

MARCH 31, 2024

Understanding and Addressing Non-Structural Blight and Vacant Land in Flint, Michigan

A Center for Community Progress
Memorandum to the Flint Non-Structural
Blight Work Group

MEMORANDUM

Flint Non-Structural Blight Work Group

TO: Non-Structural Blight Work Group Members, Flint, Michigan
FROM: Janell O’Keefe, Associate Director, Technical Assistance, Center for Community Progress
DATE: March 31, 2024
RE: Update to Non-Structural Blight Assessment Summary & Concept for a Vacant Land Stewardship Strategy

This memorandum¹ serves to provide a summary of the work completed through the Flint Non-Structural Blight Work Group from April of 2023 to March of 2024.² It details the participants and process, findings such as defining types of non-structural blight, key observations, a concept for a vacant land stewardship strategy, and specific next steps.

Summary of Next Steps

ACTION STEP	TIMELINE
Develop and implement a collective work plan for the Genesee Conservation District’s Planet Award	Immediate
Connect with the City Planning Department to understand master plan update process	Immediate
Explore why residents struggle with proper storage and disposal	Immediate
Continue to support GCLBA and University of Michigan’s research	Immediate
Further inventory existing efforts	Immediate
Expand data coordination and collection	Immediate
Continue the reinstated “blight meetings”	Immediate
Conduct overall code enforcement assessment	Revisit at end of 2024
Coordinate funders and funding	Revisit at end of 2024
Research causes of dumping	Revisit at end of 2024
Conduct fiscal analysis	Revisit at end of 2024

¹ This memo has been updated from the one issued in December of 2023 summarizing the non-structural blight assessment.

² A note on the word “blight”: Community Progress understands “blight” is the word of choice for many groups who do community revitalization work because it is a widely understood shorthand that quickly illustrates the problem. However, the term is often used ambiguously and in racialized ways to justify the erasure of entire neighborhoods and people deemed aesthetically displeasing. Our organization prefers to use the terms “vacant, abandoned, and deteriorated properties (VAD)” or “problem properties” but may utilize the “blight” or “blighted properties” when requested by our clients and partners. See our [blog post](#) on the topic to learn more.

Work Group Participants

Work Group attendance varied throughout the year. The table below represents the most consistent participants. Additional participants included City of Flint departments, C.S. Mott Foundation, Genesee County departments, North Flint NAC, and the University of Michigan School of Public Health.

NAME	ORGANIZATION
Tryphena Clarke	Ruth Mott Foundation
John Cohoon	Genesee Conservation District
Heather Griffin	City of Flint, Sanitation Division
Melissa Hertlein	Genesee County Land Bank
Michelle Kachelski	Neighborhood Engagement Hub
Taylor Franklin	Genesee Conservation District
Roy Lash	City of Flint
Julie Lopez	Crime Stoppers of Flint & Genesee County
Patrick McNeal	North Flint Action Council
Quincy Murphy	City Council, Ward 3
Janell O'Keefe	Center for Community Progress
Raynetta Speed	Genesee County Land Bank
Angela Warren	Genesee Conservation District
Justin Zigoris	Genesee County Land Bank Authority

Work Group Process Overview

The Ruth Mott Foundation (Ruth Mott) convened a group of Flint stakeholders to discuss non-structural blight at the end of 2022 and beginning of 2023. The need to discuss non-structural blight arose from the focus on demolition in Flint's American Rescue Plan Act State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (ARPA SLFRF) allocation and city council and resident concerns that non-structural blight was also a significant problem and needed to be addressed.

Through the initial three meetings, the group identified two primary goals: (1) better coordination of existing programs to address immediate needs and (2) a collective inventory of the full depth and breadth of work happening in Flint related to non-structural blight and vacant lots, including current limitations and barriers, to identify opportunities to address non-structural blight and lay the foundation for a comprehensive, long-term stewardship plan for vacant lots.

Ruth Mott invited Center for Community Progress (Community Progress) to participate in the second meeting and expressed interest in us leading a process with this group similar to our past [Community Development Working Group](#). The larger group was receptive to this and a smaller group consisting of Community Progress, Neighborhood Engagement Hub (NEH), Genesee County Land Bank Authority (GCLBA), and the City of Flint Planning Department (City) met to discuss and fine tune process, objectives, and deliverables for the Non-Structural Blight Work Group (Work Group).

Community Progress, with support from NEH, lead the Work Group through 10 meetings in 2023-24. Meetings consisted of time to (1) learn from participating organizations (e.g., presentation on GCLBA land disposition policies) to ensure a collective understanding of each other’s roles in addressing non-structural blight; (2) share project and program updates and identify areas for collaboration (e.g., letters of support for grant applications, coordinating projects in one neighborhood); and 3) review and discussion of Community Progress’s assessment activities.

What is “non-structural blight”?

Through this process, the Work Group determined a primary need was to define what they meant by non-structural blight (NSB), as there was not a consensus understanding or definition at the outset. Through a series of activities in Work Group meetings, they determined the following characteristics of NSB:

- > Has visual indications of lack of care, making the parcel unsightly or an eyesore. For example, a lack of maintenance, accumulation of household goods outdoors, and intentional dumping (e.g., construction waste, tires).
- > Has other nuisances (e.g., groundhogs) and/or hazardous materials present.
- > Can occur on parcels with and without structures.
- > Can occur on parcels with occupied or vacant structures.
- > Is not synonymous with “vacant lot” (some vacant lots are NSB and some are not).

To further narrow in on what is, and is not, NSB, the Work Group reviewed four common property characteristics: presence of a structure, occupancy of structure, condition of structure, and presence of tall grass, weeds, trash, and/or debris.³ Using these characteristics, the Work Group then discussed whether specific combinations constituted NSB.

Figure 1: Characteristic Combinations and NSB Determination

Structure	Occupied	Condition	Tall Grass, Weeds, Trash, and/or Debris	Is it NSB?
Yes	Yes	Good	No	No
Yes	Yes	Good	Yes	Yes
Yes	Yes	Fair/Poor	No	No
Yes	Yes	Fair/Poor	Yes	Yes
Yes	Yes	Substandard	No	No
Yes	Yes	Substandard	Yes	Yes
Yes	No	Good	No	No




³ While the Work Group discussed these as example scenarios, structure, condition, and “tall grass” and “trash and/or debris” are publicly available fields in the [Flint Property Portal](#). Occupancy data is not publicly available.

Structure	Occupied	Condition	Tall Grass, Weeds, Trash, and/or Debris	Is it NSB?
Yes	No	Good	Yes	Yes
Yes	No	Fair/Poor	No	No
Yes	No	Fair/Poor	Yes	Yes
Yes	No	Substandard	No	No
Yes	No	Substandard	Yes	Yes
No	NA	Good ⁴	No	No
No	NA	Maintained	No	No
No	NA	Unmaintained	Yes	Yes

This activity identified seven combinations that qualified as NSB. The group also specified that while maintained and good-condition vacant lots are *not* NSB in that condition, they are most at risk for quickly becoming NSB should maintenance stop, the reuse project is abandoned, and/or the lots are illegally dumped on. For this reason, the Work Group felt it important to continue including them in the overall NSB conversation.

Given the diversity of characteristics across parcel types and the potential tools that would address them, the Work Group felt that one all-encompassing definition would be insufficient and ineffective. Community Progress developed, and the Work Group adopted, three definitions of non-structural blight.

► Figure 2: Categories and Definitions of Non-Structural Blight

		
<p>IMPROPER STORAGE</p> <p>Accumulation, by occupants, of items that should be stored or disposed of elsewhere, e.g., excessive outdoor storage of household goods and/or appliances, out of service vehicles in driveways and side lots.</p>	<p>UNKEMPT LANDSCAPE</p> <p>Unmaintained vegetation and greenery, e.g., dead trees, tall grass and weeds, bushes covering sidewalks.</p>	<p>DUMPING</p> <p>Intentionally inappropriately discarded waste by non-occupants/owners, e.g., piles of tires, construction debris, piles of household items.</p>

Establishing these categories and their definitions was a significant achievement for the Work Group. They are the key to breaking down the issue and developing strategies to address them.

⁴ For purposes of this activity, “good” condition structure-free parcels mean a new use/purpose has been given to the parcel (e.g., a community garden, pocket park).

Key Observations

In addition to facilitating the Work Group, Community Progress analyzed and reviewed existing local policies, practices, and plans as part of an overall assessment of non-structural blight in Flint. Summarized below are some of our key observations.

- 1. Addressing problem properties is a collective priority:** Flint stakeholders have concentrated on addressing problem properties for several years, including but not limited to 2015's [Beyond Blight Framework](#), [Flint BRAND](#), [Genesee County Land Bank Authority's \(GCLBA\) ambitious demolition fundraising](#), and this Work Group. Flint stakeholders recognize the need for strategic coordination to improve quality of life for neighbors and neighborhoods. Flint already uses many tools to address improper storage, unkempt landscapes, and dumping but this Work Group has been the first step in aligning them in a collective effort.
- 2. Collaboration exists but could be stronger:** All Flint stakeholders must work together to return collective purpose to properties. Currently, Work Group members and other organizations partner on specific projects and initiatives related to property cleanups and vacant property maintenance. Collaborations like [Clean & Green](#) have resulted in positive outcomes, such as violent crime reduction.⁵ Several Work Group participants created new collaborations out of participating. Unfortunately, the City is not always an active participant in these initiatives—whether from lack of capacity or lack of priority—this often limits the potential impact. As the entity with the most tools at its disposal to tackle all categories of non-structural blight, the City must become an active participant in addressing private property maintenance issues.
- 3. Flint has most, if not all, of the necessary tools in place to tackle nonstructural blight, but implementation often falls short:** Flint appears to have all the legal tools available to address improper storage, unkempt landscapes, and dumping.⁶ However, Work Group conversations revealed that implementation and enforcement of codes is often ineffective and changes to the code enforcement process could help improve outcomes.
- 4. These are not Flint-specific problems but could be Flint-led solutions:** Improper storage, unkempt landscapes, and dumping are issues for communities across the country. Flint could be a trailblazer in finding effective solutions to these challenges.
- 5. Organizations are already actively seeking new solutions:** Dumping is one of the most challenging vacant property issues because the bad actor is not the property owner so code enforcement tools to incentivize or compel a property owner to act do not work. Additionally, the parties who are dumping are also often unknown and hard to determine, which makes criminal enforcement difficult as well. GCLBA has begun a research project with the University of Michigan to study, through experimental design, what interventions can prevent dumping on vacant lots. The findings from this groundbreaking research should inform strategies for prevention at the site level and identify potential upstream causes of dumping for further research.

5 Bushman, G., Kondo, M.C., Rupp, L.A., Gong, C., Hohl, B.C., Zimmerman, M.A. Associations between land bank ownership and stewardship of vacant properties and crime, violence, and youth victimization in Flint, MI. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 1–15. https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/flint/latest/flint_mi/0-0-0-1

6 Flint Code of Ordinances, Chapters 30 and 39, https://codelibrary.amlegal.com/codes/flint/latest/flint_mi/0-0-0-1

Concept for a Vacant Land Stewardship Strategy

Flint cannot truly tackle non-structural blight without a long-term comprehensive strategy for repurposing its full inventory of vacant lots, currently 17,834.⁷ This was a specific point of conversation during the Work Group, especially the importance of ensuring that currently repurposed and maintained lots do not revert into properties with non-structural blight. Additionally, given the significant amount of demolition activity slated for the next few years, the time is ripe for strategy development.⁸

The *Imagine Flint* master plan from 2013 provided a substantial step towards a comprehensive approach. Importantly, *Imagine Flint* included real considerations for repurposing lots for long-term uses and not just waiting for market changes and new construction. Any strategy developed should use *Imagine Flint* as a foundation to grow from. There are several implementation steps just within the Land Use Plan that could serve as suitable next steps for the Work Group to explore during strategy development, which are highlighted in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Select Implementation Recommendations from Imagine Flint Land Use Plan⁹

Community Open Space

Work with community stakeholders to educate the residents about naturalization of the Community Open Space place type and to develop individualized naturalization plans for passive areas.

Work with community stakeholders to create organizations such as a land conservancy, land trust, and/or Friends of Flint Parks to help manage Flint's Community Open Spaces.

Discuss possible partnerships to convert some community open space to state or county parks.

Work with the Land Bank to acquire properties around parks for limited park expansion, particularly around waterways.

Green Neighborhood

Continue demolition of vacant and abandoned buildings in poor condition and work with community partners to devise and implement a long-term maintenance plan for vacant lots after demolition.

Promote and incentivize parcel assembly, land acquisition, and lot clearing, prioritizing low-vacancy blocks to facilitate the land use transitions from existing conditions to recommended place types.

Invest necessary resources and promote partnerships with community groups and institutions to maintain community open space and enhance sense of community in low-density neighborhoods

Green Innovation

Promote and incentivize parcel assembly, land acquisition, and lot clearing to facilitate the land use transitions from existing conditions to recommended place type.

Identify and remediate any environmental contamination and site issues that would prevent the desirable development of properties.

Market the Green Innovation areas to potential green innovation businesses.

7 "Flint Property Portal, Pre-Made Maps, Property Type." Flint Property Portal. Accessed March 2024. <https://flintpropertyportal.com/>.

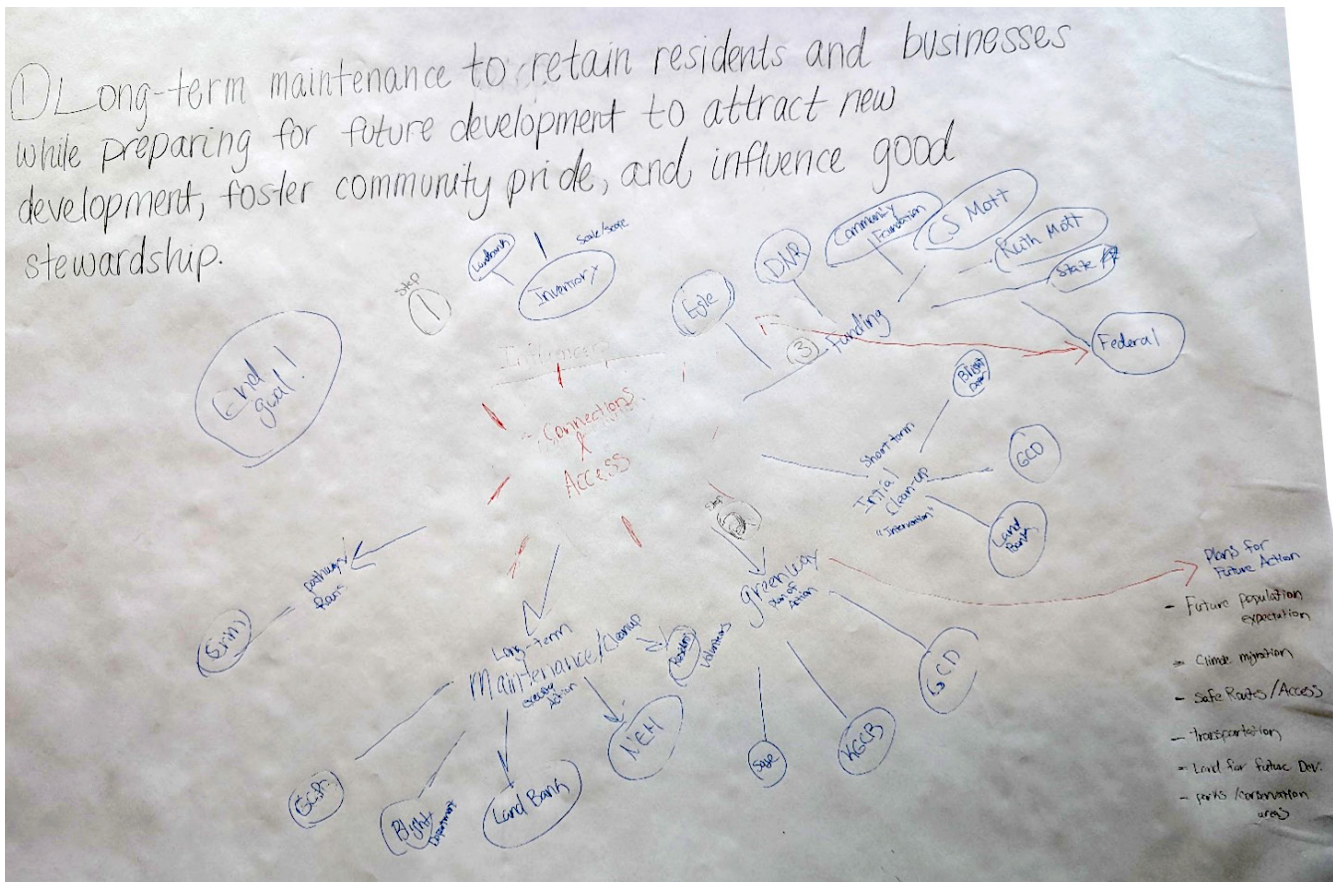
8 "\$39.5 Million Secured to Demolish up to 1,910 Blighted Structures." Genesee County Land Bank Authority. Accessed March 2024. <https://www.thelandbank.org/demolition.asp>.

9 Summarized from: City of Flint. "Imagine Flint: Master Plan for a Sustainable Flint." Chapter 4: Land Use Plan. P 45, 47, 67. (2013).

While *Imagine Flint* provides a place to start, it is also over a decade old and any future strategy should also reflect the vision, priorities, and needs of Flint today. The Work Group began some of that discussion in early 2024. Through a series of activities and conversations, members shared important ideas, considerations, and lingering questions for a future strategy, which are summarized below:

- A desire for a long-term vision that includes a mix of lots integrated into adjacent properties; repurposed to provide ecological benefit and climate resiliency; and redeveloped for economic benefit, including housing.
- A need for transitional strategies on vacant lots, to reduce maintenance burdens and increase environmental and social benefits, while they await longer-term uses.
- A need for a thorough ecosystem mapping of the vacant land system in Flint. Work Group members did some preliminary work, as shown in Figure 4.
- A thorough examination of the long-term ownership options for re-naturalized areas and other community open spaces.

Figure 4: Ecosystem Mapping Activity from Work Group Meeting



Developing a Vacant Land Stewardship Strategy

Developing a vacant land stewardship strategy for Flint will be a large, but necessary, lift. It will require significant planning and fundraising for the process, the strategy, and implementation. Community Progress offers the following process outline for consideration as a starting point for strategy development:

- Expand the core group leading this work, specifically working diligently to get appropriate City departments involved. Discuss and identify where to bring in grassroots and neighborhood groups, likely after initial data analysis. Consider creating i.e., specific working groups portions of the process, writing, and implementation.
 - Identify if or when the City plans to update the master plan and consider aligning this work with that process.
- Develop the full context of vacant land and its conditions in Flint.
 - Fully inventory what data is known and exists to inform future uses for lots. This should include mapping features such as watersheds, tree canopy, soil conditions, lot ownership, zoning, illegal dumping, crime, health, etc.
 - Review and assess all existing city and neighborhood plans and relevant policy, such as zoning ordinances and public property disposition.
 - Identify and collect missing data. Some data points mentioned by the Work Group included flooding issue areas, existing vacant land reuse projects, code enforcement citation history, invasive species presence, and causes of illegal dumping.
 - Institutionalize Your Neighborhood Inventory, meaning establish it as a specific organization or department's responsibility and a local funder commits to funding it for at least another 15 years.
- Develop a collectively agreed upon problem statement and outcome to design and fundraise around. Existing collective visions, like those in *Imagine Flint* and discussed in the Work Group should serve as a starting point.
 - For example, an outcome could be a community open space plan and implementation toolkit.
- Craft a community-engaged, data-driven process to arrive at the desired outcomes.
- Deliver a strategy that answers important, long-term questions, including but not limited to, the following:
 - Who should be the permanent owner of community open spaces?
 - What "green innovation businesses" are feasible and desired in Flint and how should they be recruited?
 - Which lots should be prioritized for which uses, including which ones should receive temporary treatments until the market supports new construction.
 - Short- and long-term solutions to preventing and addressing illegal dumping, unkempt landscapes, and improper storage.

This outline is not presented as a comprehensive list. It is meant to capture points raised by the Work Group and activities Community Progress recommends be included. The Work Group identified two initial next steps related to this strategy development, which are detailed in the next section.

▶ **An example for this process can be found in [Cleveland, Ohio](#), where a group of stakeholders received a U.S. EPA Environmental Justice Collaborative Problem-Solving Cooperative Agreement grant "to engage in a two-year planning and implementation process to unify vacant land reuse strategies around shared environmental justice and economic development goals."**

Next Steps for 2024 and Beyond

At the end of 2023, the Work Group identified potential next steps to consider during the remainder of the Work Group process and beyond. Through the final three meetings in 2024, the Work Group expanded upon some and expressed the strong desire to get *working* on something together. This section summarizes the full list of next steps discussed and provides additional detail on the ones the group is most eager to move on.

Immediate

- **Develop and implement a collective work plan for the Genesee Conservation District's Planet Award:** Work Group members will collaborate around GCD's three-year project to transform approximately 50 vacant, publicly owned lots in Flint. GCD will replicate native landscapes by removing non-structural blight and reforesting four acres (approximately 40 lots) with native trees and establishing native grasslands on the remaining one acre (approximately 10 lots). Work Group members will meet in April 2024 to develop a work plan for collaboration which will include, among other things, coordinated education and outreach, sharing resources for lot clearing,
- **Connect with the City Planning Department to understand master plan update process:** Work Group members believe an update to the master plan is being discussed. They will connect with the Planning Department to find out more details and connect with the process, if it is occurring.
- **Explore why residents struggle with proper storage and disposal:** Work Group members will coordinate with the Sanitation Department on outreach and education efforts for the special waste pickups during Love Your City Month in May. Work Group members will revisit this topic for additional action items in fall of 2024.
- **Continue to support GCLBA and University of Michigan's research:** GCLBA will continue to share updates on the study and findings as they become available and share any opportunities for collaboration and support.
- **Further inventory existing efforts:** Work Group members began an [inventory](#) of existing vacant land projects and programs at the beginning of meetings, but did not complete a full inventory. NEH will lead outreach to members and other organizations to capture that information.
- **Expand data coordination and collection:** Work Group members will continue discussions with Michigan State University and University of Michigan researchers on developing a mapping tool that allows for more citywide data (e.g., tree canopy cover, watersheds) that could inform strategies. Work Group members expressed the need to visualize in a tool besides the Flint Property Portal. Work Group members will revisit later in 2024, exploring ways to collect data on improper storage, unkempt landscapes, and dumping on parcels with structures. If this data exists (e.g., code citations) and how this data might get collected alongside other efforts, such as NEH tool checkouts and the Your Neighborhood Inventory.
- **Continue the reinstated "blight meetings":** The City and GCLBA began meeting weekly around blight issues in 2024. These meetings likely could still be expanded to include other partners and a greater range of topics related to problem properties, intervention activities, and funding opportunities. The Work Group Stakeholders can also use these meetings to set strategies, develop education and communication resources, and improve effectiveness and efficiency of existing processes.

Revisit Later in 2024

- **Conduct overall code enforcement assessment:** Code enforcement is the main tool for addressing property conditions and maintenance. The Work Group highlighted some opportunities to improve coordination with external partners and the need to conduct a comprehensive review of ways to improve equity, effectiveness, and efficiency in code enforcement processes. The City would need to be an engaged partner and leader of this work. Community Progress would welcome a discussion about supporting this work.
- **Coordinate funders and funding:** Nearly every philanthropic institution in Flint offers grant dollars to address non-structural blight in some way—such as funding Clean & Green, vacant land reuse projects, and neighborhood service officers. Most of these funding efforts are not part of an overall strategy. Funders should explore how to coordinate on overall strategy, such as how the [Pontiac Funders Collaborative](#) works.
- **Research causes of dumping:** Work Group members expressed interest in further understanding and identifying what causes dumping. There are likely points to intervene before and beyond the site where dumping occurs that could decrease dumping activity. As GCLBA's research with U of M progresses, Work Group members should explore opportunities for additional research. For example, researching tipping and dump fees, investigating licenses of tire recycling business and tire shops, and bulk waste policies and practices.
- **Conduct fiscal analysis:** The City should explore and analyze how it funds activities to address non-structural blight and opportunities for efficiency, leveraging other dollars, and collaboration with partners. An analysis could also include quantifying the cost of not addressing these issues (e.g., decreased property values, environmental impacts). These analyses could make the case for dedicating more resources to addressing the issue in Flint.

Conclusion

Community Progress hopes this summary is useful to Work Group members, and others, as they continue the important work of serving Flint's neighborhoods. We would welcome the opportunity to support work on code enforcement, illegal dumping, and vacant land stewardship in the future. Thank you for the opportunity to support and serve you over the last year.

Center for **COMMUNITY PROGRESS**

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