Fighting for Retreat after Sandy: The Ocean Breeze Buyout Tent on Staten Island

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On October 29, 2012, Staten Island, a borough of New York City, was on the front line when Hurricane Sandy ravaged the coast. Today, residents of the East Shore, directly exposed to the ocean, show how inhabitants can mobilize to transform vulnerable parts of coastal cities into a natural protection for the rest.

It's a warm and sunny morning in early October 2013, almost a year after Hurricane Sandy struck the east coast of the United States. As I walk down Seaview Avenue, navigating sidewalks overgrown with weeds and tall grass, I smell the ocean before I can see it. I turn the corner and see three people arranging hand-painted signs around a large white tent. The signs identify them as the Ocean Breeze Buyout Committee, one of several resident-led groups on Staten Island that are making the case against rebuilding their shorefront neighborhoods. Instead, they want the government to buy out their houses, restore wetlands, and create open public spaces that would offer protection from future storms. They face opposition, not from fellow residents who want to stay, but from a New York City administration that wants to redevelop rather than retreat from the coast. Every weekend, the Ocean Breeze Buyout Committee sets up an information tent and encourages passersby to sign letters indicating their interest in a buyout. The tent provides a place for residents to gather, to support each other, and to speak with journalists and local politicians. Today, a crowd gathers quickly. "I don't want to live through it again," one man says to me, adding, "even if the buyout is a financial wash for me, I would prefer the land going back to nature, so it doesn't happen to another family twenty, thirty years down the road."[1]

Twenty-three people on Staten Island died during Hurricane Sandy. Two of them lived in Ocean Breeze (Frazier 2013). Of New York City's boroughs, Staten Island had the greatest proportion of residents affected by the storm (City of New York 2013, p. 10), and the East Shore saw the highest recorded water levels (Blake *et al.* 2013, p. 9). Like other neighborhoods along the shore, Ocean Breeze is a mix of newer attached houses and older wooden bungalows reminiscent of its past as a seasonal beach community. Residents are predominantly working- and middle-class homeowners. Many have lived in the neighborhood for years, and have extended family nearby. The Atlantic Ocean flanks their houses on one side and tall *phragmites* grasses – the marker of Staten Island's remaining wetlands – are on the other. Separating Ocean Breeze from the ocean is Father Capodanno Boulevard, a road built up above sea level. On the night of Hurricane Sandy, as the tide rose, the storm surge flowed rapidly over the boulevard and onto the low-lying streets behind it. "The bowl," as residents call their neighborhood, filled up quickly, leaving hardly any time to escape.

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[1] Interviews for this project were conducted as part of the Superstorm Research Lab, a mutual aid research collective. For more information, see www.superstormresearchlab.org.

Figure 1. Map showing where flooding occurred during Hurricane Sandy

Shades of green mark wetlands and parks. A black line surrounds the East and South Shores,
one of the planning areas for the state-sponsored NY Rising Community Reconstruction program.[2]

Mobilizing to leave: the buyout option

A couple of miles farther down the shore from Ocean Breeze is the neighborhood of Oakwood Beach, where homeowners were the first to lobby the government for buyouts after Hurricane Sandy hit. Oakwood Beach residents were already organized, having formed a Flood Victims' Committee to lobby for better coastal protection after a devastating nor'easter in 1992. In 1993, the Army Corps of Engineers promised to conduct a study. It was never completed. In 2008, a grassfire destroyed the remaining berm, leaving the area even more vulnerable to flooding (Oakwood Beach Buyout Committee 2013). In the weeks immediately following Sandy, residents organized a meeting to discuss rebuilding the neighborhood. They asked the 200 attendees whether or not they would support a buyout plan. The response was nearly unanimous: yes.

The newly formed Oakwood Beach Buyout Committee quickly began researching precedents for buyouts in other flood-prone areas. They put together a plan and pushed it to local, city, and state elected officials. In January 2013 their efforts were rewarded when New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo visited Staten Island and announced his intention to "provide the funds to buy out those homeowners who don't want to rebuild and want to move on to higher ground" (Governor's Press Office 2013). Oakwood Beach would be the pilot site, Cuomo declared, because "the community has come together in a unified way" (*Staten Island Advance* 2013). The governor's speech validated many residents' feelings of vulnerability and strengthened the desire to organize local support for such a plan beyond Oakwood Beach. By the end of March, more than 2,500

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2   Retrieved from the website of the New York Storm Recovery Resources Center,
    http://stormrecovery.ny.gov/sites/default/files/crp/community/documents/committee_meeting_2_-_presentation.pdf.

New York State residents had formally registered their interest in a buyout (NYS CDBG-DR 2013, p. 20).

Buyouts are a form of managed retreat, the process of relocating buildings, infrastructure, and populations away from areas vulnerable to effects of climate change like sea-level rise, coastal erosion, and extreme weather events. Under the New York State buyout plan, land purchased by the government can never be redeveloped. Instead, it will be maintained as a public space and protective buffer from future flooding and storm surge. Although planners proposed a similar strategy for New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, the suggestion that certain parts of the city not be rebuilt proved enormously controversial (Campanella 2011). With hundreds of thousands of residents displaced by Katrina, much debate after the storm centered on the right to return rather than to retreat. A *laissez-faire* approach to reconstruction, however, left many New Orleans neighborhoods suffering from the so-called Jack-o'-Lantern effect – a patchwork of inhabited houses, abandoned buildings, and vacant lots (Maret and Amdal). To avoid such an outcome after Sandy, the voluntary New York State buyout plan not only offers homeowners the pre-storm value of their houses, but also an additional financial incentive for everyone in designated clusters of houses who agrees to move.

The Build it Back option

After Governor Cuomo's announcement of the plan, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg was reported to be "less enthusiastic than the state about letting people get bought out" (Schuerman 2013). Senator Charles Schumer concurred, saying, "I would much rather see us rebuild (…) than abandon large parts of New York" (Chaban 2013). By June 2013, the city had issued an alternative plan for homeowners outside of Oakwood Beach, where state buyouts were already under way. As part of the city's Build it Back program, homeowners could apply for assistance to rebuild in place, or for an "acquisition for redevelopment" if they wanted to relocate. In contrast to the state plan, in which buyouts form part of a broader managed retreat strategy, the city plan enables acquired land to be resold to those able and willing to take on the costs of more flood-resilient rebuilding.

Because New York City has jurisdiction over Staten Island, the Build it Back program took precedence there over the state plan. Hundreds of people who had already completed the necessary paperwork to pursue a state buyout had to start the application process for aid all over again. Substantial concern arose over the fact that city acquisitions would pay post-storm value for houses, rather than the pre-storm value of a state buyout, although the city assured homeowners that they would make up the difference through some form of relocation assistance (NYC CDBG-DR 2013, p. 63). As eligibility requirements for each program remain in flux, however, the timeline for aid grows lengthy and uncertain. By the time I visit the Ocean Breeze buyout tent more than four months after the Build it Back program launched, residents have yet to receive any assistance.[3]

As residents wait for a definitive response from the government, they face a growing number of problems. Visitors to the buyout tent tell me of health issues from mold and chronic stress, about threats of foreclosure, and of the struggle to afford rent in temporary housing. Frank Moszczynski, an organizer of the Ocean Breeze Buyout Committee, points out that even if people do eventually receive aid to rebuild, there is still no guarantee that they will be able to remain on the shore. Homeowners in newly expanded flood zones may be required to elevate their houses up to 15 feet. At an estimated cost of approximately $10,000 per foot, many cannot afford to do so (Jorgensen 2013). Those who do not elevate face high flood insurance premiums that they may also struggle to pay. "If they don't help us with flood insurance," Frank posits, "and the city does rebuild, what happens? People can't afford to live here (…) and they swear to us, 'No, it's not going to be gentrification.' How could it not be?"

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[3]   At the time of this writing, construction has begun on just six homes and only three homeowners have received aid through the program (Durkin 2014).

A recent history of vulnerability

Frank has lived in Ocean Breeze for 43 years. Two of his neighbors whom I meet at the buyout tent have lived in the area for nearly 60 and 70 years, respectively. As we all sit and chat over the course of the afternoon, they reminisce about Ocean Breeze's past and explain why they no longer see a future here. "In the '40s and '50s," Frank says, "me and you would be sitting in a swamp. No streets. So think of walking up, like, a two-foot-wide rickety boardwalk to your home." His neighbors recall ice-skating and tubing down creeks that have since been filled in, running through the tall grass to buy milk from the corner store, and spending long days on the beach. "We had some good times here," an older woman tells me, "and that's why it's so hard. It's hard when somebody says, 'Take the buyout and run.' I'm not gonna find another place like this… but when so many people are affected… I have four members in my family, and we're all in the same boat."

The buyout tent is a space where stories about the past can become valuable knowledge for those discussing the neighborhood's future. While Frank traces the area's vulnerable low-lying topography back to the ice age, he notes that development decisions since the 1950s have exacerbated the risk: "[The land] was all filled to facilitate the building of the state hospital first – the [South Beach] Psychiatric Center. [Later] to build Staten Island Hospital, they filled it again, and they raised Seaview Avenue 10 feet. So now you worsen the problem twice. Two times you had the opportunity to buy people out. To give them the opportunity to get out before we made the bowl worse. Because whereas at least when we had streams here, the water had the opportunity to go out." Government officials and planners, he believes, should attend to this history as they decide whether or not Ocean Breeze should be rebuilt.

In the end, residents frame their main argument for buyouts in moral rather than financial terms. Retreat would serve to protect residents who remain further inland, as well as to protect Ocean Breeze's two hospitals – both worthy reasons, Frank believes, for he and his neighbors to surrender their homes. "People here are willing to give up their land (…) to make those places more resilient," he says to me. "As well as trying to get their lives back on track, they're willing to help other people that live up the beachfront from us. This is monumental," Frank declares, as he describes "people that have been here their whole lives [saying], 'Hey listen, we're willing to sacrifice.' That's tremendous. That's such a profound statement." Although Frank and his fellow residents might receive the same amount of money for a city acquisition as they would for a state buyout, redeveloping the land would negate their reason for giving up their homes. Retreat, in contrast, would make the process meaningful as a sacrifice, not just as a transaction.

A sign in Ocean Breeze counts the number of days that residents have been displaced. ©Liz Koslov.

Paying attention to local situations

Several weeks after I visited the buyout tent, the collective persistence of Ocean Breeze residents paid off. New York City and New York State signed a "memorandum of understanding" that returns control over all buyouts and acquisitions to the state. Some places will still be turned over for redevelopment, but all homeowners who participate will receive the pre-storm value of their houses. The agreement also enables the state to designate more areas eligible for managed retreat. In mid-November, Governor Cuomo once again visited Staten Island. Sitting alongside Frank Moszczynski, Cuomo announced that Ocean Breeze would be the next neighborhood after Oakwood Beach to be bought out. "If a community decides enough is enough," Cuomo declared, "we want to help." He continued, "I congratulate [Ocean Breeze] for coming together (Randall 2013).

In other neighborhoods across Staten Island, the fight for retreat continues and the future remains uncertain. No longer isolated or unique, extreme weather events like Hurricane Sandy will only continue to worsen, given the current trajectory of climate change. Paying attention to local situations by visiting neighborhood public spaces, like the Ocean Breeze buyout tent, makes it more likely we will find ways to retreat or rebuild that are both effective *and* collective.

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