

Bonita Springs might buy homes in neighborhoods flooded by Hurricane Irma

Thaddeus Mast, Naples Daily News | Published 8:16 p.m. ET July 24, 2019 | Updated 8:18 a.m. ET July 25, 2019



After Hurricane Irma, more than 28 million gallons of treated and untreated sewage spilled into 22 counties across Florida. View the archive video. Wochit

CONNECT | TWEET | LINKEDIN | COMMENT | EMAIL | MORE

Homeowners in flood-prone neighborhoods in Bonita Springs might be able to sell their properties through a voluntary buyout program run by the city.

The state has set aside \$75 million to buy property impacted by Hurricane Irma in an effort to reduce flood risk, according to a city news release.



Water floods Pawley Avenue in Bonita Springs on Tuesday, August 29, 2017. The water rose to a few feet in certain places along the street, forcing many families to leave their homes. (Photo: Nicole Rauchslein/ Naples Daily News)

The block grant is competitive — any local government in Florida can apply for funding. Bonita Springs officials are working to get a share, the city said.

The city said it would focus its buyout program on [Quinn Street](#) and [Downs Drive](#) neighborhoods.

The Imperial River spilled over its banks and into streets and homes in the surrounding area twice in a four-week span in 2017.

CONSIDER SUBSCRIBING TODAY: [Help support local journalism](#)

Share your feedback to help improve our site experience!

MORE STORIES

Marco fire training chief arrested on charge of domestic violence
Aug. 3, 2019, 7:09 p.m.

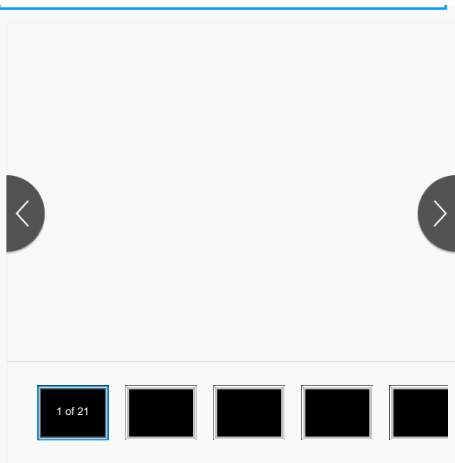
More details emerge in City of Naples cyber attack
Aug. 2, 2019, 4:33 p.m.

Planning commission rebuffs North Naples housing project
Aug. 2, 2019, 1:49 p.m.

Two Florida panthers found dead after vehicle collisions in Collier, Lee
Aug. 2, 2019, 1:08 p.m.

12 Collier schools will have new principals on the first day of school
Aug. 2, 2019, 11:58 a.m.

FGCU outreach director fired for credit card misuse
Aug. 2, 2019, 5:27 p.m.



Heavy rain in late August of that year pushed the river beyond its capacity, flooding many homes. That September, Hurricane Irma forced waist-high water into the same neighborhoods. Flooding receded about 10 days after the storm.

"While there are no guarantees, we're 100% committed with making this (buyout program) happen," Bonita Springs Mayor Peter Simmons said. "No person or family should have to go through what a lot of people had to in the Quinn Street neighborhood."

The property buyouts would be voluntary, Simmons said. If homeowners want to stay in their homes, the city government program would not force them out, he said.

A city press release stated the houses would be purchased for a "fair market value."

Chris Benovic, a resident of Imperial Oaks Circle, just north of the Quinn Street neighborhood, said the price would have to be right.

"It's all about how much (the city) would pay," he said.

Photos: [Bonita Springs communities continue cleanup 3 weeks after Irma](#)



Manuel Angel, 11, from right, Ezequiel Manuel, 11, and Manuel Matea, 19, wade into flood waters to check on their house on Saunders Avenue in Bonita Springs on Thursday, Sept. 14, 2017, four days after Hurricane Irma. (Photo: Nicole Rauchenberger/Naples Daily News)

Benovic said some people would choose to keep their homes, despite the flood risk or the buyout money.

"I know the man who's lived in that house for 30 years," Benovic said as he pointed to a home on Dean Street. "He's not going to leave."

The neighborhoods targeted by the city's proposed buyout program have some of the lowest property values in the city, according to the Lee County Property Appraiser's Office.

"Where would these people go?" Benovic said. "Most of the houses in the city are more expensive."

The city plans to canvass the area and provide information about the possible buyouts to every homeowner in the eligible neighborhoods, according to the news release. Two town meetings are also scheduled.

"This will be a process — a learning experience for everyone, but we don't want them

to go in blind," Simmons said. "We will educate them and ourselves and walk through this together."

More: [Bonita Springs seeks to settle mining company's two-year lawsuit](#)

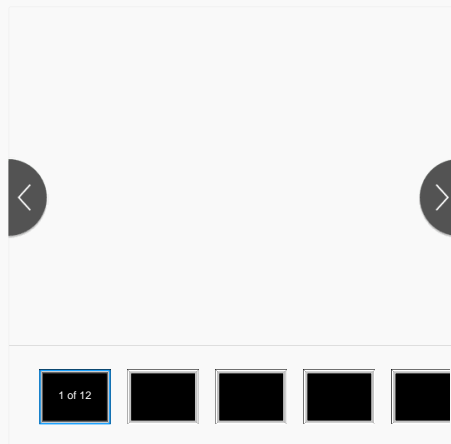
And: [Bonita Beach Road hotel proposed, under city review](#)

Benovic said the city might find it difficult to ensure everyone has information on the program. Some residents who are at risk of deportation due to their immigration statuses might avoid opening their doors to strangers, he said.

"Half of (them) won't answer," he said. "They'll think it's ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement)."

Simmons said buyouts are one of the best answers to the area's flooding problem because the neighborhoods are on a flood plain, and Imperial River waters consistently threaten to fill the streets.

"I don't know what the solution is, but I guarantee we're going to work hard to find a solution," he said.



The city has yet to announce what it would do with properties acquired through the program.

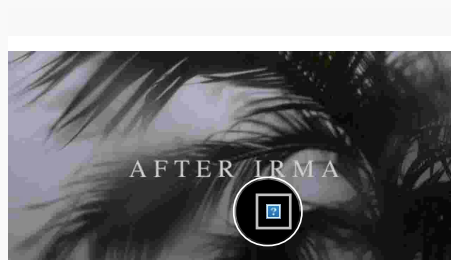
The city's application to the state for funding, due August 15, lists a specific area where people can opt in to a buyout plan. The eligible area is bordered by Lime Street and Interstate 75 to the west and east and by the Imperial River and Bonita Beach Road to the north and south.

This includes Quinn Street, the neighborhood west of Imperial Road and a collection of mobile homes near the Flamingo Island Flea Market.

Despite also being flooded in the aftermath of Hurricane Irma, Imperial Bonita Estates, Citrus Park and the Morton Grove Drive neighborhoods fall outside the buyout area, announced by the city Wednesday.

Benovic said he is worried the buyout program could change the atmosphere of the eligible neighborhoods.

"There is a lot of culture in this neighborhood, and it would go away," Benovic said.



Southwest Florida communities reflect on their needs after Hurricane Irma. Katie Klann/Naples Daily News

Buyout program neighborhood meetings

When: 6:30 to 8 p.m. Thursday, Aug. 1, and Tuesday, Aug. 6

Where: City Hall, 9101 Bonita Beach Road, Bonita Springs

Florida Voluntary Home Buyout Program public hearing

When: 5:30 p.m. Wednesday, Aug. 7

Where: City Hall, 9101 Bonita Beach Road, Bonita Springs

