

British Columbia

Cities are abandoning homes that will be destroyed by climate change

Grand Forks, B.C., among those adopting 'managed retreat' — moving people, infrastructure to mitigate damage

[Brendan Coulter](#) · CBC News · Posted: Feb 24, 2022 7:00 AM PT | Last Updated: February 24



A combination of river water and sewage swamped Grand Forks, B.C., in 2018, pictured. Now the city is demolishing dozens of homes in the North Ruckle neighbourhood to mitigate future impacts from extreme weather events. (Tina Lovgreen/CBC)

Grand Forks, B.C., resident Les Johnson is compiling photos to preserve the memory of a flood-damaged neighbourhood before it's fully gone.

In May 2018, heavy snowpack and several days of torrential downpour caused [local rivers in the southern Interior B.C. city to overflow](#). This led to severe property damage in the neighbourhood of North Ruckle, which sits on the bank of the Kettle River in the province's Kootenay-Boundary region.

Instead of repairing the neighbourhood, which is at risk of recurrent flooding, the City of Grand Forks has spent \$16.5 million in a flood mitigation program, [buying approximately 90 properties](#) most at risk of damage as extreme weather events become more common.

The program is an example of managed retreat, which refers to the co-ordinated movement of people, and sometimes infrastructure, away from natural hazards often brought about by extreme weather events.



Les Johnson is pictured walking around the flood-ravaged North Ruckle neighborhood in Grand Forks, B.C., to photograph homes before they're demolished. (Submitted by Les Johnson)

While many houses are still standing, the city has started demolishing some of the homes in the neighbourhood — and Johnson has been walking around with his camera, taking pictures of each home before it's gone.

"This is the community I'm going to be in until I die," said Johnson, who has also used a 360-degree camera mounted on the roof of his car to document the neighbourhood.

"I think the community would be hollow if we didn't have our history available to us."

In Canada, different levels of government have spent hundreds of millions of dollars on managed retreat buyout programs — including [Calgary](#) and High River, Alta., where residents were devastated by flooding in 2013.

But the decision to abandon, rather than protect, homes can be controversial, as the City of Surrey learned when it proposed looking into [moving or abandoning 400 homes](#) in the Crescent Beach community in order to avoid the effects of sea level rise over the next century.

Crescent Beach, along with 20 per cent of Surrey's land area, lies on a coastal floodplain, and is just a few metres above sea level, which is expected to rise one metre by 2100 and two metres by 2200.

Public backlash and vocal opposition soon had the city back away from managed retreat.

Jason Thistlethwaite, a professor at the University of Waterloo's school of environment, enterprise and development, said this sort of public outcry makes it difficult for policymakers to implement managed retreat programs.

"You may be asking people who've lived in the community for generations if they want to leave," he said. "You may be asking people who can't afford to take the buyout and then move somewhere where the housing is more expensive."

But Thistlethwaite also predicted it will ultimately be impossible for communities to avoid managed retreat programs altogether, as a report he authored found more than 12 per cent of properties around B.C. are at a high risk of flooding.

"The water is going to come. It is going to be higher, and it is going to be more extreme," he said.

Grand Forks has also faced backlash to the managed retreat program.

"We had demonstrations, we had picketing at city hall," said Mayor Brian Taylor.

But ultimately, he said, the city had to make sure residents were safe from future flooding.



The 2018 flooding in Grand Forks, in the province's southern Interior, led to hundreds of homes being inundated with floodwaters. (Tina Lovgreen/CBC)

"[Grand Forks] believed this would be a long-term solution to climate-change ... The choice to go in this direction, I support."

Grand Forks plans to demolish most homes in the neighbourhood by the end of April 2022, allowing much of the area to return to natural floodplain and wetland. The city says it will also build a dyke to protect homes in the surrounding area.