



Back Roads

Sourland Planning Council

www.sourland.org

Autumn 2007

Crucial Open Space Measure on the Ballot This Fall

This November, we have a very important opportunity to ensure continued open space funding in New Jersey and also right here in the special place we call the Sourlands.

State funding for open space has all but dried up and lands important to water quality, wildlife, recreation and agriculture are at risk of being lost forever. A significant amount of land in the Sourland region remains unprotected, yet there is an increasing understanding of the importance of ensuring that a good portion of these lands remain in their natural state. The Sourland Mountain Region's natural resources, especially the fragile drinking water supply and its unique ecosystems, are at risk.

On the ballot this fall will be a public question asking whether we want to authorize a \$200 million state bond issue to continue funding the preservation of key lands over the next year. Already the depletion of state funds has slowed the pace of preservation so this measure comes before us not a moment too soon.

The new funds will enable the state to continue to provide matches for locally generated open space dollars. The state matches are often crucial

to ensuring enough funding to save a property. Sourland Region communities that have established local open space funds—East Amwell, Hillsborough Township, Hopewell Borough, Hopewell Township, Lambertville, Montgomery Township, West Amwell—are amongst those that stand to benefit. So are our counties—Hunterdon, Mercer and Somerset—who also have established open space funds that can be used to match state dollars in order to preserve properties.

The Sourland Planning Council trustees unanimously support passage of the 2007 open space bond issue and plans to continue working with other committed groups, citizens and public officials to see that longer-term, stable state funding is put into place for subsequent years.

See our article on page 3 to get a better picture of what's at stake.



We still have maps!

(They're free.)

Look for the racks in public places around the region or contact SPC.

Smart Growth Regional Planning Project Update

As part of our effort to develop grassroots planning for the Sourlands, the Sourland Planning Council will be sponsoring a series of public meetings in each of the five towns on the mountain starting this fall. The goal is to find out what residents value about this very special region and how we can preserve the special character of the Mountain. In 1992 the SPC conducted a very thorough survey of how residents in the eastern half of the Sourlands viewed the Mountain. We found the responses to be strongly consistent across town and county boundary lines. While many of the values expressed then may remain unchanged today, this new effort will include residents of the entire length of the Mountain, from Hillsborough to Lambertville.

On June 5, the consultants who are leading this project, Banisch Associates, Conservation Resources Inc., and the Stony Brook Millstone Watershed, met with representatives from the participating municipalities and counties to launch the process of "visioning sessions." All sorts of issues might be raised— *cont'd p. 4*

The Sourlands Planning Council is a non-profit organization working to protect the ecological integrity, historic resources and special character of the Sourland Mountain region.

Meeting information

Please come!

The Sourland Planning Council trustees will meet during the remainder of 2007 on the dates listed below. We hold our meetings at the historic Hopewell Railroad Station on Railroad Avenue, just off North Greenwood Avenue in Hopewell Borough, at 7:30 p.m. You are warmly invited to join us.

Sep 6 Nov 1

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2006 - 2007

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Hannah Suthers

A Sourland Oral History

Interviewed by
Jared Rosenbaum



Hannah Suthers first rode her horse through the abandoned farm fields above Featherbed Lane nearly forty years ago. The flat land was just sensing that it was to become wild once again.

Deer trails cut swaths through feral timothy grass and common yellow throats sang from the young branches of sun-drenched shrubs.

Hannah still rides the trails of the abandoned farm today, but even astride her horse she is shaded by the trees of a young forest. Following those old deer trails, she'll pass small openings where meadow flowers still bloom. But just steps away, beneath the shade of red maples, pin oaks and blackhaws, a mayapple spreads its twin parasols to catch the dappled sun.

Transformation in the land is the ever-shifting context for Suthers' work here. For these old fields are home to the Featherbed Lane Bird Banding Station. The formal study of bird habits and habitat here now spans over thirty years.

In 1979, avian expert Suthers decided to set up a bird banding station on her favorite riding grounds on the ridge of the Sourland Mountain. She already had decades of experience in the emerging field of migration studies at Island Beach State Park and in Michigan prior to that.

Although the remains of the 180 acre farm were in private hands and the threat of development was imminent, she immersed herself in the landscape, studying the resident birds weekly by temporarily catching them in ultra-thin nets; monitoring their song and behavior almost daily on horseback. She came to recognize all the plants, to study the amphibian inhabitants of the ephemeral wetlands, to note the calls of nocturnal predators.

Through dedicated awareness of the wilderness, Hannah began to observe long-term processes at work and to produce scientifically significant studies. Like a monk watching water slowly etch channels in solid rock, Hannah observed the rebirth of a forest.



The mist nets are up by dawn every Sunday morning, and are not taken down for half a day. They are checked constantly while they gather in their silken mesh the feathered denizens of Featherbed Lane. In the spring and fall neotropical migrants stop to feed and are temporarily waylaid; in the summer baby birds are caught just feet away from their parents. All the birds are swiftly and gently banded with identifying rings by Suthers and a steady crew of volunteers. Measurements are taken, health is monitored, and the birds are released back to the wild landscape where they belong.

The total amount of species Hannah netted last year exceeded 100, with several dozen more observed.

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Future Development in the Sourlands

What's at Stake

by Steven Davison

The Sourland Planning Council has received two grants from the Smart Growth Grant Program of the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs for detailed studies of the Sourlands. In this and subsequent newsletters, we plan a series of articles that digest the reports that the consulting firms have created with this funding. (The full reports from Phase I are available on our website, www.sourlands.org). We start with a look at the potential for future development on the mountain.

As part of the first phase of the Smart Growth project, the environmental consulting firm Banisch Associates, Inc. prepared a Build-out Analysis for the Sourland Mountain Region. The build-out analysis shows what the mountain would look like if all the development that is allowed under current zoning policy takes place. We need a study like this so that every-

one can see the development patterns already at work on the mountain and understand what's at stake as we consider future development.

The study presents a worst-case scenario in which all the development that local zoning currently allows actually takes place, using the latest data available when the study was undertaken in 2004. The study includes a large number of lots that do not comply with current zoning ordinances but

since then and some have been developed.)

Below is a table summarizing some of the results.

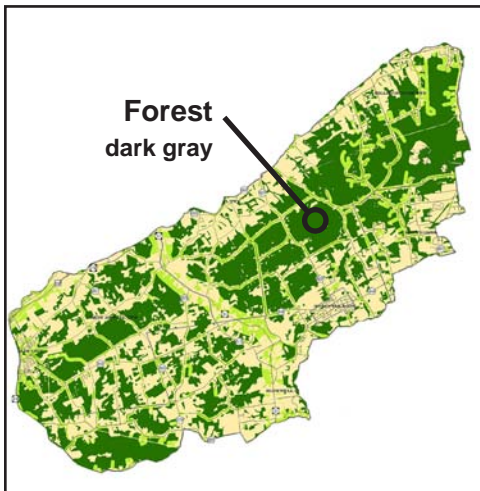
All of the townships but West Amwell could grow by roughly 60%. The reason that West Amwell could grow so much more is that the majority of the township lies within the area of study for the project—the mountain holds most of West Amwell's potential for expansion. Across the entire Sourland

<i>Build-out by Township</i>	East Amwell	Hillsborough	Hopewell	Montgomery	West Amwell	Region
Existing units	579	611	1,386	442	779	3,797
Possible new units	352	307	837	259	2,013	3,767
Total units @ build-out	931	917	2,223	701	2,792	7,654
% change	60.8%	50.1%	60.4%	58.6%	258.4%	99.2%

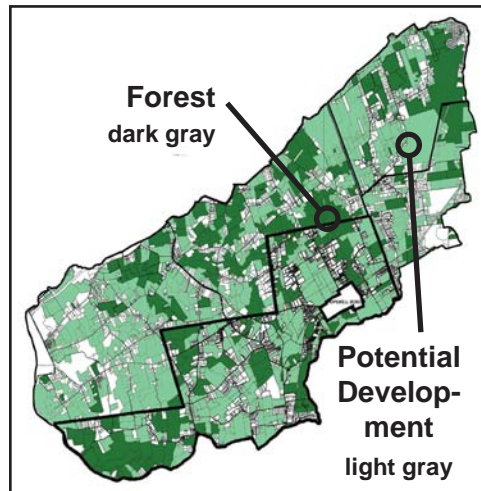
could be developed anyway, either through grandfather provisions or by variance. (Some of these properties have gone into various preservation programs

region, development could double under the current zoning provisions—twice the number of dwellings, with roughly twice the demand for water, twice the impact from septic systems, and some further loss of forest and puncturing of continuous forest, which is important for some deep forest bird species.

Current Forest Cover



Potential Future Build-out



To the left are two rough maps that provide a better picture of the possible development impact. The first shows currently forested land in black. As you can see, except for the swath cut by Rt. 31, a more or less continuous band of forest runs the length of the mountain. In the build-out map, however, that band is totally chopped up into isolated tracts, with some very large gaps between patches of woods.

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On the Mountain

Profiles of the Creatures & Features We Protect

Barred Owl

Strix varia

by Pat Sziber



Photo: Ronnie Gaubert

Who cooks for yooooo? Who cooks for you-all? This probing query piercing the night is not emanating from the Food Network but rather from the elusive barred owl, which is listed as threatened by the New Jersey Non-game and Endangered Species Program. Only two other owl species appear on the list: short-eared owl (endangered breeding status) and long-eared owl (threatened). A beautiful portrait of the barred owl, pensive and serene, graces the cover of SPC's Stewardship Map.

The distinctive “hoo-hoo-to-hoo, hoo-hoo-to-hoo-aw” is just one part of this large owl's vocal gymnastics. Once a mate is contacted and courtship ensues, the couple engages in an ethereal conversation that is better described as a weird duet than romantic billing and cooing. They breed in spring—later than the great horned—and can be very aggressive in defending their nests. But the culinary question can come up at any time of year and may be interspersed with a cacophony of yelps, barks, cackles and caws, which bear no semblance to the rhyme or meter that might be thought to inspire the occasional gaffe “bard owl.”


The barred owl's signature song is longer and more complex than that of the slightly larger and far more common great horned owl. It also lacks the ear tufts that give our familiar hooty owl its descriptive “horned” name. Like Hooty, the barred owl is a predator and takes similar prey including birds up to the size of a quail and mammals up to the

size of a rabbit. The great horned will take larger prey, and will even grapple with a gangly great blue heron! Unfortunately, it is also the main predator of our featured owl. This brings us to the reason why the barred owl has the dubious distinction of being on the list of threatened species.

The single most important habitat requirement of the barred owl is its need for very large woodland patches, especially those with big trees in old forests, where they build their nests in existing cavities or use an old crow or hawk nest. Contrary to some accounts, they do not require but prefer wet habitat and will occupy upland areas as well. As forest dwellers, they share a habitat type with the more adaptable great horned owls. Choosing not to become an easy meal, they avoid great horned territories, which are widespread throughout our area and, in fact, nearly the entire western hemisphere. In New Jersey—especially the central part of the state—there just aren't enough large blocks of forest to go around. This is not the case in most parts of the U.S., where barred owl populations actually seem to be increasing and spreading

westward.

The barred owl has been documented as a very rare resident of the Sourlands. As such, it is one of the indicators that our region serves as a critical refuge for New Jersey's shrinking indigenous flora and fauna and warrants the highest level of habitat protection.

To hear the sounds of the barred owl and compare it to the great horned owl, visit www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAbout-Birds/BirdGuide and scroll down to the name of the bird. For more tantalizing facts on all the owls, visit www.owlpages.com. 

Smart Growth Project

(cont'd)

traffic, wildlife habitat, woodland management, surface water quality, wells, and so on. We encourage all stakeholders—residents, local businesses, other nonprofits—to participate in these discussions. Ultimately the goal would be for each town's Master Plan to reflect the values set out by the stakeholders. Following that step, each municipality would develop ordinances consistent with their Master Plans.

This project will succeed if it leads to a true, bottom-up, grassroots consensus. Watch your community bulletin boards and our website, www.sourland.org, for information about these upcoming meetings. We hope to see you there!

~ Andrea Bonette,
SPC President

Biking with Erik

by Cliff Wilson

My friend Erik is wont to exclaim at the beauty surrounding us as we bike through the Sourlands. “Wonderful, wonderful,” he will say in his Swedish accent, or “Fabulous, fabulous.” Whether remarking on a rhododendron, some wildflowers, an old stone church, or a wide-open vista of the valley below, Erik invariably speaks in taut couplets. “Beautiful, beautiful.”

“And the weather is just perfect,” he generally adds. From Erik’s perspective, anything short of a violent hailstorm is “perfect” weather for biking in the Sourlands. He is the most optimistic person I have ever met, and his enthusiasm is infectious.

Erik’s ability to live “in the moment” is a particular blessing, for he is afflicted with Alzheimer’s disease. Last spring, as the illness progressed into its middle stages, Erik began having occasional difficulties on his solo daily rides, sometimes getting lost on roads that were once comfortably familiar to him. His wife asked if I would ride with him from time to time, and so began our weekly excursions together.

Each week, I planned a route that allowed us to visit one of the many points of interest on the Mountain. We visited the Charles Lindbergh estate and Hunt House, which served as George Washington’s headquarters when New Jersey was at the crossroads of the American Revolution. We visited a number of parks and preserves, and searched for locally renowned rock formations, with varying degrees of success. Several times we stopped for muffins at the Peacock Country Store, a particular favorite of Erik’s. One day we had an early lunch of hamburgers

at Hillbilly Hall – we arrived before the cook was on duty, but the bartender graciously agreed to feed us the one thing she knew how to cook. Erik was excited by some advertisements for a beer he remembered from his younger days in Sweden, but we cheerfully drank iced tea.

The destinations, of course, were secondary; the main point was to be out biking in the splendor of the Sourlands. For the most part it was truly idyllic, but there were trying times as well. Although Erik has exceptional strength and stamina for a person his age, we sometimes had to walk our bikes up stretches of the mountain. I remember walking up the entire mountain one “perfect” summer day: 90 degrees with humidity so high I couldn’t tell whether it was raining (and it hardly mattered), melting tar grabbing at the soles of our shoes.

The most difficult part of these excursions, though, was gauging Erik’s ability and keeping him safe. In some ways it was like being a parent, but in important ways it was different; I had to shake some of the habits and assumptions of parenthood. For instance, a parent knows that once a child has mastered a skill, it’s something that can be built upon. An Alzheimer’s patient, though, may not be able to deal with a situation with which he had no trouble the previous week. And then the next week he may be OK with it again.

So I stayed close to him, although I would ride ahead on the downhills, which I like to take fast and Erik handles more prudently. I would wait at the bottom, a bit anxious until he showed up.

Unfortunately for Erik, there were a couple of occasions when I misjudged his capability and he paid the price. Both involved unusual obstacles – a partially washed-out culvert and a big bump of fresh asphalt patch – which I had foolishly assumed he would cope with but instead sent him crashing when he didn’t appreciate the challenge in front of him. There were scrapes and bruises only – and Erik never lost his sunny outlook – but on both occasions I felt ashamed for not having been more vigilant.

There were surreal moments as well. One day I wanted to check out a report that a nursing home on the mountain was for sale and the property might be subdivided for development. Erik and I rode down to gorgeous Featherbed Lane to have a look. While I checked out the fine print on the for-sale sign, one of the residents of the home – seemingly suffering from advanced Alzheimer’s – came up to us and started talking nonsense. Erik, mystified, tried to be polite. Afterward, he was unusually subdued. I wondered if he understood this might be a glimpse of his own future.

Sometimes we would come upon a sight and Erik would say, “I remember this!” seemingly trying to convince himself. When we crossed Rock Brook, Erik would explain that his last name means “rock brook” in Swedish; he has told me this at least a hundred times now. We would return to my house, from which we had started our ride, and Erik would not remember where we had been, or even know where he was. “Is this your house?” he once asked, although he had been there countless times. “It’s very nice,” he said, when I answered affirmatively.

Our rides stopped at the end of last summer, due to my exceptionally busy fall schedule. Although Erik’s diminishing capabilities had made continued riding a dicey proposition, I still held out some hope that

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Sourland Oral History

Hannah Suthers (cont'd)



People might be surprised to hear that such a diverse number of birds inhabits this semi-rural plot of central New Jersey. Hannah has advice for those who are interested in becoming better acquainted with birds ranging from year-round residents like bluebirds and goldfinches to exotic migrants like scarlet tanagers and hooded warblers.

First of all, she says, keep your cats indoors. Cats are an introduced species that kill millions of songbirds every year. Especially vulnerable are ground-nesting birds like veerys, black and white warblers, ovenbirds, and towhees. A cat on the prowl at night can take a nest full of eggs and a tired mother bird with them.

To convert your yard into a bird sanctuary, she recommends planting native species of flowers, shrubs, and trees. Spicebush, dogwoods, cardinal flower, spotted-touch-me-not; each has ornamental value to match typical nursery imports, with the added benefit of millennia of co-evolution with native birds, butterflies, and other wildlife.*

To augment the miniature ecosystem of native plants in her own yard, Hannah keeps several birdfeeders going all year long. The extra food she can offer helps offset all the food sources being lost to development.


Lastly, she says, don't use pesticides and herbicides. These poisons kill birds, who after all live on plants and insects.



In the early 1980s it seemed certain that the Featherbed Lane research station would be razed and tract housing put in its stead. A developer owned the property and dollar signs were flashing in his eyes. But Hopewell Township

made it clear that sewage services would not be extended to the site, and the abandoned farm fields were purchased as a nature preserve by a coalition of D&R Greenway Land Trust, NJ Green Acres, and Friends of Hopewell Valley Open Space.

Suthers' long-term dedication to the site has allowed her to publish important studies documenting the changing avian use and habitation of these abandoned hay fields as they one by one develop into deciduous forest. Currently, she is studying gray catbirds to find out how long male birds can occupy territories before yielding to younger generations. Some catbird patriarchs have been resident at Featherbed Lane for as long as eight years.


Among the wild growth and constant change of the young forest, these things are constants—the tenure of catbirds, the ruby-throated hummingbird who returns to the same perch year after year, and the curious eyes and skilled hands of Hannah Suthers. 

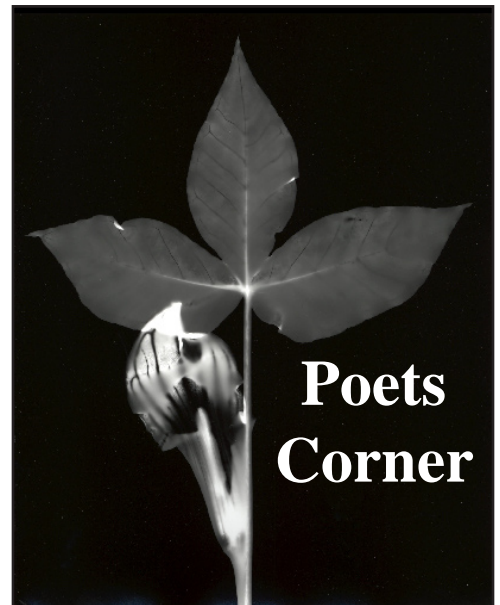
* For more about native plants, see Bowman's Hill Wildflower Preserve at www.bhwp.org or call 215-862-2924.

Biking with Erik

(continued from p. 5)

we would be able to resume in the spring. It pained me to consider that it was time to take away from Erik this particular joy, one of the few remnants of personal freedom in his life.

In fact, Erik's condition worsened quickly, and by spring he had been admitted to a full-time care facility. I am left to enjoy the memories of our rides together, and to hope that one day someone will be around to help me extend my own time in the mountains. That, I think, would be "Wonderful, wonderful." 



Jack in the Pulpit • Photograph by Rachel Mackow

By An Old Stone Wall

for Edna Brokaw Voorhees

Blocked by steeple bushes, wild cherry
and four-foot weeds I can't name,
I glimpse flashes of pink, deep purples.
Wading through brambles
I discover a low stone wall
where showy clusters of columbine
trespass from crevices
and nod in the tall grasses.

Planted with coral-bells and lilies,
my grandmother may have known
old fashioned columbine as
ladies' britches, granny's bonnet,
or litle doves, and for an instant

I spy her on hands and knees,
digging in her prize rose garden,
fingers knuckled with arthritis,
and recall how she brought me
a bouquet when I was in bed
with June grippe, ten years old,
my first gift of flowers—
sweetness and thorns.

~ Norma Voorhees Sheard



Red Oak Leaves • Photographs by Rachel Mackow



Jim Popik and Ten Foot Tall

They say that luck is 90% perspiration and 10% inspiration. The beautiful weather that embraced the Sourland Music Festival on July 21st could be described as the kind of luck that was simply divine. The gods were smiling

volunteers, sound and stage crew, Drew Munro and the staff at the Hillsborough Country Club, and of course the musicians. Nomad Pizza and SPC Catering created just the right kind of culinary

on the Sourlands as the festival captured the magic of the mountain for over 1000 people who attended. A festival like this takes preparation and execution, and earnest

perspiration by the festival organizers,

triumph that now seems to be a mainstay of the festival. The food was down home and exceptional. The music was intimate and joyful. And, the summer breeze blowing across the ridge had all the children dancing. We had a blast and met old friends. Who can forget the brilliant orange sun setting over the Amwell Valley while the crescent moon ushered in the music of Ten Foot Tall and Amfbian. Those who were there were blessed by a soulful display of Sourland magic. Those that weren't can come next year . . . same time, same place. 

Rev. Truman Goines
Tom Kilbourne
Jim Popik


3M to Close Belle Mead Quarry

3M announced in June that it plans to phase out operations at its Belle Mead quarry because of reduced customer demand and increased costs of operation.

NJ Department of Environmental Protection has repeatedly cited 3M in recent years for violating clean water standards. The site includes an enormous 40-acre pile of mineral fines that are a byproduct of the mining operation. Rainstorms erode the pile, causing the fines to run off into local streams, turning the water a milky white. Nearby homeowners also have reported problems with the fines polluting the air.

3M says it plans to market the site "for future commercial operations." However, Somerset County is reportedly interested in acquiring the land

for incorporation into the Sourland Mountain Preserve.

"The question on everyone's minds now is what will happen to that fines pile when 3M shuts down," says Sourland Planning Council Vice President Cliff Wilson. "It's very important for DEP and the municipalities to insist on a plan that protects the environment and does not let 3M off the hook." 



Black Cohosh in Fog – Rachel Mackow

John Brunner Executive Director

The Sourland Planning Council is very pleased to announce that we now have a permanent executive director. John Brunner has twenty plus years experience working for nonprofit conservation and watershed groups, mostly within the Delaware River Basin. He led the 7-year effort to study the Musconetcong River for National Wild and Scenic designation, culminating with official designation in December 2006. He is an avid canoeist and naturalist who paddles at least 300 miles of rivers and streams each year. He's also an accomplished musician. Welcome, John!

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This is a birds-eye view—what migrating birds will see as they pass over central New Jersey looking for places to rest. Today, the mountain invites these birds to stop over. Today, this huge continuous forest invites deep-woods songbirds to nest. If all this development takes place, the Sourlands will look more or less like the rest of central New Jersey to the migrators, and some nesters will lose their nesting grounds entirely.

However, birds will not be the only victims. The increased demand for water will endanger the water supply for the tens of thousands of people who depend on the mountain to recharge their water table. We've already seen some impact, according to the hydrological study that also was done in Phase I (a future newsletter digest). This much development would also greatly diminish the

recreational value of the Sourlands and its natural beauty and character.

Much of this development will not actually take place. Some lots have no connection to a road; some will not produce a perc for septic systems; hopefully very many will go into preservation. One of the primary purposes of the Sourland Planning Council is to educate the public and our policy makers and governing bodies about the implications of development in the region and to help coordinate regional planning so that our growth really is smart—that is, best for all the stakeholders (including the non-human life) over the long term. We invite you to visit our website and look more carefully at the Build-out Analysis, which has much more information than this article, and at the other four studies, so that you can be as informed as possible as we plan our future growth.

Sourlands Store

New Jersey's Sourland Mountain Softcover, 162 pages, by T.J. Luce **\$20.00**

Plush Red-breasted grosbeak with green Save the Sourlands sash Squeeze it and it sings! **\$8.00**

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Sourland Planning Council



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