot and will not abandon our waterfront,” said Bloomberg. When it was clear that New York City would not support the buyout program, the committee went to the governor. As a result of their efforts, on February 26, 2013, Governor Cuomo announced the pilot of a home buyout program in Oakwood Beach. The program would focus on areas that 1) had a high level of consensus for participating in a buyout, 2) were located in state-designated high flood risk zones, 3) had a history of chronic flooding, and 4) had sustained damage from Hurricane Sandy.

Once Governor Cuomo announced his support for the Oakwood Beach buyout, seven other neighborhoods began organizing for their own buyouts. Cuomo’s swift support for relocation was unusual (and may have been related to tensions between the mayor and the governor). While there are many reasons for local leaders to oppose climate migration, the specter of lost property values is significant and can also make states more supportive than local governments.

Less than three years after Hurricane Sandy, 99% of the residents of Oakwood had participated in the buyout program. One year later, the Governor’s Office of Storm Recovery offered to buy 107 properties in Ocean Breeze and 122 properties in Graham Beach for a total of \$86 million dollars. Altogether, the State has spent \$255 million dollars to buy 654 properties, most of them in Staten Island. At the same time, since Hurricane Sandy, the city has continued to move forward on new developments along the waterfront in Williamsburg, Long Island City, and Hallat’s Point, all of which were underwater during Sandy. This indicates the absence of a consistent strategy for resilient development.

Twisted pier as a result of Hurricane Sandy, in Staten Island New York
Cover Photo: Charles via Adobe Stock

³ The term managed retreat has been used to refer to the coastal management strategy of moving inland from the shore and is now used to refer to strategies for relocating away from climate risks. However, the term has been criticized for glossing over the coercive history of forced displacement, particularly for communities of color. For many climate advocates, “supported relocation” or “climate migration” are now preferred terms. Because the relocation in Staten Island was characterized as managed retreat at the time and after, we use both terms in this paper. For further discussion of the politics of retreat and Oakwood Beach, see Lisa Koslov, “The Case for Retreat” (Public Culture: 2016).



*Fox Lane in Oakwood Beach, Staten Island May 2014
Photo Credit: Robin Michals*

The community in Oakwood Beach was predominantly homeowners, many of whom had lived in the area for generations and understood Sandy not as a one-time event or even an expression of increasing storm risk due to climate change, but as the most recent in a series of battles with flooding embedded in the development of the area.

Financing

In 2013, Governor Cuomo pledged \$200 million to a state-funded buyout program to relocate residents in state-designated high flood risk areas like Oakwood Beach. The enhanced buyouts meant the government would pay pre-storm prices for the homes and then knock them down, returning the area to its pre-development wetland state. The Governor's Office of Storm Recovery (GOSR), which was created in the wake of Hurricane Sandy to ensure a more coordinated and efficient disaster response, provided and managed funds for the Oakwood, Ocean Breeze, and Graham Beach buyouts. GOSR relies on a variety of federal funding sources including Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), Community Development Block Grant Disaster Recovery, and the Department of Agriculture, as well as state resources and New York City's Build It Back program.

What made this work?

The community in Oakwood Beach consisted predominantly of homeowners, many of whose families had lived in the area for generations. They understood Hurricane Sandy not as a one-time event or even an expression of increasing storm risk due to climate change, but as the most recent in a series of battles with flooding that were embedded in the development of the area. This history likely helped residents decide they were interested in relocation before it was suggested to them, which in turn gave them a sense of agency. In their 2016 report on buyout programs, the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy notes that "most successful buyouts began as community efforts."

Two primary forces made the decision to relocate palatable to Oakwood Beach residents. First was the knowledge that their homes would not be torn down in order to build luxury homes. Second was the sense that by agreeing to relocate, they would be making other parts of Staten Island safer. The open space of Oakwood would serve as a buffer, protecting residents further inland and making their homes more resilient to future flood risks. The city's Build It Back buyout program allowed the land to be redeveloped, which residents opposed. The knowledge that instead all structures would be demolished and returned to open space made residents feel like they were contributing something meaningful to the larger community.

As homeowners, residents of Oakwood could use the money from the sales of their homes to relocate elsewhere. In addition to agreeing to pay pre-hurricane value, the buyout program provided incentives of 10% of pre-hurricane value for participants who relocated to an enhanced buyout area on Staten Island and 5% for participants who relocated within the same city or county. These incentives reflected the desire of the city and state to retain the financial benefits of new property sales, but they also allowed residents to retain community connections as they moved. Many have chosen to buy homes near each other in other parts of the city or outside the state.

The speed with which the state was able to move millions of dollars into the hands of eligible households combined with the fact that most of the residents were homeowners stands out in comparison to other managed retreat programs. Part of this rapid pace was due to the federal declaration of major disaster, but even with that declaration, other neighborhoods that were not offered a buyout immediately after Hurricane Sandy could not reach consensus because they had already moved or invested in rebuilding.



*Home on Kissam Avenue that is still occupied as of July 2017
Photo Credit: Robin Michals*

Other Communities

While programs that support climate migration can play an important role in climate adaptation and mitigation, they pose a series of logistical challenges and run the risk of reinforcing social inequity if they are not strategically designed and implemented. Many of these challenges have been visible in Harris County, Texas, which has one of the largest buyout programs in the country.

Progress in Harris County, whose program began in 1985 and is managed by the Harris County Flood Control District, has been slow and uneven. A 2017 ProPublica analysis estimated that at current rates, it would take a decade to acquire the properties on the priority buyout list at that time. Meanwhile, the area covered by the program excludes thousands of additional homes that continue to flood.

After Hurricane Harvey damaged 8,750 homes in 2017, 4,000 residents sought buyouts in Cypress Creek. Of these, 1,100 were considered eligible, but in the subsequent three years, only 106 homes were purchased. The inadequate scale of response reflects a lack of clarity about buyout criteria, lack of resources, and lack of urgency. It is also worth noting that Harris County is a predominantly non-white community with one of the highest property tax rates in the country, despite the fact that 20% of households live below the poverty line.

As with the buyouts in Staten Island, Harris County buyouts require properties to become green space, which local officials see as a threat to tax revenue. Unlike New York State, Texas has not intervened to support the local buyout program. In the absence of strong government support, many homeowners end up selling their properties to investors who take advantage of their desperation to buy the homes for cheap, then renovate and resell to families willing to risk flooding for homes they can afford.

While lack of funding and slow progress have stymied climate migration in Harris County, the speed and funding access of one of the most comprehensive managed retreats in Illinois stands at the other end of the spectrum. In 1993, two floods hit the town of Valmeyer, Illinois, destroying many homes and businesses. With general consensus from the community, the city used FEMA and state funds to buy 300 homes and 25 businesses in the floodplain, allowing residents to rebuild on a nearby bluff that is 400 feet higher than the old town. Within two years, 700 of the 900 people who lived in Valmeyer had relocated to the new location. Today, the city population has grown to 1,300.

While a relocation of a similar distance took place in Odanah, Wisconsin, it took that community 30 years to move a few miles away from the Bad River floodplain. The residents of Odanah are members of the Chippewa tribe and experienced forced migration to the banks of the Bad River before the town was flooded in 1960. As a result of the flooding, the tribal leader began seeking federal support for relocation. The Bad River Housing Authority was established in 1963 to relocate the community, but the move to a new location a few miles east and further from the floodplain was not completed until 1993. The move recently gained new attention after massive floods inundated the old town. Although they now face less risk, some residents see their relocation as an extension of the serial displacement forced on many tribal communities. This feeling is compounded by the fact that the new town is largely composed of rental properties that are not owned by the residents.⁴

Although migration from flood zones is happening, in many cases it is simply the result of residents picking up and moving after another flood experience, rather than the formal climate migration programs that are necessary for systemic and equitable relocation and large-scale protection. Currently one in ten homes is vulnerable to significant flooding. The number will only increase over time, as sea levels rise and flooding events become more common.

⁴ The issue of climate migration is live and fraught for indigenous communities. Many residents of Odanah feel discomfort with their relocation being held up as a model. However, they were able to complete a move that many other communities have not been able to accomplish. In Alaska, the community of Newtok had been seeking money to relocate since 1994, but their efforts were stalled by the lack of funding to build new housing and infrastructure. As of June 2021, the move still is not complete.

Lessons

- ◆ **Community-led initiatives and homeownership are central to successful managed retreat strategies.**
 - ▶ Our systems do a better job of serving communities where residents own their property. Where residents do not own their property or are not organized, it can be hard to move quickly in the wake of a climate disaster.
 - ▶ Given the history of redevelopment and displacement, ensuring and communicating that properties will not be redeveloped or resold is important to garnering community support and buy-in.
 - ▶ Other ways to increase support and buy-in include allowing communities to control how and where they move and responding quickly in the wake of a disaster.
 - ▶ To prevent the perpetuation of inequities, specific attention must be paid to how communities of color, where residents tend to own less property and property is undervalued, are treated in developing climate migration strategies. The difference between voluntary migration and forced displacement is particularly important for Native communities.

- ◆ **Federal funding is key to managed retreat, but states can play an important role in determining effective strategies.**
 - ▶ Engaging state and/or federal agencies and funds is important to countering local concerns over lost property tax income.
 - ▶ If states can deploy resources to communities quickly, before home values depreciate, local governments may be more responsive.

- ◆ **Moving quickly facilitates effective and innovative responses.**
 - ▶ Though preempting disasters is generally more cost effective, governments are often more open to moving money—and moving it quickly—in the immediate aftermath of a disaster.
 - ▶ When capital is deployed quickly after a disaster, shifting political and community sentiments can open up opportunities for innovative responses, as well as for advancing solutions that have been slow to move.

About the Author

Saneta deVuono-powell is a co-founder and partner at Ground Works Consulting, where her focus is supporting equitable community development and climate justice. Saneta has over a decade of experience working on issues of racial justice, housing, and health and conducting community-based participatory research. She serves on the Oakland Rent Board, sits on the boards of the Texas Observer and The Safe Return Project, and is a contributing editor at Stranger's Guide. Saneta received her bachelor's degree from Sarah Lawrence College and both her law degree and her master's degree in city planning from UC Berkeley.

Acknowledgements

Saneta deVuono-powell would like to thank the generous and thoughtful folks at the Center for Community Investment, particularly Robin Hacke, Omar Carrillo Tinajero, and Rebecca Steinitz; Rupal Sangvhi, Naomi Cytron, Abby VanMuijen, and Miriam Zuk for their thought partnership and Honora Montero for her research and input on this wicked problem; Thomas Yee, Nora Bloch, Lizzy Mattuizzi, Kerry O'Neill, Anthony Corso, Phill Giffie, and Solange Gould for their interviews; and, finally, Allison Allbee and Joules for creating space. The Center for Community Investment would like to thank Chavon Blount of Irie Designs by Tere for designing this publication; Janelle Julien for managing its production and Zev Alexander for production support; the photographers and artists credited in these pages for their powerful images; Amy Cotter, Maureen Clarke, and Will Jason of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy for their thoughtful reviews; and The Kresge Foundation and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, whose generosity made this piece possible.

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR COMMUNITY INVESTMENT

The Center for Community Investment at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy works to ensure that all communities, especially those that have suffered from structural racism and policies that have left them economically and socially isolated, can unlock the capital they need to thrive.

centerforcommunityinvestment.org |  @C4CInvest

ABOUT THE LINCOLN INSTITUTE OF LAND POLICY

The Lincoln Institute of Land Policy seeks to improve quality of life through the effective use, taxation, and stewardship of land. A nonprofit private operating foundation, the Lincoln Institute researches and recommends creative approaches to land as a solution to economic, social and environmental challenges.

lincolnst.edu |  @landpolicy

To learn more about how other communities are investing in climate resilience, read the full report at:

<https://centerforcommunityinvestment.org/resource/seeding-climate-resilience-through-equitable-investment>

© 2021 Center for Community Investment

CCI is committed to sharing our learning and making our resources available to everyone. With that in mind, we give you permission to use, copy, and distribute any information contained within these materials for any nonprofit educational purpose without fee, provided that the copyright notice and attribution appear in all copies.

Center for Community Investment
June 2021

