

# Kenosha County, Wisconsin



Former residential lot bought by Kenosha County. Photo by Rebecca Kihslinger.

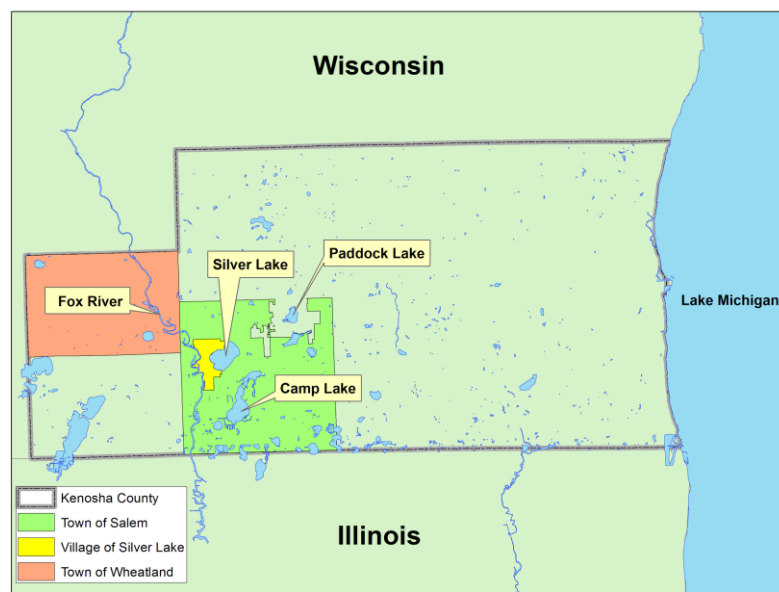
## Background

Kenosha County (pop. 166,426) is located in the southeastern corner of Wisconsin, in between the cities of Milwaukee and Chicago. Lake Michigan serves as the eastern border, and the Fox River, a tributary of the Illinois River, flows north-south through the western third of the county. The city of Kenosha (pop. 99,000) is the largest city and serves as the county seat. Retail, healthcare, and social assistance are the major industries in the county, though around 43% of all workers are employed outside of the county or state. The presence of Lake Michigan, along with the smaller Paddock, Silver, and Camp Lakes makes the county a popular recreation and vacation destination.

**Figure 1: Kenosha County Location**



**Figure 2: Relevant Features in Kenosha County**



## History of Flooding

Records of flooding in Kenosha County date back to 1894. River flooding is often due to snowmelt, heavy rainfall, or a combination of both. Major flooding has occurred in 1938, 1960, 1962, 1965, 1973, 1979, 1986, and nearly all years in the 1990s (“Flood Mitigation”, 201:4). More recently, flooding has occurred in most of the early to mid 2000s, as well as in 2009 and

2013. Presidential disaster declarations were declared during the floods of 1973, 1986, 1993, 1994, 1998, 2000, 2001, and 2004 (“Hazard Mitigation”, 2010:83).

However, the flooding in 1993 was the most severe. The flood occurred in April, when a combination of snowmelt and over seven inches of rain caused the Fox River to rise 15 inches above flood stage. Over 200 homes were damaged, costing around \$250,000 total. Residents of 100 of these damaged homes were evacuated. The communities Silver Lake, Wheatland and Wilmont, all located along the Fox River were affected the most during the 1993 floods (“Hazard Mitigation”, 2010:83)

Not nearly a year later, a combination snowmelt and heavy rains once again caused the Fox River to flood in February 1994. Winter-time flooding becomes especially precarious due to potential ice flows, floodwater freezing, and foundation freezing. The towns of Salem, Wheatland, and Silver Lake were affected most significantly, with damages accumulating at \$250,000. Thirty-two families were evacuated and a presidential disaster was declared once again (“Hazard Mitigation”, 2010:83).

**Table 1: Kenosha Demographics**

	<b>Kenosha</b>	<b>Wisconsin</b>
Population (2010)	166,426	5,771,337
Median age	33.6	38.5
Housing units	69,288	2,648,317
Owner occupied	66.9	67.7
Black (%)	6.6	6.6
White (%)	83.8	87.8
Hispanic or Latino (%)	11.8	6.5
High school degree (%)	89.7	90.8
Bachelor’s degree (%)	23.3	27.4
Median household income	\$54,653	\$52,738
Poverty rate	15.4	13.2

Source: US Census, 2010 and American Community Survey 2014

Many of the demographics of Kenosha County are similar to the state of Wisconsin as a whole. However, the median age in the county is younger than the state (34 vs. 39). In addition to having a slightly higher household income. In terms of race, the Hispanic or Latino population accounts for a greater share of the county population than in the state (12% vs 7%). In contrast, population share of White residents of the county is less than the state (84% vs 88%).

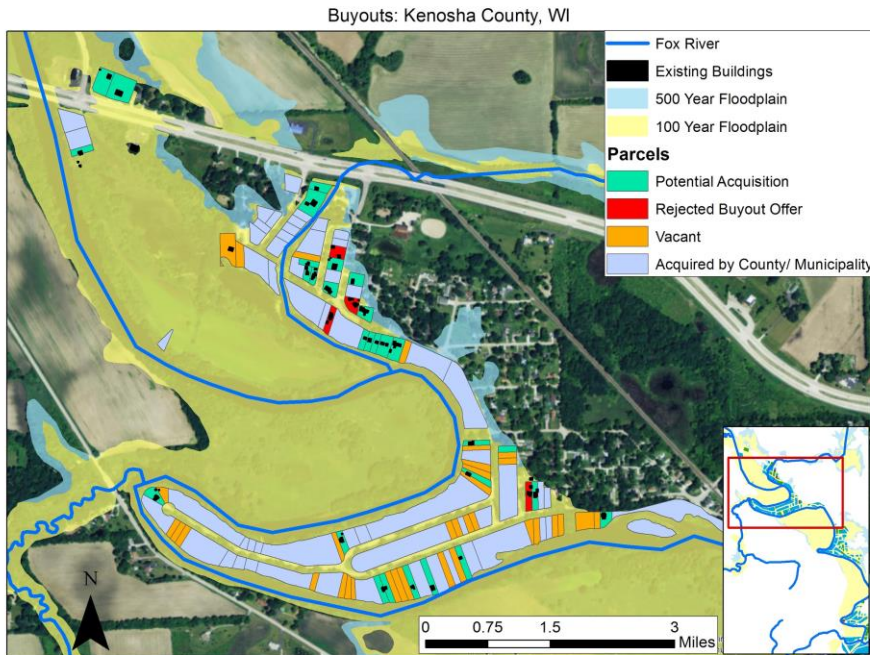
## The Buyout

According to John Meland of the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission (SEWRPC), high flood-risk properties were identified as potential acquisitions as early as 1969. After the 1993 flood, in which a presidential disaster declaration was made, Kenosha County was able to apply for federal assistance. In 1994, the Fox River Flood Mitigation Program was created, which initiated a voluntary buyout for flood prone properties along the Fox River. Initially, 178 properties were identified as high-risk flood locations and therefore potential acquisitions. These properties are located primarily on three well-defined peninsulas along the Fox River, near southern portion of the county (Figures 3,4,5). Using \$12 million in grants, and after a cost-benefit analysis was conducted for each property, 103 homes on 165 parcels in the towns of Wheatland, Salem, and Silver Lake were purchased under the Mitigation Program. While SEWRPC was the administrative party for the buyout, acquired properties are under ownership of the Kenosha County Housing Authority.

Funding for the \$12 million buyout came mostly from the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). The second largest source of funding came from the Community Development Block Grant Program- Disaster Relief (CDBG-DR) administered by the Wisconsin Department of Commerce. Other state sources of funding came from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and the Municipal Flood Control Program ("Moving People", 2008). Funding was split between federal and state, with 75% coming from federal grants and 25% from state sources. Homeowners that participated in the buyout were given the property's pre-disaster fair market value, which averaged around \$110,000 per home. In addition, homeowners were also provided relocation expenses. Most properties purchased were seasonal and summer homes, used as vacation properties due to their location along the Fox River ("Moving people", 2008)

The buyout has proved to be very popular. However, due to a current lack of funding, there is now a waiting list of around 20 homeowners who wish to participate in the buyout. According to John Meland, all funding for the buyout program is currently exhausted, and federal funding will become available only if Kenosha becomes victim to a federally declared disaster ("Summary Notes", p. 2). As of late April 2015, 72 residential properties and 97 vacant parcels still remain in the Fox River floodplain that has been targeted for a buyout. Parcels that were vacant prior to the buyout are privately owned. ("Summary Notes", 2015:2).

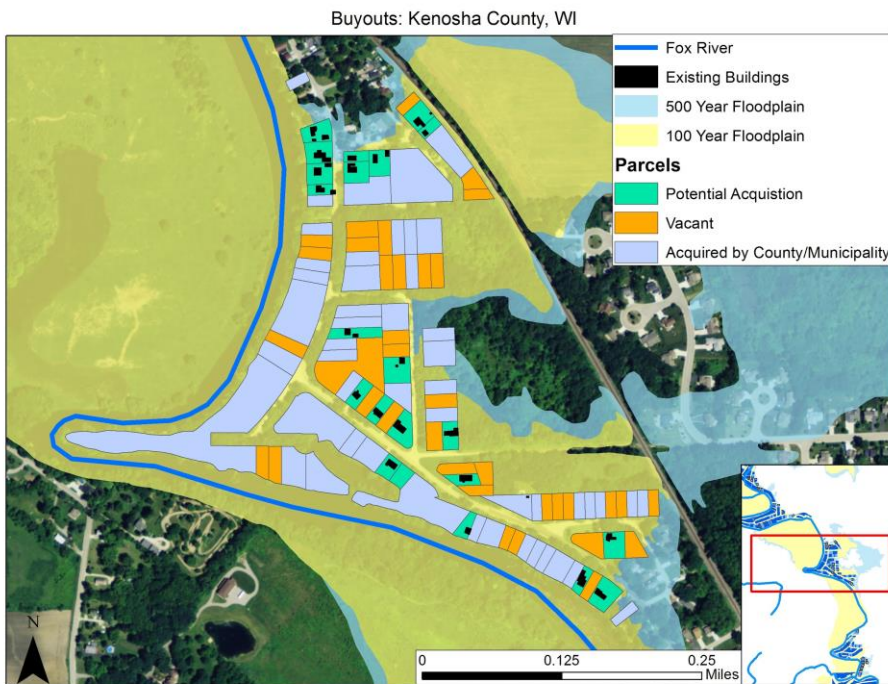
**Figure 3: Map of Buyout Area - Northern Peninsula, Fox River**



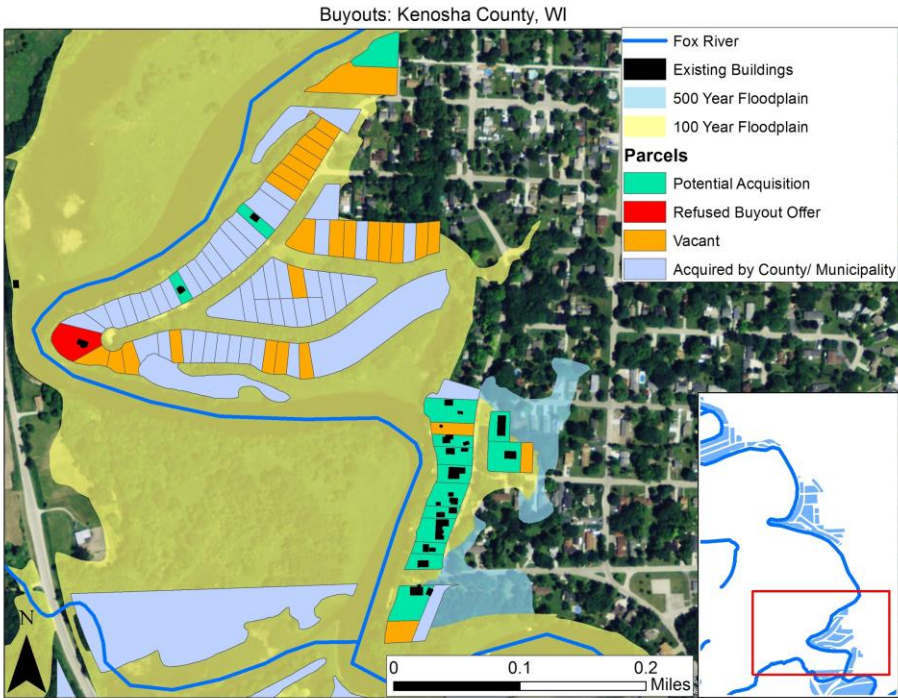
Figures 3, 4, and 5 show buyouts along the three defined peninsulas along the Fox River. There are large stretches of acquired parcels (165 total). However, 97 privately owned vacant parcels, 70 parcels that potentially could be acquired, and 5 parcels that refused participation in the buyout still remain along the River. However, if all parcels bordering the Fox River in the southern peninsula (figure 5) were purchased,

for example, Kenosha County would own a roughly one mile contiguous stretch of natural, open space.

**Figure 4: Map of Buyout Area- Middle Peninsula, Fox River**



**Figure 5: Map of Buyout Area- Southern Peninsula, Fox River**



### Current Status

Once a parcel of land is acquired, any structures on the land will be demolished. Afterwards, the land is seeded with grasses and is left as vacant property. Currently, some of the acquired land is mowed by previous homeowners, and other portions of the land is occasionally used for recreational off-roading. The employees for the county’s Emergency Management Department visit the buyout areas periodically to make sure there are no new structures being built on the acquired lands, otherwise there is no other department (such as a Parks and Recreation Department) that monitors the buyout parcels.

### Integration with Hazard Mitigation Plan

The Hazard Mitigation Plan of 2011-2015 mentions the 1994 Fox River Floodplain Mitigation Program, as well as describes acquisition and stormwater management projects as implementation activities to reduce flood damage (HMP 2010: 9).

### Integration with Land Use Plan

While Kenosha County has not adopted a land use plan, the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission has created a regional land use plan, which includes the county, in effect through the year 2035. In this plan, floodplain and shoreland zoning is required for all cities, villages and counties in the region, in effort to conserve and protect the floodplain (“Regional Land Use Plan” 2006: 48). In addition, the Multi-Jurisdictional Comprehensive Plan for Kenosha County, effective until 2035, mentions the Fox River buyout, along with various floodplain zoning ordinances that aim to “enforce and support requirements relation to restricting development in floodplains (“Multi-Jurisdictional” 2010:461, 474).

## Conclusion

Overall, the results of the buyout in Kenosha County have been mixed. The buyout has greatly reduced the costs of flood damage and emergency response, in addition to creating large stretches of open space along the Fox River. Unfortunately, many homes and vacant lots still exist within the flood hazard area. In fact, the county maintains a waiting list for homeowners who would like to participate in a buyout if funding becomes available. Continuing federal funding for the program remains an issue for the county. Unless another federal declared disaster occurs in the county, there will be no federal funding available for property acquisition. In addition, as a voluntary program, some homeowners within the floodplain refuse to sell their homes, precluding the creation of contiguous, natural open space along the river.

## References

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