**Step 3: Intake Meeting and Documentation Collection**

After the GIN is sent, property owners will be requested to meet one-on-one with an Eligibility Specialist by phone, virtually, or in person. The specialist will explain items listed in the GIN, the program, and request documents such as a right of entry, income documentation, ownership documents, principal residence, information on Federal, State or local disaster assistance, and other documents as outlined in the program’s standard operation procedures. If the owner does not respond to requests, the County can complete a placeholder application and initiate the process using Eminent Domain. If the owner does not respond to requests for an intake appointment or information needed for the application, a placeholder application will be completed on their behalf and the process will continue following the same steps. The County will use Eminent Domain authority to acquire the property.

**Step 1: Identify Eligible Properties**

The Harris County Flood Control District (HCFCD) identifies parcels of interest for the program, along with the property owners. The County first determines whether a property qualifies for either mandatory acquisition or mandatory buyout. Mandatory acquisition properties are those that have transferred ownership since the 2017 flood or contain structures that have been extensively repaired, improved, or newly constructed since the 2017 flood. Mandatory buyout properties are those that have not undergone extensive repairs or improvements since the flood. A property is considered eligible for a buyout or acquisition if it is located in a "hopelessly deep" floodplain, where flood reduction projects are not cost-effective. These properties are typically in areas that have experienced multiple flood-related damages, with one event being the 2017 Hurricane Harvey flood.

**Step 2: Outreach to Acquisition/Buyout Interest Areas**

Public meetings are held within the identified interest areas to inform property owners about the program. Notices for these meetings are posted on the Harris County Disaster Recovery website, and property owners are notified via email, neighborhood canvassing, and other outreach methods. Brochures and informational materials are provided at the meetings. After these meetings, property owners can schedule an intake meeting with acquisition staff. If the initial meeting is virtual, staff will contact property owners to arrange a follow-up meeting. During the intake process, participants are given a checklist outlining the documents required to begin the acquisition process.

General Information Notices (GIN) are sent to property owners after the meetings. These notices inform owners that their property may be acquired under eminent domain as part of a federally funded project. The GIN includes a HUD information brochure, "When a Public Agency Acquires Your Property," and a copy of the Texas Landowner’s Bill of Rights, ensuring property owners are informed of their rights and protections.

**Step 6: Counteroffers and Negotiations**

If the property owner does not accept the initial offer, they can submit a counteroffer in writing. The owner must provide detailed reasoning and supporting documentation for the counteroffer. The County will review the counteroffer and assess whether it necessitates updating the appraisal. If a significant change in the property’s condition or market value has occurred, or if 12 months or more have passed since the original appraisal, the County may update the appraisal. If a new appraisal indicates a change in value, the County will present a revised offer to the owner.

If an agreement is still not reached after negotiations, the case is referred to a Special Commissioner’s Hearing. The property owner can present additional information to a panel of court-appointed commissioners, who will determine just compensation. If the owner is dissatisfied with the commissioners' decision, they may request a trial by judge or jury, and further appeals can be made if necessary. If no agreement is reached, and the owner rejects the offer, Eminent Domain proceedings may begin.

**Step 5: Making the Offer**

Once the buyout offer amount is determined, the County issues a **written purchase offer** to the property owner. This offer includes:

* **Amount Offered**: The total compensation, based on pre-flood or post-flood fair market value, as determined by the appraiser.
* **Copy of the Appraisal**: A third-party, independent real estate appraiser’s valuation is provided, along with a clear explanation of how the amount was determined.
* **Written Summary**: A breakdown of the offer, including a description of the property, improvements included in the offer, any deductions (e.g., liens or mortgages), and the basis for the compensation.
* **Notice to Vacate**: A 90-day notice to vacate the property unless alternative arrangements (e.g., lease-back agreements) are made.
* **Notice of Eligibility**: A document confirming the property owner's eligibility for relocation assistance (if applicable).

**Step 4: Determine Buyout Offer Amount**

A licensed independent third-party appraiser determines the pre-flood or current fair market value of the property. The appraiser will schedule an inspection, inviting the property owner to attend. After the appraisal, County staff will conduct a review to ensure accuracy. An inspector will verify if the property has received any FEMA or other disaster-related assistance. If duplicative benefits are found (e.g., FEMA assistance that overlaps with the buyout), the County will deduct this amount from the final offer.

**Step 7: Post Acceptance County Actions**

After the property owner accepts the buyout offer, the County initiates several administrative steps to finalize the acquisition. First, the County will update the abstract of title or title insurance policy to reflect the transfer of ownership. The County will also work with the property owner to determine their eligibility for any available relocation benefits. The necessary documents for closing, such as affidavits, releases, and other closing forms, will be prepared. A closing statement will be drafted, and the closing will be scheduled within 120 days of the property owner’s acceptance of the offer. The County ensures that the property is vacated before closing, or a lease-back agreement is made if applicable.

On the day of closing, the County will disburse funds according to the closing disclosure statement, detailing amounts due to the seller, including any eligible closing costs and realtor commissions. After the closing, the County will file the required documentation to complete the legal acquisition of the property. Following the acquisition, the property will be cleared and repurposed as natural floodplain, retention areas, or green space to mitigate future flood risks. Properties acquired through the program can only be used for green space, recreational purposes, or floodplain/wetlands management practices in the future.

**Step 7b: Post Acceptance Owner Actions**

Once you accept the mandatory buyout offer, you will have a minimum of 90 days to vacate the property and finalize the buyout process. You will have up to 12 months from the date of the offer to close on a replacement home. If you choose to rent while searching for a replacement home, that will be at your own expense. The County will provide relocation assistance as needed, which may include up to $7,200 for rental assistance or down payment assistance to help cover the cost of finding new housing. In certain cases, other relocation-related expenses, such as moving costs, may also be covered. If you operated a business exclusively from the property in addition to being a legal residential occupant, your business may be eligible for business relocation assistance as well. If comparable replacement housing is not available, or if the standard relocation payment is insufficient due to financial limitations or occupancy requirements, Last Resort Housing assistance may be provided. This assistance can extend for up to 42 months and exceed the statutory limits for rental assistance or down payment assistance.

Any displaced residential owner-occupant or tenant-occupant who qualifies as a displaced person is entitled to payment for moving and related expenses. Moving costs are covered within a 50-mile radius of the buyout property, but any additional mileage must be paid by the displaced person. The County may also offer down payment assistance of up to $35,000 for Low- and Moderate-Income (LMI) participants, including those with incomes up to 120% of the Annual Median Income (AMI), who need gap financing to cover the lender-required down payment for purchasing a replacement home. The purchased home must be located outside the 100-year floodplain or floodway, within Harris County (but outside the city limits of Houston), and must meet HUD occupancy guidelines for descent, safety, and sanitation. The homeowner must maintain the new property as their primary residence for at least 2 years.

Homeowners and mobile home owners with incomes up to 120% of AMI, who choose to relocate outside the 100-year floodplain or floodway but remain within Harris County, may be eligible for a lump-sum payment of $19,875 at the closing of their replacement home. The homeowner must also maintain the new property as their primary residence for at least 1 year.