



WMEAC



ANNUAL REPORT

2019 — 2020





Letter from the Executive Director

Writing a “year in review” is always a little tricky when your “year” actually began 18 months ago. After some debate, in late 2018 we decided internally to change WMEAC’s fiscal year to a July 1– June 30 calendar. And while the novel coronavirus changed nearly every way in which we work in the world, it was only a factor for the 4th quarter of our 2020 fiscal year. I vividly remember a meeting I had in February 2020 with long time project partner Ecology Center. We discussed whether it was wise for me to make a trip to Washington DC for Great Lakes Days, where WMEAC meets up with other water advocates from Michigan (and beyond) to talk with our elected officials on Capitol Hill about the importance of protecting this unparalleled natural resource. I made the trip, which would end up being the last time I was on an airplane as of this writing. It wasn’t long after that our entire world changed, and a frightening new virus would knock most other news from the headlines.

Prior to all that, however, WMEAC stayed busy and true to form. In July of 2019, the hard work of a steering committee of which I was a part paid off as we brought Paul Hawken to town to discuss practical applications of his book Drawdown to a mid-sized city like Grand Rapids. The event sold out and was by all measures a smashing success. Alongside a group of concerned citizens, WMEAC successfully held off a bid to dredge the Grand River. We ramped up our Lakeshore work by adding a staff member from Muskegon County to focus solely on communities that border the Big Lake, and also stepped into energy democracy campaigns in both Holland and Grand Haven. And although COVID shut down plans to host a similar event in Grand Rapids, WMEAC collaborated with our sister organization EMEAC, as well as Ecology Center, Sierra Club, and Soulardarity, to host an in-person dinner and conversation around energy (production, pricing, etc.) at the Hotel St. Regis in Detroit.

Thank you for taking some time to read this quick recap of our year. You’ll find further details on some of these projects and others once you dive into the report. I’m sure that next year, 2021, there won’t be words to describe what we have all been going through. Please know that we are in this fight for the environment together, and WMEAC will continue working for a safer, cleaner, and more equitable world alongside supporters like you. We appreciate you.

Sincerely,



Bill Wood
WMEAC Executive Director



WE.

Community. There is beauty in this place we live. It stems from the natural wonders of the lakeshore dunes and streams running through our cities. But this beauty reveals its truest form in the people who come together in a shared love, to protect and preserve West Michigan.

ME.

Commitment. There is a power in the individual resolve. It is a source of energy and a guide to keep us true. And the seeds of this energy lie in each of us, waiting to emerge. Ready to change minds. And to change the world.

ACT.

Action. We must preserve this special place for all generations. By gathering our collective hopes and intentions, we create a beginning. Our next step is to act; placing our intentions in policy commits our communities to sustaining what is best for today and tomorrow.

What we do best:

Advocating. Activating. Educating. Partnering.



Water

ELAINE STERRETT ISELY & CARLOS CALDERON

RAINY DAY PROJECT

Rainy Day Contest participants from Baxter, Garfield Park, Roosevelt Park, and Seeds of Promise neighborhoods in Grand Rapids received “water conservation kits” and green stormwater infrastructure assessments. During the Summer and Fall of 2019, we installed 16 low flow toilets, 16 low flow showerheads, and 34 faucet aerators in 17 homes. We delivered 11 rain barrels, and conducted 8 Grand River Rainscaping Assessments for placement of native plantings and/or rain gardens. Water bills were compared for the same periods in 2018 and 2019, and contest participants collectively reduced their water consumption by 42,636 gallons of water. On average, each contest-participant-household saved 2,500 gallons of water per quarter, and the top water-saver in each neighborhood received a \$100 credit toward their year-end water bill.

The Rainy Day Project went beyond the installation of water-saving devices and green infrastructure though. It was also a learning process for WMEAC and our partners to improve our community outreach and inclusion strategies and build more authentic relationships with community members we don’t typically reach, but who live in areas that are often identified as a priority. This project allowed WMEAC staff and partners to put a significant emphasis on “walking alongside” our community, instead of the more typical “top-down” approach to community interventions. While there is still more work to be done – relationships take time to build and nurture – this project has resulted in an improved inclusion strategy.

STORMWATER WORKSHOPS

We distributed 108 rain barrels at workshops and community events in FY 20. We are continuing our bourbon rain barrel specialty workshops, and also have some steel barrel options. Three of our rain barrel workshops targeted residents in the Ridgemoor Neighborhood who live along the Alger Ravine, where the City is doing a reconstruction project to help manage stormwater runoff and prevent flooding.

Our Stormwater Solutions workshops were updated to include a new soil and infiltration station to go with our floodplain model demonstration and rain barrel and green stormwater infrastructure station. We are still refining our Rainwater Rewards Stormwater Calculator station.

STORMWATER ROCK: WATERSHEDS

WMEAC’s latest stormwater video and accompanying coloring book were released last year. WMEAC partnered with the City of Grand Rapids; the Wege Foundation; and the Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy to develop a catchy song and video to help educate young people about the impacts of stormwater runoff on streams and rivers. We followed the video with a corresponding coloring book, printed in English and Spanish. The song was written and performed by Brian Vander Ark and the video and coloring book were created by Michael Lynn Animation Studios.

GREAT LAKES GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE CHAMPIONS NETWORK

The Director of Water Programs has participated in this network as a Pioneer Champion for the last two rounds of this Great Lake Commission-led program. In year 1, she mentored Emerging Champion Sanitary District of Michigan City (IN) and added their local data to our Rainwater Reward Stormwater Calculator. Last year, she mentored Emerging Champion Muskegon Conservation District and continues to help them locate additional funding resources to review stormwater ordinances for the members of the Muskegon Area Municipal Stormwater Committee.

WOLVERINE COMMUNITY ADVISORY GROUP

The Director of Water Programs continues to serve on the Wolverine Community Advisory Group (CAG), and is providing leadership on the Communications Committee. WMEAC has been managing the CAG’s website, and has provided eco-journalism and policy intern support. The CAG will be transitioning from US EPA facilitation in 2021, and WMEAC is helping the CAG find additional funding sources for local facilitation and meeting management.

WMEAC would like to congratulate Lynn McIntosh, who was the 2019 recipient of the Petoskey Prize for Environmental Leadership for her work with the Concerned Citizens for Responsible Remediation to hold Wolverine Worldwide accountable for its contamination of groundwater with PFAS and other contaminants in Northern Kent County.

GRAND RIVER WATER TRAIL

This Spring we completed our latest Water Trails report: Lower Grand River Water Trail Planning for Kent and Ionia Counties. This report explores the benefits of a water trail, educational opportunities, designation, and funding sources for water trail development and maintenance; it also provides an inventory of existing and recommended infrastructure and water trail assets in Kent and Ionia County. This work, along with our 2016 report focused on Ottawa County will be used by Grand Valley Metro Council/ Lower Grand River Organization of Watersheds to prepare a Lower Grand River Water Trails Management Plan and apply for state and federal designation of the Lower Grand River as a Water Trail.

STORMWATER OVERSIGHT COMMISSION

The Grand Rapids Stormwater Oversight Commission (SOC) is an appointed, citizen-led body that reviews the City’s stormwater system and makes recommendations regarding policy and practices and budgetary matters to the City Manager and City Commission. Our Director of Water Programs is the current Chair of the SOC, and it was due, in part, to her leadership that the City elevated its stormwater management as an essential function in its COVID response earlier this Spring.

MICHIGAN STATE WATERWAYS COMMISSION

As a result of our Water Trails work, our Director of Water Programs was appointed by Governor Gretchen Whitmer in Fall 2019 to the Michigan State Waterways Commission MSWC). The MSWC is a seven-member advisory board that works with the Department of Natural Resources on the use of dedicated funds, provided by boaters, for the acquisition, development and maintenance of public harbors and boating access sites, as well as certain locks and dams. In 2019, the MSWC was charged with developing a funding source for the state’s Water Trails program.



Environmental Education

THEA VANGOOR & KYLE HART



The 2019-2020 school year required flexibility from everyone. We expected a normal year to start with, delivering field experiences for 6th-grade students in Grand Rapids Public Schools, as well as 5th graders in West Ottawa and Godfrey Lee schools. WMEAC education staff and interns guided students and teachers through the Teach for the Watershed program. By engaging with local watersheds, students and teachers conduct water chemistry tests, study in-stream habitat conditions, and discover the diversity of macroinvertebrate communities. Our goal is to provide an experience that shows students how they play an important role in influencing their local environment.

Though we did some fieldwork in the fall, the bulk of our environmental education work is done in the spring, when weather is most suitable for stream study. We were really disappointed to not get to meet with all of our scheduled spring classes, but realized the priority of keeping everyone safe. The education team is now working diligently to prepare a series of stream study videos for teachers to use. We are also working on increasing our virtual learning opportunities.

In July of 2019, we hosted a no-cost summer camp for students at Joe Taylor Park. Youth went on a tree scavenger hunt, made seed bombs, learned about stormwater, and how to use a microscope. The highlight of the camp was racing solar powered cars that participants built around the park.

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION IN THE COMMUNITY

In addition to our school programming we were able to bring our education programs and resources to a variety of community events throughout West Michigan. These include:

- The Macatawa Water Festival where students were able to learn different modes of creating renewable energy such as wind, hydro, and solar power.
- We hosted a breakout session at the 3rd annual *Making the Case for Green Infrastructure* hosted by the Macatawa Area Coordinating Council. Our education team presented two tabletop models to demonstrate the effectiveness of natural solutions for managing stormwater such as native plants and conserving wetlands.
- Supported several rain barrel workshops with vital stormwater education for our community. Our goal is to reduce the volume of stormwater entering our waterways after it rains to prevent runoff from transporting pollution and causing erosion in our streams and rivers.
- Supported the Earthsavers Club, an after school group at Congress Elementary School.

- We partnered with Wormies, a local composting business in Grand Rapids, to host a DIY composting workshop that trained teachers on how to create, maintain and incorporate vermicomposting (composting with worms!) into their classrooms.
- We hosted a breakout presentation at the *Climate Change Education Solutions Summit* hosted by the Geography and Sustainable Planning Department at Grand Valley State University. Our session highlighted how we utilize place-based learning to transform students into stewards of our environment.
- Our education team hosted an interactive table at the *Sportsmen for Youth Day* at the Muskegon County Fairgrounds.
- Waste Reduction presentation for students at Forest Hills High School.
- Once again WMEAC supported the *Grand River Water Festival* hosted at Riverside Park, Grand Rapids with an interactive demonstration of stormwater and pollution.

THE MAYORS' GRAND RIVER CLEANUP

The 2019 Mayors' Grand River Cleanup proved to be the largest community river cleanup that WMEAC has hosted to date. Over 1,200 volunteers participated in early September, 2019. They spread out across Grand Rapids, Wyoming, Walker, and Grandville picking up trash and recyclables from the banks of the Grand River and tributaries like Plaster, Buck and Indian Mill Creeks. Many volunteers also focused on storm drains and street trash pickup since we know that nearly all the trash that starts on the street will end up in our waterways. Over 7,000 pounds of waste were kept out of our river and streams because of these efforts. This community event could not take place without the support of the mayors and staff of these four cities, incredible donors like Dean Transportation and Meijer as well as all of the individuals and families – young and old alike – who volunteer each year.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

We are always learning and absorbing information and best practices from our local community partners. Some of our professional development this year included:

- Invasive species removal training through the Kent Conservation District.
- Attending the EdX online course: *Climate Change: The Science and Global Impact* presented by Michael Mann, a Professor of Atmospheric Science at Penn State University.
- Attending an *EnviroDIY* training session sponsored by Schrem's Chapter of Trout Unlimited and Stroud Water Research Institute (PA) about the *Mayfly Data Sensor*. These tools allow researchers, students, or citizen scientists to remotely monitor conditions of a freshwater stream such as its flow or temperature.
- Kyle served as a moderator at the Environmental Justice Symposium at Pierce Cedar Creek Institute. This panel was a collaboration between WMEAC and PCCI and featured the expertise of Paula Collier (SEEDS of Promise), Deirdre Courtney (Western Michigan University), and Alex Markham (Healthy Homes Coalition).

- We both did work to complete our Master Rain Gardener certification. This initiative from the Washtenaw County Water Resources Department highlights the use of native Michigan plants in gardens that are designed to absorb and clean stormwater runoff from homes and parking lots.
- Thea completed coursework for Urban Environmental Education and Environmental Education Outcomes through Cornell University.

EDUCATION GRANT NEWS

WMEAC was one of 29 organizations in the country to receive funding for the "Our Community in Land and Water – E-STEM" grant which we used in Muskegon. This funding from the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) will allow us to continue to partner and collaborate with the Boys and Girls Club of the Muskegon Lakeshore to develop students' environmental literacy and leadership skills while participating in learning activities that connect them to nature.

Another exciting grant that we received was from the JSJ Foundation to give a series of four "Trash Talks." The themes for these workshops include topics on: Food Waste and Composting, Conscious Consumerism, Waste Savvy Businesses, and Sustainable Schooling. The actual workshops are on hold until the summer of 2021.

Our programming in schools could not happen without our interns. They dedicate a lot of time, energy, and enthusiasm for our programs. We would like to recognize and thank the following:

Matt Bain, Paige Lackey, Eva Kool, Rachel Jongsma who interned for Teach for the Watershed and Sarah Geal, who served as a Zero Waste intern with WMEAC and Kent County Department of Public Works.

Advocacy

BILL WOOD

HEALING OUR WATERS

The Great Lakes Coalition's Healing Our Waters (HOW) mission is to secure a sustainable Great Lakes restoration plan and the federal funding to implement. It maintains an active presence in Washington DC to help educate elected officials about the importance of Great Lakes restoration investments and policies. WMEAC has been an active member of HOW for more than 10 years. This last year our staff participated in a special fly-in for Clean Water for All, and Great Lakes Days in Washington, DC. Both of these events were focused on highlighting successful Great Lakes Restoration Initiative projects to our Great Lakes congressmen and congresswomen.

GRAND RIVER DREDGING

Throughout 2019, WMEAC provided meeting space and support for the Friends of the Lower Grand River, who fought against the Grand River Waterway Project to dredge the Grand River from Grand Haven to downtown Grand Rapids. Due to these efforts, the state-allocated funding for this project was redirected to other programs in November 2019.

PIGEON RIVER COUNTRY ADVISORY COUNCIL

In late 2019, Executive Director Bill Wood received an appointment from DNR Director Dan Eichinger to a seat on the Pigeon River Country Advisory Council. WMEAC's involvement with the council goes back several decades, when we acted as a litigant in the legal case that eventually established the Michigan Natural Resource Trust Fund. Outgoing WMEAC Board Member Peter Gustafson has acted as the Action Council's representative on the PRCAC for over 25 years and has passed the torch to Mr. Wood in order to maintain that a strong environmental voice is represented in this unique arrangement of land management in the Lower Peninsula.



Environment For All

ERICKA POPOVICH

IDEAL

In the summer of 2018 the Inclusion and Development of Environmental Allies and Leaders (IDEAL) Committee created a white paper (referred to as the IDEAL Values Paper) for WMEAC staff and board to outline the values of the IDEAL committee and provide guidance and support for incorporating those values into the next strategic plan. The IDEAL Values Paper recognizes the goal of Environmental Justice as an overarching value in the organization's work.

Understanding that the environmental justice and climate justice issues we face today are the result of a colonial system that fails to value other ways of knowing and sustaining the environment, WMEAC partnered with Dr. Andrea Mukavetz-Riley from GVSU to work with her Wicked Problems of Sustainability class. Through this partnership WMEAC learned about decoloniality and indigenous ways of sustainability from a decoloniality expert and the students learned about WMEAC from staff, committee and Board members. At the end of the course, WMEAC was presented with feedback on how the organization could begin the process of decolonizing our operations and programming. Throughout the spring and summer of 2020 the IDEAL committee used this feedback to decolonize the Values Paper in preparation for the strategic planning efforts in the fall of 2020. In addition, one of our IDEAL committee members will be serving as a liaison between the committee and the Board of Directors during the upcoming strategic planning process to ensure these values are appropriately reflected in the organization's work moving forward.

IDEAL has also continued to be engaged in other WMEAC projects, such as the Rainy Day project and the Women, Community, & the Environment Series.

INTERNS

WMEAC is proud of our robust, year-round internship program. Interns are employed for fall, winter/spring and summer academic semesters and support all aspects of the organization. Each intern works closely with a staff mentor throughout the semester to learn and grow as a professional. This fiscal year, 24 talented interns worked a combined 4300+ hours as part of the WMEAC team. We worked with interns from Aquinas College, Grand Valley State University, Hope College, Michigan State University, Northern Michigan University, the University of Michigan, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Western Michigan as well as non-traditional interns exploring new pathways in their career.

Interns worked on a variety of projects as part of the WMEAC team including the Rainy Day Project, Evening on the Lakeshore, the Mayors' Grand River Cleanup, Giving Tuesday, Women, Community & the Environment, and the Blue Tie Ball. They developed marketing and social media strategies for WMEAC's annual events, fundraising campaigns, volunteer opportunities and more. Interns taught environmental education programs, led rain barrel and stormwater education workshops, participated in community events, coordinated volunteer days in the rain garden and green roof, expanded our macroinvertebrate specimen collection, and developed age-appropriate activity calendars for students to stay engaged with nature when the pandemic shut-down in-person learning.



Lakeshore

TANYA CABALA

One of WMEAC's goals in 2020 was to hire a lakeshore staffer and establish a physical office in Muskegon. Lifelong Muskegon County activist Tanya Cabala was hired in late February, 2020 and began to connect with folks eager to collaborate and partner on lakeshore initiatives. Then COVID-19 hit and the office was put on hold, as the focus quickly turned to virtual collaborations, book chats, and numerous other educational events.

ECO-ACTION BOOK CHATS

WMEAC has partnered with one of the Muskegon area's independent bookstores, the Book Nook & Java Shop, to host several environmental book chats. Participants are invited to strategize around actions we can take to carry out the ideas we are learning about. They are also brainstorming new books to read and discuss for 2021! We would love to have you join us!

WHITE LAKE AREA CLIMATE ACTION COUNCIL

The leaders of this new group (new to activism) were inspired by their participation in our winter virtual climate action book chat to organize and begin working with the White Lake area community to set aggressive goals and timetables for climate action.

CLIMATE ACTION TRAINING

We found a great deal of citizen interest in community activism around climate change. To support this, we have been offering training opportunities for citizens wanting to request their city or township declare a climate emergency, and set an aggressive greenhouse gas reduction goal and timetable to achieve it.

GRAND HAVEN ENERGY

We assisted Grand Haven area residents working as part of a new group, Grand Haven Energy, to promote clean energy alternatives and halt construction of a costly new fossil fuel facility and office complex on Harbor Island.



What's Next?

CLIMATE ACTION

During the year 2020, WMEAC continued to lead both locally and regionally in working to mitigate and adapt to the existential crisis posed by climate change. While many of our programs can be viewed through the climate change lens, several explicit climate related projects launched or continued during this year.

REAMP

As part of the midwestern equitable deep decarbonization table known as REAMP, WMEAC was involved in a state-based project known as the People's Power Plan, which was designed to convene ordinary folks around the state to discuss their understanding of and relationship to the energy grid (production, distribution, pricing, etc.). Playing a supporting role with our partners and allies in Detroit, WMEAC helped convene a dinner and dialog in Fall of 2019 with partners Soulardarity, Sierra Club, Ecology Center, Michigan Interfaith Power and Light, and our sister organization EMEAC. This event was a success, but plans to host a second one had to be scrapped due to COVID-19. The coalition and network built from this is anticipated to bring an energy democracy campaign to Consumers Energy in 2021.

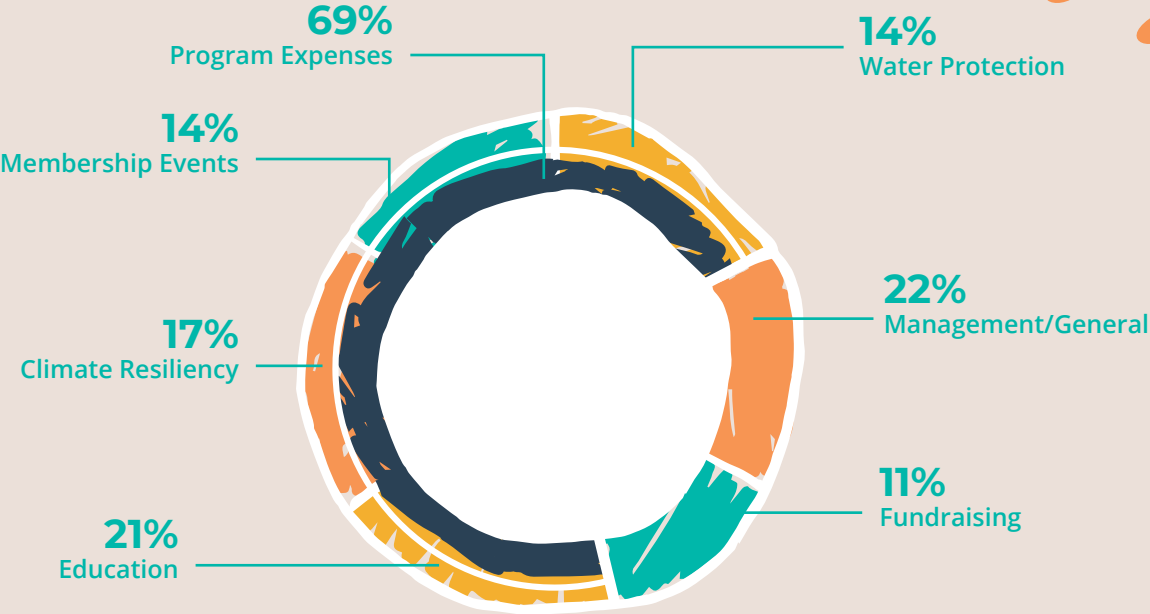
HOLLAND CLIMATE COLLABORATIVE

Responding to requests of helping a concerned group of Holland area residents create an aggressive climate change plan for their city, WMEAC helped organize and launch the Holland Climate Collaborative. During 2020 this group was able to meet in person until COVID-19 pushed us into remote, digital organizing. The HCC has been successful in bringing this prominent issue in front of Holland City Council for discussion, and continues to advocate for an aggressive carbon reduction goal for the community in 2021.

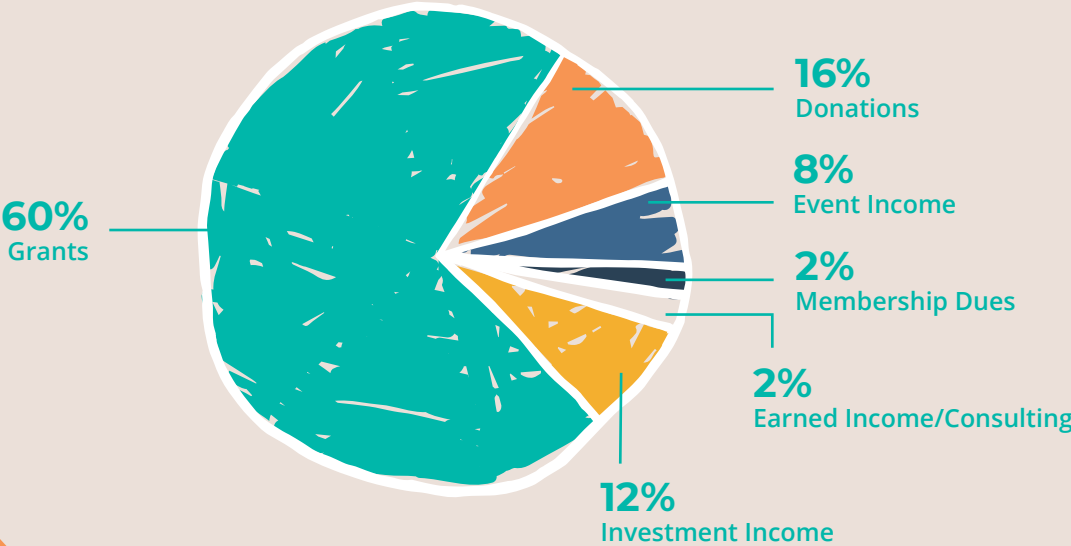
COMMUNITY COLLABORATION ON CLIMATE CHANGE (C4)

WMEAC is part of a collaborative formed in late 2019 to focus on an equity-first long-term solution building project for the City of Grand Rapids to confront climate change. Alongside partners like NAACP, Urban Core Collective, and the West Michigan Sustainable Business Forum, WMEAC participated in a series of exercises designed to create an equitable, intersectional group to focus on addressing the disproportionate outcomes of climate change in the city we call home.

Expenses



Income



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