

Plum Creek Land buy creates extremely large conservation area

By GILLIAN POMPLUN

Local land trust Mississippi Valley Conservancy (MVC) has purchased 1,600 acres of rugged land along the lower Kickapoo River for permanent protection. The site, just north of Wauzeka in Crawford County, which includes a stretch of Plum Creek and is located on both sides of Plum Creek Road, will be known as Plum Creek Conservation Area.

The property includes over five-and-a-half miles of frontage along the west bank of the Kickapoo River, and over two miles along both banks of Plum Creek, a Class I trout stream. It is next to DNR's 1,927-acre Kickapoo Wildlife Area-Wauzeka Unit that includes the 635-acre Kickapoo Wild Woods State Natural Area.

"These protected areas, now enlarged by the MVC purchase, support one of the highest concentrations of rare forest-interior breeding birds in southern Wisconsin, including many considered high conservation priorities in eastern North America," the WDNR's Craig Thompson said.

The protected land will be open to the public for hunting, fishing, and low-impact recreation such as hiking, paddling, and wildlife observation.

"Public lands are an asset to Crawford County," said Dave Troester, the Crawford County Conservationist. "People come here to fish the streams, to hunt, to enjoy the rivers and scenic beauty. Public land makes that possible for more people, as access to private land for hunting is harder to find these days."

Troester also cited Crawford County's Comprehensive Plan, in which a survey of county residents rated the things they most value about living in Crawford County.

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Riverway meeting History of bridges explained by Cupp

By GILLIAN POMPLUN

The Lower Wisconsin State Riverway Board met in Muscoda on April 14 to conduct a regular monthly business meeting.

Mark Cupp, Executive Director of LWSRB, started the meeting with an educational presentation on the history of river-crossings at Muscoda. Cupp said that one of the most important issues in the Riverway in the post-settlement era has been river-crossings, which he said are essential to promote travel and commerce. Historically, ferries had crossed the river at Harper's Ferry, Avoca and Muscoda.

"The Moore family originally ran a ferry across the river from Muscoda to Richland County. Following the Civil War, General Jonathon B. Moore, a former Sheriff of Grant County and former member of the state legislature, agreed to invest \$16,000 in a new toll bridge with additional investors putting in another \$8,000," Cupp told the board. "There were complaints about the tolls for using the new bridge, but it provided an important link across the Wisconsin River."

Cupp said that in 1888, the toll bridge was sold to John Postel and John Schwingle for \$10,000. The remnants of the stone piers for the toll bridge can still be seen on the upstream side of the existing bridge. In 1920, Cupp said, a severe storm had destroyed major parts of the toll bridge, requiring significant repairs.

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Enjoying an egg hunt moment

Four-year-old Colby Hooker, son of Tara Heisz, was on the move, gathering up Easter eggs at a furious pace. The little fellow shot out of the starting gate with gusto, and seemed to be filling up his bag in short order at the Gays Mills Easter Egg Hunt held Saturday at the Log Cabin Village Park. Was Colby having fun? You bet.

Perseverance pays off

Drone team competes in Milwaukee

By CHARLEY PREUSSER

Despite some real obstacles, the North Crawford High School drone team rose to the occasion at a competition held in Milwaukee recently.

The team's adviser Liz Bransky brought some of the participants to the Gays Mills Public Library last Saturday to discuss their work and the competition.

There was a huge problem with receiving the drone kits for the 12 teams from around the state. Materials to build and ready the drones was supposed to arrive in December. In fact, nothing arrived until March just one week before the competition. That was very unfortunate and due to ongoing supply chain problems.

Working with the Wisconsin Space Grant Consortium, the UW-Whitewater GIS Center,

along with Carroll College, organized and ran a state-wide drone competition for high school teams from around the state.

Inspired by the Artemis NASA mission to the moon, teams were tasked with building sensor platforms that would be mounted on a drone and used in the competition to sense and measure a simulated lunar environment.

The competition took place in the Fiserv Forum in Milwaukee. All of the teams attended the Milwaukee Bucks game the same day as the competition.

The Bucks game, the chance to eat some different types of food and the hotel pool made the it all very enjoyable to the local high school students, according to adviser Liz Bransky.

The competition was created to spread awareness of NASA to help the younger generation learn what trying to go to moon involves," Bransky said.

The adviser had three of the students from the drone team (Rivyn DiPadova, Aiden Unseth and Sarah Bransky) on hand for the presentation.

The students took turns explaining the project and the competition.

The project was intended to use a drone to collect soil samples and take other measurements. It's similar to what will be done on the moon in the coming unmanned launch in the Artemis mission.

The students needed to program sensors to work with drone sensors and collect information with a supplied APP, using a Bluetooth connection to transfer the information.

"It was simple enough to understand," Sarah Bransky said.

Aiden Unseth indicated that making the sensors work was bit harder. The group wanted to test for moisture in air and soil. There was also a color sensor to record colors.

Then, there was the servo, a scoop to retrieve a soil sample. There was also Lidar to map the area.

Unseth noted a battery to supply power was too weak and some of the sensors were too heavy for the drone.

Well, the group struggled to make progress in a week on the project, which was originally scheduled for three months. Progress was made.

Rivyn DiPadova was charged with communications about the project. Her tasks included writing releases and making videos to place on multiple social media platforms—among other things.

Adviser Liz Bransky acknowledged the group hit a lot of dead-ends in the short period of time they had to complete the project.

Unseth added that the drone had to be assembled as well. He served as the drone pilot. At the end of the presentation, the group assembled outside to see the drone fly.

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MAKING A CONNECTION was easy for drone team member Rivyn DiPadova, left, and her sister Aurelia. The pair hooked up the sensor and programed it. Behind them, Bjorn Unseth works with Liz Bransky to get the sensor programed.

At North Crawford

Board discusses developing referenda for fall election

By GILLIAN POMPLUN

At their Monday, April 18 meeting, the North Crawford School Board took up the topic of development of referenda to be placed on the November 2022 election ballot. The two referendums would authorize the district to exceed the property tax levy limit set by the State of Wisconsin.

"We need to make very clear to the voters in the school district that there will be two separate referenda placed on the ballot in November," board member Jesse Swenson said. "There will be an operating referendum to help the district maintain instruction and services, and a capital improvement referendum to allow the district to make needed repairs or improvements to our buildings."

North Crawford School Superintendent Brandon Munson reported to the board on the current status of referenda development, and the timeline for completing the process. He explained that the series of four meetings of the Advisory Task Force (ATF), composed of interested citizens in the school district has been completed.

Securing ideas and input

These meetings were intended to secure ideas, input and feedback about what repairs or improvements are needed for district buildings, and what the voter's appetite is to support the district in paying for them through an increase in the property tax levy.

"We haven't invested any money in our district building for 30 years," board president Mary Kuhn said. "We all know that if we own a property, and don't engage in needed maintenance, then eventually the bill comes due for the work that we deferred, and the cost only goes up over time."

Munson pointed out that 80 percent of the referendums proposed by school districts on the April 5 ballot had passed, which is a historic high. He said that the results indicate that support for public schools is high.

Munson said that at the last meeting of the ATF, the district had revealed for the first time estimated numbers for what the scenario for the district would be if an operating referendum to pay for continuation of district instruction and curriculum were not passed. This estimated, developed with the district's financial consultant, Baird, projects budget deficits as soon as the 2024-2025 school year.

Operating referendum

The proposed operating referendum amount would be for a recurring \$900,000 per year. This would be phased in slowly over the course of four years, at Year 1, \$300,000; Year 2, \$250,000; Year 3, \$200,000; and Year 4, \$150,000. Beginning in year five, we would then have an additional \$900,000 of revenue built into our base to use to pay staff salary and benefits, increased operational costs, sustaining our instructional programming and curriculum without making programmatic cuts, and to budget for deferred maintenance projects.

"Phasing the additional levied operating revenue in slowly over the course of four years would allow us to make adjustments based on any changes to state aid to schools that may come about in future state budgets," Munson said. "It is important to know that the numbers we are working with are just estimates, which is always how it is with school district budgets."

At the fourth ATF meeting, the district also revealed what the cost would be to property taxpayers under a \$5.5 million, and a \$6.5 million referendum, for debt service for borrowing to make needed repairs or improvements to district facilities.

"If both the operating referendum, and a capital improvement referendum at the \$6.5 million level were passed, that would result in \$150 per \$100,000 of assessed

value increase for the operating referendum, and \$76 per \$100,000 of assessed value for the capital improvement referendum," Munson explained. "That would mean a total of \$226 per \$100,000 of assessed value."

The board felt strongly that in the survey to be sent out in April to voters in the district, the language of the survey should make crystal clear that there would be two referenda on the November ballot. That survey will be made available electronically through e-mail and social media, and will also be available as a hard-copy paper option from the district for those that are less familiar with online options.

Public survey available

The survey will be available to voters for at least five weeks, and Munson estimated the results would be available to the board for review at their May meeting. From there, the board will work to develop final referenda language at their June meeting. The final language of the two referenda to be placed on the November ballot must be finalized 75 days before the election or approximately in the month of August.

"I am concerned that voters will focus on the building/capital improvement referendum, and not understand that there will be an operating referendum as well," Kuhn said. "We don't want to appear to be 'dramatic,' as if we're overstating the consequences of not passing the operational referendum, but they need to clearly understand that without those additional funds, the district is poised to fall off of a financial cliff."

Building projects rating

Coming out of the fourth ATF meeting, ratings for the various building maintenance or improvement projects proposed by the district and their architectural and building consultant partners (FEH Design and Kramer Construction) were available at the April 18 school board meeting. The numbers, provided by Kramer are refined rough estimates. Final numbers will be developed at such time as the projects are authorized.

The top nine projects identified by attendees at the fourth ATF meeting would come in within a \$5.5 million facility maintenance referendum amount. The projects, currently estimated at a cost of \$5,010,000, include (projects presented in descending order of ranking):

- Reroof of entire building \$2,890,000
- Repair Exterior Insulation & finish system at above roof walls \$170,000
- Replace exterior windows \$150,000
- Agriculture lab, finishing room and project storage addition \$700,000
- Add Childcare rooms \$130,000 (renovation option) or add if childcare is an addition +\$230,000 (total \$360,000) ***
- Outdoor concessions, restroom structure, new sanitary line, 600 SF \$175,000
- Replace parking lot paving south of the building \$175,000
- Media Center, teaching space, tutoring room, booth, windows \$100,000 **
- Replace parking lot paving west and north of the building \$290,000

Capital improvements

If a capital improvement referendum were authorized at the \$6.5 million level, then in addition to the projects listed above, these additional projects could be accomplished for a total of \$6,275,000 (projects presented in descending order of ranking):

- Renovate family Cons. Science, Life Skills, Career & Tech Ed rooms \$600,000
- Add mezzanine storage above commons to gain classroom back \$190,000
- Update Middle School Showers, \$75,000

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Land acquisition supports key state goals for support of biodiversity

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Most highly rated by survey respondents was natural beauty, open space, small town atmosphere, proximity to family and friends, and recreational opportunities.

Supporting biodiversity

The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) Director of Land Strategy, Kurt Schlimme, called the project 'a high priority for acquisition' because of its size, its proximity to other protected lands, and its prominence within their 'Resilient and Connected Lands' analysis, which comprehensively identified a network of lands and migration corridors across the United States that are best able to support plants and animals in a changing climate.

On their web page, 'Connected Landscapes,' TNC describes the process used to designate high priority conservation landscapes:

"Resilient sites are sites that continue to support biological diversity, productivity and ecological function even as they change in response to climate change. Resilient sites buffer their resident species from the direct effect of climate change by providing temperature and moisture options in the form of connected microclimates that can differ as much as 10-15 degrees Celsius. Sites with high microclimate diversity allow plants and animals to persist locally even as the regional climate appears unsuitable, thus slowing down the rate of change"

To map site resilience scientists first grouped the land into distinct geophysical settings and then analyzed every acre for two characteristics:

- Landscape diversity: The presence of characteristics

(topography, elevation range, wetland density and soil variety) that create microclimates and habitat variety.

- Local connectedness: The absence of barriers or fragmenting roads, dams, development, etc. that prevent plant and animal populations from taking advantage of local microclimates.

On their 'Connected Landscapes' map, the entire Kickapoo River Valley as well as the Lower Wisconsin Riverway are described as 'far above average' for this kind of resilience.

Land Legacy Report

"It's been a long time coming. I'm really glad to see MVC and TNC succeed in the conservation of the land. The 'Wisconsin Land Legacy Report' describes it as 'one of the most diverse assemblages of natural communities in the state,'" Craig Thompson, WDNR Program Manager at the LaCrosse Office, said.

The Wisconsin Land Legacy Report was compiled in 2006 to identify places critical to meet Wisconsin's conservation and outdoor recreation needs over the next 50 years.

The report resulted from public and staff meetings over a three-year period, from 1999 to 2002. The purpose of the meetings was to gather information, local knowledge, and opinions about Wisconsin's land and water. The report identifies and described 229 legacy places, and eight statewide needs and resources.

Specifically, the report says of the Kickapoo River Valley:

"The valley's forests support breeding populations of many forest-interior species, especially birds. Stretches of

the upper river and its tributaries pass through sandstone cliffs, which provide habitat for numerous rare plants and animals, including globally rare species such as northern monkshood and several species of land snails. In addition, the Kickapoo River corridor provides an opportunity to ecologically connect the large block of public lands in the Central Sands Plains (Fort McCoy), Black River State Forest, and many county forest lands with the Wisconsin River."

Thompson notes the need to move with some haste to restore the land because of the importance of the area to migrating birds, and the rapid decline of their numbers "on our watch." He said that there is broad agreement among conservation practitioners that we have about a decade to set a course for the future of our planet for its inhabitants, human and otherwise.

Management vision

Another partner, the Savanna Institute, will provide planning services for the long-term restoration of the land to help MVC reach its conservation goals for the project.

In addition, TNC signed a memorandum of understanding with MVC last fall regarding its assistance in developing and implementing MVC's management vision.

"It's definitely been a team effort to see this property protected. And it will continue being a team effort as we move forward," TNC's Schlimme said.

TNC will help to provide planning oversight, and will join with WDNR to provide 'boots on the ground' involvement in restoration and regeneration efforts as well.

"It may take a number of years before the property is healed and restored to its ecological health," MVC Conservation Director Abbie Church said. "That's the challenge that Mississippi Valley Conservancy has taken on."

Church said the majority of the woodlands have a long history of grazing and the farmland offers ample opportunities to implement conservation practices.

"Erosion and habitat degradation both need to be addressed," Church said. "We will be working closely with our partners at TNC and the Savanna Institute over the coming year to develop a long range plan and vision for the site to achieve conservation goals that include healthy habitats, water quality protection, and resilience to climate change"

Church explained that much of land will continue to be farmed and grazed, while integrating regenerative farming practices as part of the management plan. The land will continue to generate property taxes to support the local community, as it has in the past.

"Part of the benefit of partnering with Savanna Institute in management of the land will be the opportunity to put demonstration projects on the landscape, showing how land can be managed to achieve both a profitable agricultural system as well as a variety of ecosystem services," MVC's Abrahamson explained.

Abrahamson emphasized that with an undertaking of this size, many partners will be needed to realize all the goals for the property. She said that in the future, additional partnerships will be explored for additional areas of restoration and regeneration.

Generous donations

"This land acquisition was made possible by an anonymous donor who is passionate about land and water conservation in this part of Wisconsin and gave a gift – the

largest we have ever received – to purchase the property. Plum Creek Conservation Area is now the largest property the Conservancy owns," Carol Abrahamson, Executive Director of MVC said. "Thanks to the generous donor and our diligent partners, the land will be protected and restored to provide natural services such as flood protection, recreation opportunities for outdoor enthusiasts, and an expanded area of connected lands that provide refuge for wildlife whose native habitats are threatened by climate change and development."

Abrahamson went on to explain that MVC purchased the property with a \$3 million gift from the anonymous supporter, and in close collaboration with TNC and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR).

"Craig Thompson was one of the driving forces in helping to facilitate this acquisition," Abrahamson explained. "It has been his vision for many years to expand this vital migratory corridor for wild birds and other rare and threatened species that make their home in the area."

Additional funding from TNC, the Paul E. Stry Foundation and the John C. Bock Foundation covered the remainder of the transactional and other costs.

With a gift of \$50,000 from a generous couple and \$200,000 from TNC, MVC has created an endowment to help manage the long-term restoration and care of the property. Now celebrating its 25th anniversary, MVC is launching a match campaign to double that amount.

Contributions to help reach the \$500,000 management endowment fund goal can be sent to Mississippi Valley Conservancy, with 'Plum Creek Conservation Area' noted in the memo. Their website includes many different donation options, as well as an online donation portal. To send a check, the

mailing address for MVC is: Mississippi Valley Conservancy, P.O. Box 2611, LaCrosse, WI 54602

Owners and donors

Peter Lewis of Madison represented the owners of the property during the negotiations. His father, Robert Lewis, and other friends and family began buying land for the farm in the 1970s. They raised cattle and had fields in a rotation of corn and hay. According to Peter, his father, who at one time was the staff assistant for agriculture in the Gaylord Nelson administration, had a lasting commitment not to carve up the property for hobby farms.

This commitment has made it possible for the project partners to acquire the property at a scale, in terms of contiguous size, that is much larger than is typically available in southern Wisconsin.

"We are grateful that Robert Lewis and his family had a vision that included keeping this property together. It created this wonderful opportunity to ensure that the property will forever remain whole as Robert envisioned," Abrahamson said.

The intact sale and protection of this land "is the highest possible ending I can imagine," Lewis said.

Asked about the gift to buy the land, the anonymous donor said:

"I love Crawford County and am so fortunate that I can help the real experts who have worked to save this land for future generations. This county is bounded by the Mississippi River on the west and the Wisconsin River to the south with the beautiful Kickapoo flowing through the middle – what a joy to live here! And to have this opportunity for habitat protection, in such a unique place, on such a large scale, this is all beyond my wildest dreams. My deep gratitude goes to all who made this happen, especially to the Lewis family."

Fewer rainy days leads to earlier spring

A drop in the total number of rainy days each year is contributing to an earlier arrival of spring for plants in northern climates, a new study finds.

Scientists have known that warmer temperatures due to climate change have led to the first leaves coming out at earlier dates in recent decades.

But this study shows that fewer rainy days plays the second largest role in this early leaf-out, said Desheng Liu, co-author of the study and professor of geography at The Ohio State University. "Scientists have looked mainly at how temperature affects when leaves first appear and, if they considered precipitation at all, it was just the total amount," Liu said.

"But it isn't the total amount of precipitation that matters the most -- it is how often it rains."

In the new study, published recently in the journal Nature Climate Change, the researchers calculated that the decline in rainfall frequency will lead to spring arriving an additional one to two days earlier each decade through 2100 compared to what scientists previously thought.

"We should expect an even earlier spring in the future compared to what current models tell us," said study co-author Jian Wang, a doctoral student in geography at Ohio State.

The researchers analyzed data sets from the United States, Europe and China (all north of 30 degrees latitude, which includes most of the United States). The data included the dates each year when observers noted the first evidence of leaves. They also used satellite images from 1982 to 2018, which recorded when vegetation started to green.

They compared that with data on how many rainy days

there were each month at the sites studied.

Results showed that as rainy days declined over the years, spring arrived earlier for most of the areas in the Northern Hemisphere. The one exception was grasslands mostly located in semi-arid regions, where fewer rainy days delayed spring slightly.

Why do fewer rainy days lead to earlier arrival of spring? There are two main reasons, according to the study.

One is that rainy days are also cloudy days. Fewer rainy days in late winter and early spring means that trees and other plants are receiving more solar radiation earlier in the year, which stimulates leaf growth.

Fewer days with clouds also means daytime temperatures will be higher with more sunlight heating the ground and atmosphere. Nighttime temperatures will cool more rapidly without clouds to trap the heat.

"This contrasting effect earlier in the year makes the plants think it is spring and start leaf onset earlier and

earlier," Wang said.

The researchers used their findings to create a model estimating how much sooner spring would arrive now through 2100. Current models already suggest that spring for plants will arrive about five to 10 days earlier for most of these northern climates by the end of the century, Liu said.

But by taking the decline in rainy days into account, the researchers' new model suggests spring will arrive another day to two earlier than expected each decade.

"We need to plan for a future where spring arrives earlier than we expected. Our model gives us information to prepare," Liu said.

The study was funded by the National Science Foundation.

Other co-authors were Philippe Ciais of Laboratoire des Sciences du Climat et de l'Environnement in France, and Josep Peñuelas of the Centre for Research on Ecology and Forestry Applications in Spain.

Source: Ohio State University

School one of three to build drone

DRONE from Page 1

Of the 12 schools in the competition, only three got their drones assembled and got them flying. North Crawford was one of them.

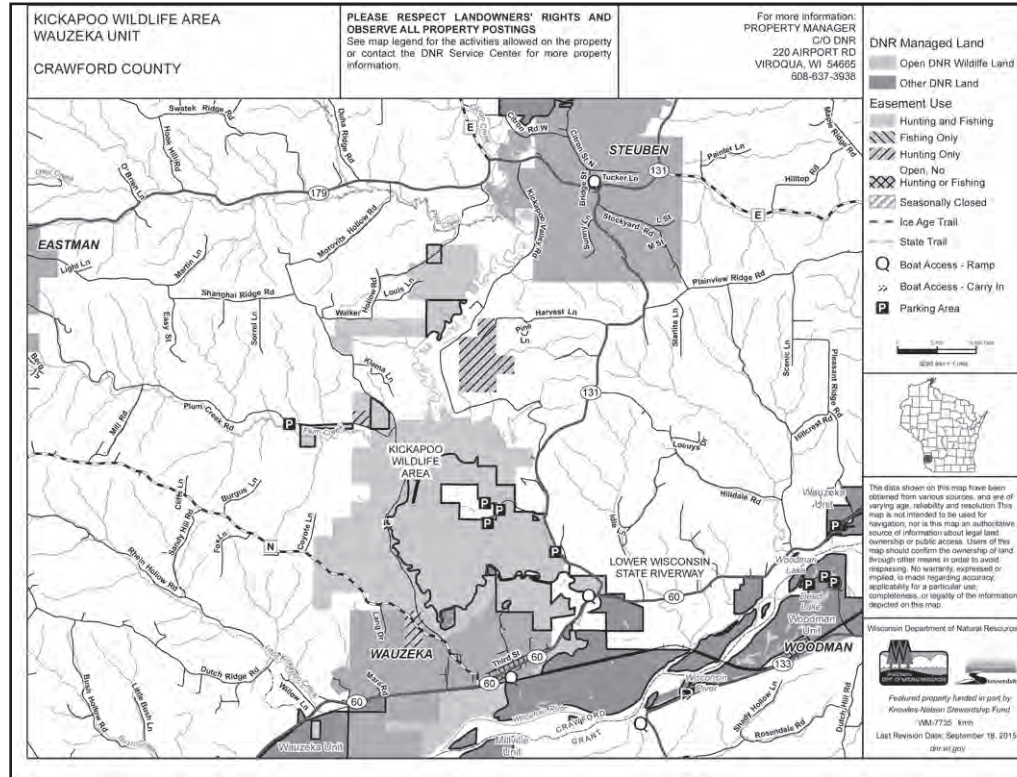
"They kept their chins up," Liz Bransky said of the local

team. "It was really, really a challenge not to get the drone earlier."

Despite the challenges, North Crawford can be proud of their first drone team. So, keep your eyes on the sky Trojans.

Climate change and land-use change are projected to make wildfires more frequent and intense, with a global increase of extreme fires of up to 14 percent by 2030, 30 percent by the end of 2050 and 50 percent by the end of the century, warns a new UN report. It calls for radical change in government spending on wildfires, shifting from reaction and response to prevention and preparedness.

Source: United Nations Environment Programme



AS CAN BE SEEN on this WDNR map of the Lower Kickapoo River Watershed, the 1,600 acre land acquisition Mississippi Valley Conservancy has realized will connect areas above and below the area with existing properties managed by WDNR. This will mean an expanded corridor of connection for species that exist in the area, with a variety of habitats, and promote biodiversity in this crucial area for species preservation.

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 Kickapoo Valley Medical Clinic – Soldiers Grove
 La Farge Medical Clinic – La Farge

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