

**MAKING THE MOST OF OTTAWA'S
FLOODPLAIN BUYOUTS**

A REPORT ON A COMMUNITY WORKSHOP HELD ON
AUGUST 29, 2017 IN OTTAWA, OHIO

Environmental Law Institute and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

November 2017

Introduction

Ottawa's 55 buyout properties offer the community an opportunity to turn frequently flooded properties into areas for outdoor recreation, habitat, stormwater management, or other community benefits. In summer 2017, Ottawa invited the Environmental Law Institute and the University of North Carolina's Institute for the Environment to work with them on a process of identifying opportunities for using the acquired lands and in developing a funding strategy. Working with local officials, neighbors, and community groups our goal was to identify and further develop opportunities for making the most of acquired properties in Ottawa. We aimed to engage potential project partners that can help ensure long-term success and to find potential funding sources to make it all happen.

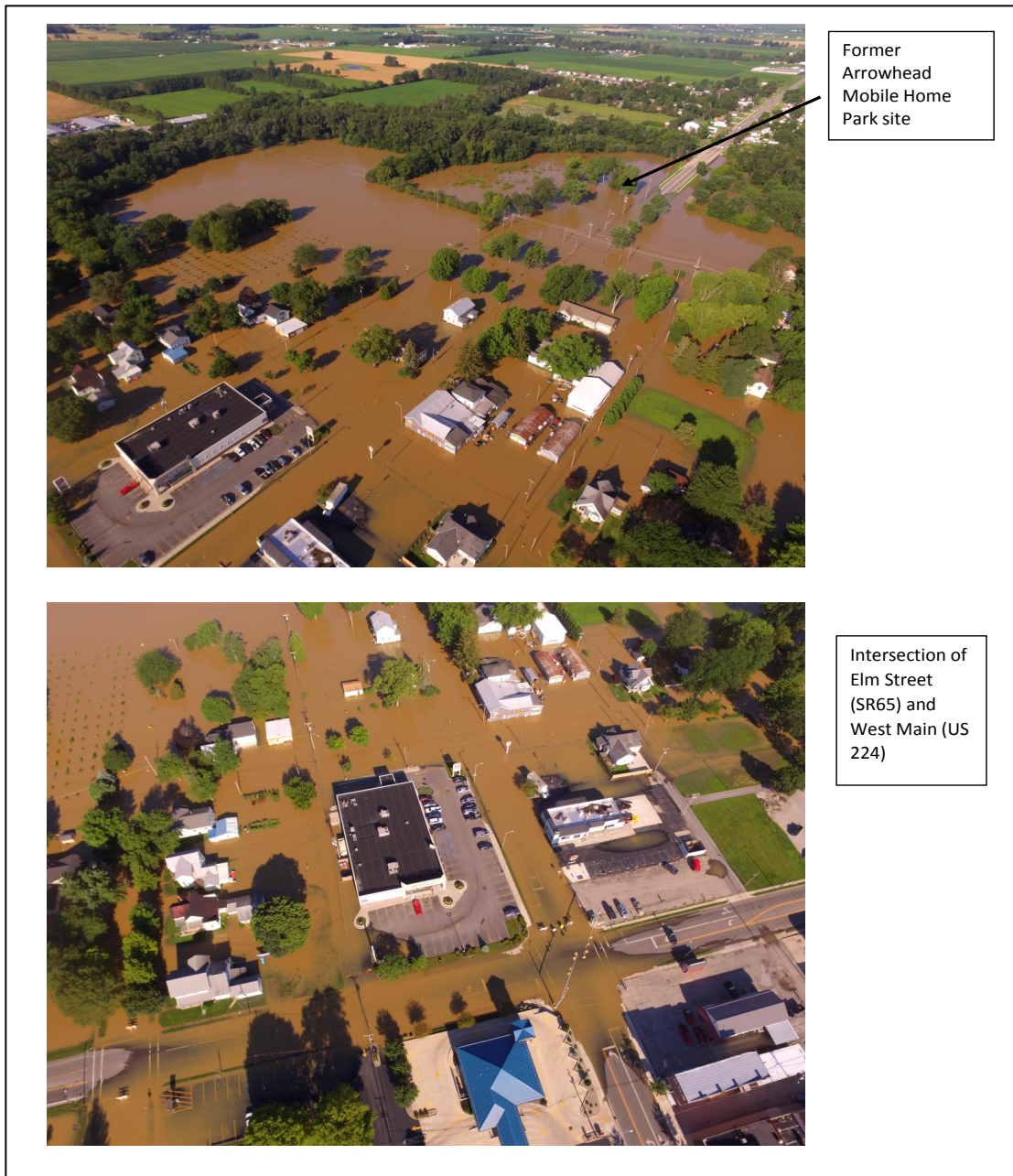
Specifically, our objectives were to:

- Identify and prioritize potential uses for buyout sites in Ottawa.
- Develop a strategy for implementing priority uses.

Residents of Ottawa, along with state and local officials, gathered on August 29, 2017 for a half-day workshop at the Putnam County Educational Service Center to discuss opportunities and begin a process to identify specific project ideas for the town's buyout lands. About twenty-five participants from the community attended the workshop; including local and state government representatives, local business leaders, representatives from the Putnam County Educational Service Center, and local property owners. Participants discussed what makes Ottawa a great place, developed a vision for the future, and generated ideas for using the buyout properties, specifically for some of the larger acquired parcels.

Flooding and Buyouts in Ottawa

Located along the Blanchard River, Ottawa has a long history of flooding (Figure 1). Flooding has worsened over the past decade, with major floods occurring in 2007, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2013 and 2017. In fact, five of the top eight floods have occurred since 2007. The August 2007 flood, which crested at 31.4 feet, was the second worst on record. The flood affected most of the Village, inundating the entire first floor of many homes in the community. A presidential disaster declaration was made as a result of the flood, triggering the release of federal funding under the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP). These funds were used to acquire a number of flood-damaged homes in the Village in 2008, including 17 mobile homes in Arrowhead Park. The project involved the acquisition and demolition of substantially damaged mobile homes and a total of 10.33 acres located in the floodway of the Blanchard River.



Former
Arrowhead
Mobile Home
Park site

Intersection of
Elm Street
(SR65) and
West Main (US
224)

Figure 1. July 2017 Floods in the Village of Ottawa

Since 2008, Ottawa has purchased a total of 55 flood-prone properties totaling approximately 25 acres of land with funding from all levels of government and private citizens. These acquisitions, known as buyouts, have resulted in reduced damage from subsequent flooding (see Figure 2).



Figure 2 - The result of flood acquisitions in Ottawa throughout the years. Note the number of houses near the water tower in the 2007 photo (top, from August 23, 2007) and the open space around the tower in the 2017 photo (bottom, from July 15, 2017).

The buyouts are distributed across the community, but fall in several clusters (See Figure 3). The first is the former Arrowhead Mobile Home Park, the second is the West End properties. In addition, several smaller lots are distributed across the community, including one property downtown – Paul’s lot – and a string of properties south of town – off of Oak Street (see map).

The community is currently pursuing additional buyouts to add to this list. Much of the buyout land in Ottawa has since remained vacant and underutilized.

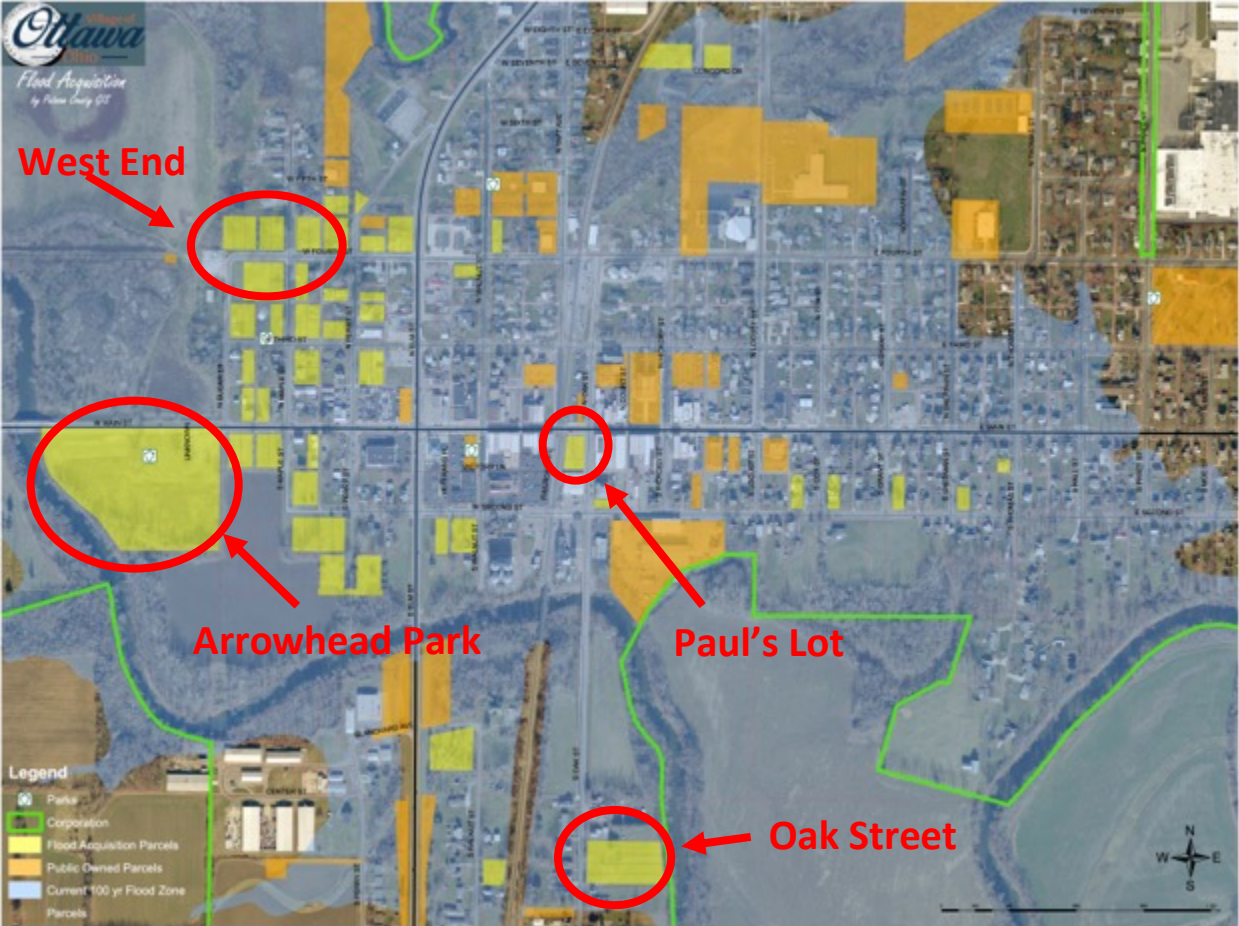


Figure 3 - Map of Ottawa's Buyouts

Management Opportunities

WHAT'S POSSIBLE

Buyout properties can be restored to provide outdoor recreation, habitat, stormwater management, or other community benefits. Communities across the country have developed parks, restored habitat, and provided recreational amenities on buyout land. However, there are restrictions and limitations for what can be developed on buyout sites.

Floodplain buyouts – Restrictions and Compatible Uses

Restrictions: Federal hazard mitigation regulations require that after properties are acquired using HMGP funds and existing structures are removed, the land must be dedicated in perpetuity to open space, recreation, or wetland management uses (44 CFR § 80.19). Development is prohibited if it impedes the area's ability to convey flood flows, reduces the area's capacity to store floodwaters, or increases downstream velocities or flood heights.

Uses and activities that are generally prohibited include:

- walled buildings
- commercial inventory storage (e.g., automobiles)
- cemeteries
- levees, dikes, or floodwalls
- paved roads, highways, bridges, or paved parking
- landfills and storage of hazardous or toxic materials
- above or below ground pumping or switching stations
- above or below ground storage tanks
- off-site fill
- uses that obstruct the natural and beneficial functions of the floodplain

Compatible uses: The "compatible uses" which are allowed on the property present a wide range of opportunities for communities. In general, permissible "open space" uses include:

- nature preserves
- outdoor recreation
- cultivation or grazing
- buffer zones
- camping (where there is adequate warning time to allow evacuation)

To ensure the natural values of floodplains and/or wetlands are maintained, only unpaved parking lots can be used, and any structures other than a public restroom must be open on all sides and related to the open space use.

Examples from other communities

Buyouts have been used for parks, gardens, camping, outdoor recreation, wildlife habitat, wetland management and other open space uses. For example, Charlotte, NC has created a greenway and community gardens out of properties it acquired as part of a buyout. East Grand Forks, Minnesota created a campground, while the small town of Montevideo, MN integrated the buyout lands into a prairie restoration project. The most common use of buyout lands, however, is vacant lots.



Figure 4: Former church in Austin, MN now used as community center.

Post-buyout management options will vary by site, depending on the location, adjacent land uses, funding available, capacity of local governments and/or organizations to restore and maintain the property, and by the “completeness” of the buyout (i.e., are the buyouts clustered to create a large area of open space or dispersed widely across the community). Here we present a few examples of how other communities in Ohio and across the country have made use of their buyout properties.

Some categories of uses include garden, recreation and community gathering spaces, and habitat restoration.

Gardens

Gardens present excellent opportunities to use a small piece of land—an isolated parcel—to provide multiple benefits to community residents and the ecosystem (Figure 5). Community gardens provide a location for neighbors to gather to grow vegetables, fruit, flowers, or other plants. Another possible option is to lease buyout parcels to an individual neighbor or business for use as a residential garden, which can help beautify empty lots, provide environmental services to residents, and allow residents to take on some of the management responsibilities for buyout sites. Green infrastructure projects (e.g., rain gardens, bioswales, etc.) incorporate

the natural environment into water management by protecting, restoring, or reproducing features of the natural water cycle (Figure 5). These projects can provide small scale stormwater management benefits to neighborhoods and make good use of buyout sites.



Gardens and Green Infrastructure

Left: Community garden in Montevideo, MN

Below: Rain Garden in Cuyahoga Falls, OH
(Photos used with permission from Ohio EMA)



Figure 5 – Gardens and Green Infrastructure

Recreation and Community Gathering

Recreation areas and community gathering spaces can provide flood mitigation benefits while also providing a community amenities, recreation opportunities, and many other social and cultural benefits (Figures 4, 6, 7, and 8). Examples of recreation areas and other amenities that may be developed on acquired properties include: linear parks/ greenways; parks and playgrounds; athletic fields; other recreation (e.g., Frisbee golf); gathering spaces; and education centers or outdoor classrooms. Other possibilities include outdoor recreation access, such as fishing wharfs and boat ramps.



Recreation

Left: Disc Golf in Rocky Mount, North Carolina

Below: Archery Range in Montevideo, MN and Horseshoes in Austin, MN



Figure 6 – Recreation Opportunities



River Access

Left: Accessible fishing wharf in Jefferson Co., WI; Right: Boat ramp in Pierce Co., WI

Figure 7 – River Access



Community Gathering Spaces

Left: Soccer Field

Below: Community Park in Shelby, OH
(Photos used with permission from Ohio
EMA) and Playground in Austin, MN



Figure 8 – Community Gathering Spaces

Habitat Restoration

Where a community has managed to acquire a sufficient number of contiguous properties there may be an opportunity for habitat restoration (Figure 9). Restoring or managing these sites for native species can provide new habitat for native species, connect dispersed habitat in the region, and provide ecological benefits for the community and region. Many factors affect the type of habitat that can be restored in a given area, including surrounding landscape and land use, historic habitat types, community needs, and funding available. But, given the floodplain location of many buyout sites, valuable habitat types that might be restored include: floodplain/riparian habitat; wetlands habitat; native prairie/grassland habitat; or upland forest habitat.



Habitat Restoration

Left: Native prairie restoration in Montevideo, MN

Below: Stream restoration in North Royalton, OH (Photos used with permission from Ohio EMA)



Figure 7- Habitat Restoration

Making the Most of Ottawa's Buyouts

The Village of Ottawa and a Vision for the Future

We started the workshop by asking the participants "What would you like to see in Ottawa?" Our goal was to help identify the types of projects that would match community values and desires and that will ultimately be embraced by the community.

Ottawa residents see their village as a community of close-knit relationships and small-town values with good schools and community gathering spaces. They see their community as a center for commerce and agriculture, and as a county hub with good regional access (several highways converge in Ottawa). The Village has a love-hate relationship with the river and view it as an underutilized asset.

Residents would like to see more parks, river recreation/access, and trails and walking paths. They would like to see more opportunities for education, kids and families (including parks, interactive features, sports fields), and seniors (e.g., gathering space/activities). Community members would also like to see a place for the arts and community events. Finally, residents see the need for more natural areas and wildlife (e.g., wildlife gardens) and opportunities for environmental studies (e.g., water quality studies). Buyouts are generally in floodplain areas, so wetland and floodplain habitat restoration may be appropriate. This can provide habitat and flood storage; improving community resilience.

Ideas for Acquired Properties in Ottawa

After discussing what they would like to see more of in the Village of Ottawa, workshop participants brainstormed ideas for uses for the floodplain buyouts.

General Ideas

The general ideas fell in a few categories, including recreation, kids, community gathering, wildlife/habitat, education, and other. Specifically, participants suggested the Village use the buyout properties for the following:

- **Recreation** – walking and biking trails, exercise areas, a zipline with tree houses, archery range, putting green/par 3 course, ball fields, kayaking (racing), and camping
- **Kids** – boy scout summer camps, playgrounds, outdoor activities for kids, accessible playgrounds for kids across the county, splash park, ball fields, and imagination station playground
- **Community gathering** – a stage, farmer's market, dog park, and music park
- **Wildlife/Habitat** – wildlife gardens, habitat, community garden where community groups involved, wildlife refuges, wetlands, and a butterfly garden

- **Education** - hands-on education areas (e.g., water sampling), and agricultural research plots
- **Other** - wind turbines, tree farm, and a track for 4-wheelers

Participants also suggested that the properties may present opportunities to promote the Pioneer/Native American history of the Village and County and the positive aspects of the river for the Village.

Place-based Ideas

Participants also discussed specific ideas for some of the larger (and more prominent) of the buyout sites/clusters, including Arrowhead Park, Oak Street Properties, a property known locally as Paul’s lot, and the West End properties.

*Arrowhead Park (has existing utilities, parking, and river access) ***

The proposed Arrowhead Park project involves 10.33 acres located in the floodway of the Blanchard River and has good river access (See Figures 3 and 10). The site also had existing utilities and parking.

Participants in the workshop had a number of ideas for this site. In fact, given its size, river access, and existing amenities, many participants focused on this site as a good project for the Village to tackle first. Access to the river – for canoeing, kayaking, fishing – was a major focus of the discussion. Other desired amenities for the site included a walking path, playground, shelter/picnic area, bow/archery range, and a sledding hill (See Figure 19). Participants suggested including parking and access to a restroom.



Figure 8 - Before and After images of Arrowhead Park. Better access to the river, a playground, and a picnic area are desired uses. Parking and a restroom are also important. After images produced by Eric Roberts and Orion Thomas from The Ohio State University.

Oak St. Properties

Ottawa has purchased 4 long lots along Oak St. south of downtown (See Figure 3). These properties may be well suited for creating river access for canoe/kayak put-in (See Figure 11). This could be an ideal location for families to put-in boats to float down river to pull out at Arrowhead Park (See Figure 9). A sizeable excavation may be required to develop a kayak launch at this site.



Oak Street Properties – Participants suggested that river access (kayak/canoe put in) here would be desirable.

Above: Before and After aerials showing possible layout for river access

Right: Before and After views of river access at Oak Street.



Figure 9 – Before and After images of Oak Street Properties – Participants suggested that river access here would be desirable. After images produced by Eric Roberts and Orion Thomas from The Ohio State University.

*Paul’s lot (pavilion/sitting area) ***

Paul’s lot in downtown Ottawa was another focal location for implementation of a project among workshop participants. Many participants see this lot as a prime place for a project that would encourage community gathering. Suggestions for use included a pergola/sitting area, a stage (where civic groups could hold events on weekends), and other interactive features. Participants also suggested that acquiring the Ottawa Feed and Grain property behind Paul’s lot would expand the available area for a project.

West End

A final focal area for potential implementation of a project/projects was the west end. The Village has acquired a number of properties in the west end. Many of these are non-contiguous, and many people still live in the neighborhood. However, the area still presents excellent opportunities to create parks or recreational areas. Specifically, workshop participants mentioned that the Village could create soccer fields (in short supply in the Village) and associated parking there. Participants also suggested that over the long term, the Village should focus further acquisitions in this neighborhood in order to reduce vulnerability to future floods and to provide a greater range of options for reuse of the acquired lands.

Obstacles and How to Overcome Them

Many communities face challenges in managing acquired properties. Workshop participants identified some common challenges that may arise in developing and implementing projects on buyout sites, as well as some basic information and resources that can assist communities in meeting them.

Funding – One of the primary obstacles to developing buyout properties for community gathering, recreation, or educational spaces or for restoring habitat or natural floodplain functions to these sites is a general lack of funding. Funding is also necessary for long-term maintenance of properties. The participants came up with some possible sources of funding for projects that are worth pursuing.

- **Capital Budget** – One promising source of funding is the Capital Budget. It was suggested at the workshop that Ottawa may have a good shot at state funding through this vehicle this year. To obtain this funding the Village would have to submit a white paper to the state by March 2018. Some priorities for funding through this vehicle could include a splash park, athletic fields, parks, and historical projects. Money can be requested in stages as projects develop.
- **Local Service Organizations** – Another potential funding source is through the funding arms of the local service organizations, such as the Jaycees, Kiwanis, and Ottawa-Glandorf Rotary Club. These clubs regularly donate money for projects in the Village. The Open Space Committee should consider pursuing these funds.
- **Grants** – State grants are another possible source of funding. The Village would have to dedicate time (and staff?) to develop proposals for these grant opportunities. Possible grants programs include the following.
 - Putnam County Soil and Water Grants – The Putnam County Soil and Water Conservation District may have grant opportunities.
<http://www.putnamcountyohio.gov/CountyAgencies/SoilWater.aspx>
 - Clean Ohio Fund - The Clean Ohio Fund “restores, protects, and connects Ohio's important natural and urban places by preserving green space and farmland, improving outdoor recreation, and cleaning up brownfields to encourage redevelopment and revitalize communities.” Some of the identified project ideas may fall under these priorities. See <https://development.ohio.gov/cleanohio/>.
 - ODNR Outdoor Recreation Facility Grants – These grants – administered by the ODNR Office of Real Estate – are offered to local governments and other groups for increasing recreational opportunities. See the website - <http://realestate.ohiodnr.gov/outdoor-recreation-facility-grants>

- **Adopt-a-Trail/Bench/Tree/Other** – One way to raise funds from community members for some types of projects may be through Adopt-a-Trail/Bench/Tree/Other campaigns. The City of Fairfield Ohio employed a similar approach in developing an Honor Grove project in their community; allowing community members to sponsor the planting of a tree in a loved one's name. The sponsorship provides funds for the management of the site.
- **Chamber of Commerce Leadership** – Another possible funding source is through local businesses, which may be willing to provide money and/or in-kind support. Chamber of Commerce leadership could help motivate local businesses to participate.
- **Leases** – Leasing out some of the smaller buyout parcels within the Village may help local government staff coordinate management of the sites with community members. Community members could then use the sites for gardens or other allowable uses. This could potentially reduce some of the financial burden on the Village for management, while still allowing projects to move forward.

Management/staffing – Moving forward with developing ideas and plans for desired uses, identifying and securing funding sources, and for long-term management and maintenance of the sites is going to take leadership and staffing. Who is going to draw up plans, write grants, and maintain the acquired properties? The workshop participants came up with a number of possible solutions.

- **Open Space Subcommittee** - The Village has moved forward with this discussion through its Community Development Open Space Subcommittee, which held its first meeting on the subject on September 19, 2017.
- **Community Involvement** – Community members can provide funding, leadership, and in-kind support (e.g., labor, materials, etc.). Getting the community involved takes outreach (see more below). Some creative ways to get community members involved may include an Adopt-A-Tree/Bench/etc. program, work days at the sites, community gatherings at the sites, church events, boy/girl scout projects, etc.
- **Interns and Students** – Interns and students may be a valuable source of labor for project development, especially for developing plans. Committee members may have connections with local universities or other organizations that may be sources of volunteers.
- **Community Development Committee on the Council** – The Community Development Committee on the Council may be a good source of staffing and leadership for these projects.

Misinformation, public opposition, and conflict with other groups – Any public project could be derailed by misinformation or a lack of outreach leading to opposition among community members or conflicts with other user groups. Community buy-in is especially important in situations where there are still people living throughout the neighborhood or adjacent to the project area, since the new use of the site will be part of the daily life of those local residents. Without support from neighbors and community members, community amenities might go unused and restoration areas might eventually fail due to improper maintenance. Ongoing and clear communication, including with the Village Council and the residents of Ottawa, is critical.

- **Community Meetings** – The initial community workshop described here was a good step towards getting the conversation on these projects started. Further meetings may be necessary as the projects move forward. These could take place during open meetings of the Council or Open Space Subcommittees.
- **Marketing and Outreach** – The Village should be prepared to discuss what is and is not possible on buyout sites and any project ideas under development. This can be done through community meetings, or through brochures, reports (like this one), online, or through other means and media.

Constraints on the types of possible projects that can be developed – As describe above, FEMA rules require that buyout properties be dedicated in perpetuity to open space, recreation, or wetland management uses and limit the types of projects that can be pursued. The size and location of existing properties also limits the types of projects that can be pursued. Workshop participants suggested a few ways to broaden the possibilities for the sites.

- **A plan for future acquisition** – The Village should develop a plan for future acquisitions. The plan should focus on acquiring properties that are near or adjacent to existing acquisitions (especially in the West End of the Village) or with publically owned open space in order to create greater options for reuse. As part of the plan, the Village could consider creating incentives to encourage additional property-owners to sell.
- **No surprises** – The Village should work with the state early in process, so there are no surprises later. Continue to share project ideas – early in the process – with Steve Ferryman, Mitigation Branch Chief at the Ohio Emergency Management Agency for a preliminary review to at least weed out any issues that may occur later on in the process.

Momentum – Now that the process has started, how do the Village and interested residents keep the momentum going to see projects through to implementation?

- **Floodplain Buyouts Management Committee** – The Open Space Subcommittee has taken on the leadership in this issue. Hopefully, this will institutionalize the process and keep the momentum going.