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Rural American Post Offices Campaign For Deliverance From Closing

By Todd Wilkinson, Special to The Christian Science Monitor / December 20, 1996

LIVINGSTON, MONT.

This holiday season, residents in Livingston, Mont., are hoping that the United States Postal Service will deliver word of salvation.

Amid the avalanche of Christmas cards, mail-order fruit cakes, and bundled packages, folks here say they want nothing more than to have their downtown post office saved from the scrap heap of history.

While such a request would be a tall order for even a team of fabled reindeer, the ultimate decision in this case lies with US Postmaster General Marvin Runyon.

Today, this Montana village is at the center of a quiet national controversy. The debate swirls around plans from the Postal Service to close down or relocate hundreds of small-town post offices from proverbial Main Streets where they have been the social pillars of rural America's identity since the days of the pony express.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation in Washington, D.C., says the matter is serious enough that next month it may ask the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee, which has jurisdiction over the Postal Service, to hold oversight hearings when Congress convenes.

From Sylvester, Ga., to Madison, Conn., "it is the same story line," says Laura Skaggs, a researcher at the trust. "You can change the cast of local characters ... and the zip code, but the plot remains the same."

Since the early 1980s, more than 2,000 post offices have been targeted because either shrinking rural populations made them no longer viable or, as in Livingston's case, the outdated building cannot keep up with an increasing flow of mail and comply with such issues as access for the handicapped.

Livingston councilwomen Caron Cooper and Sheryl Dahl - who organized a local revolt - say they first heard about the change in a newspaper ad stating an alternative site on the outskirts of town would be selected in 30 days. "It was basically presented to us as a done deal," says Ms. Cooper.

When citizens complained, Postal Service officials at the regional office in Denver, characterized the opposition as "a fringe movement." But when 1,500 signatures (out of 7,500 local residents) were collected in four days, postal officials realized they had a groundswell of protest on their hands.

The protests are "happening everywhere" Cooper says, "but there has been no unified resistance nationally because each community believes it is struggling against a big government bureaucracy on its own."

Cooper and Ms. Dahl argue the \$3.1 million earmarked for a new building could be better spent upgrading the old one, but postal officials have reacted tepidly to that option. Last week, postal authorities refused to allow architects with the state historical preservation office to tour the site.

Dating back to 1912, Livingston's brick and sandstone post office has been a social hub for generations of locals in the old railroad town located an hour north of Yellowstone National Park. The relationship is a special one, though it is no different from the bond developed in every hamlet across America large enough to have a postmaster.

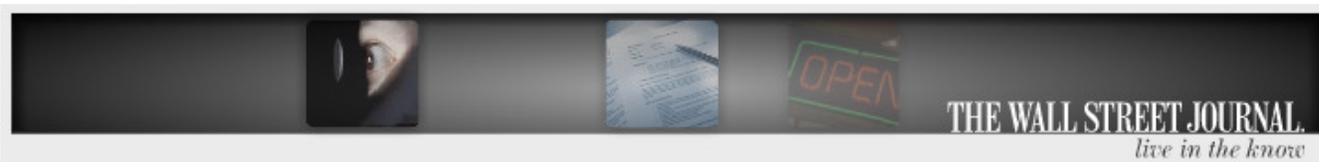
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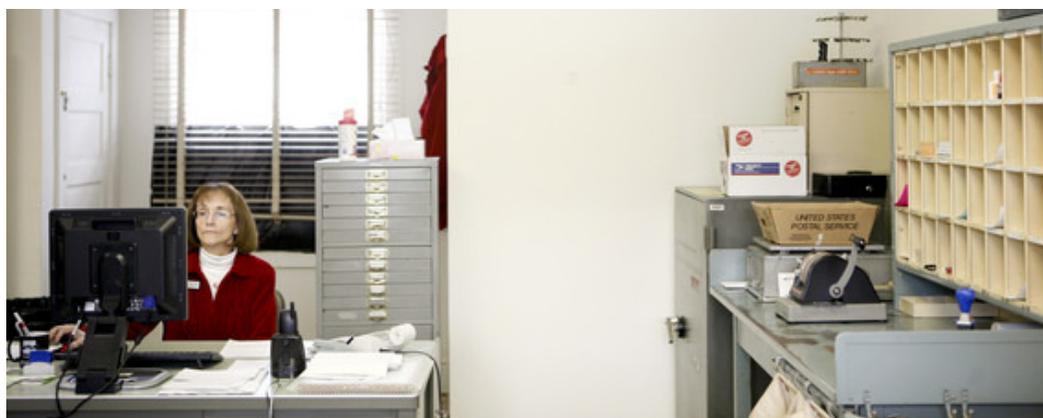
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POLITICS | JANUARY 24, 2011

Postal Service Eyes Closing Thousands of Post Offices

By JENNIFER LEVITZ



Eli Meir Kaplan for The Wall Street Journal

Final days at the Millville, W.V., post office, which closed last week: postal worker Christine Carter

HOLMES MILL, Ky.—The U.S. Postal Service plays two roles in America: an agency that keeps rural areas linked to the rest of the nation, and one that loses a lot of money.

Now, with the red ink showing no sign of stopping, the postal service is hoping to ramp up a cost-cutting program that is already eliciting yelps of pain around the country. Beginning in March, the agency will start the process of closing as many as 2,000 post offices, on top of the 491 it said it would close starting at the end of last year. In addition, it is reviewing another 16,000—half of the nation's existing post offices—that are operating at a deficit, and lobbying Congress to allow it to change the law so it can close the most unprofitable among them. The law currently allows the postal service to close post offices only for maintenance problems, lease expirations or other reasons that don't include profitability.



Jennifer Levitz talks to Simon Constable about the postal service's latest cost-cutting program that will result in the closure of as many as 2,000 post offices

The news is crushing in many remote communities where the post office is often the heart of the town and the closest link to the rest of the country. Shuttering them, critics say, also puts an enormous burden on people, particularly on the elderly, who find it difficult to travel out of town.

The postal service argues that its network of some 32,000 brick-and-mortar post offices, many built in the horse-and-buggy days, is outmoded in an era when people are more mobile, often pay bills online and text or email rather than put pen to paper. It also wants

around the country.

post offices to be profitable to help it overcome record \$8.5 billion in losses in fiscal year 2010.

A disproportionate number of the thousands of post offices under review are in rural or smaller suburban areas, though the postal service declined to provide any estimate on how many beyond those slated to begin closure in March might ultimately close or which ones are being targeted. "We want to make the smartest decisions possible with the smallest impact on communities," Dean Granholm, vice president for delivery and post office operations, said in an interview. He said the agency is identifying locations that are operating at a deficit and looking "for the opportunity to start the process of closing."



Eli Meir Kaplan for The Wall Street Journal

Money-order machine at the Millville, W.V., post office

Post Offices Closing

See a sortable list of 491 post offices the U.S. Postal Service said it was closing starting at the end of 2010.

smaller number of post offices. But while closures have been "on the table" in the past, this push is the agency's most serious yet, Mr. Granholm said, and is drawing widespread interest from a cost-cutting Congress. Still, shutting down post offices is often politically unpopular: elected officials in several communities have already written the Postal Regulatory Commission protesting planned closures.



Eli Meir Kaplan for The Wall Street Journal

Keys in boxes at the Millville, W.V., post office

In addition to reducing employees—it has cut staffing by a third since 1999—the postal service has sought for years to deal with financial woes by raising rates or cutting services, such as a proposal to drop Saturday delivery. It has also talked in the past about closing a much

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smaller number of post offices. But while closures have been "on the table" in the past, this push is the agency's most serious yet, Mr. Granholm said, and is drawing widespread interest from a cost-cutting Congress. Still, shutting down post offices is often politically unpopular: elected officials in several communities have already written the Postal Regulatory Commission protesting planned closures.

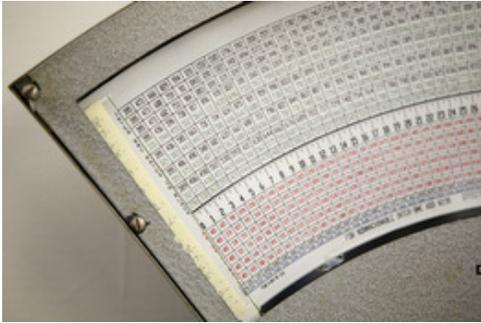
Eighty-three specific post offices were approved for closing during the three months ending Nov. 15, more closings than in any quarter in the agency's history, according to the postal service. In addition, 408 post offices where service has been suspended for various reasons won't reopen amid the fiscal crisis, Mr. Granholm said.

Some of those suspensions are being contested by the Postal Regulatory Commission, independent from the postal service and reporting to Congress, which is investigating whether the postal service has been illegally using reasons such as lease expirations to close small, underused branches. The agency has denied wrongdoing.

When a Post Office Closes

because many citizens see post offices as an essential public service. Postal service dates to the founding fathers, with Benjamin Franklin serving as the first U.S. postmaster general and the Constitution explicitly authorizing Congress to establish post offices. Critics in Washington argue the postal service should reduce what they say is too much spending on employee benefits before resorting to closures.

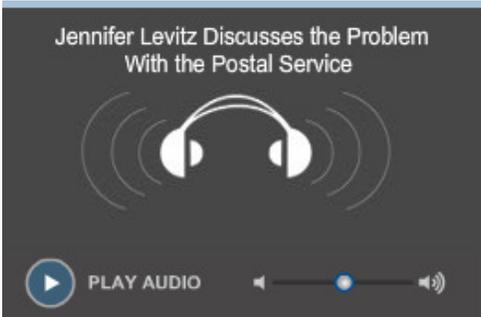
While paring down is a common survival tactic for organizations these days, efforts by the postal service to do so routinely raise alarms



Eli Meir Kaplan for The Wall Street Journal

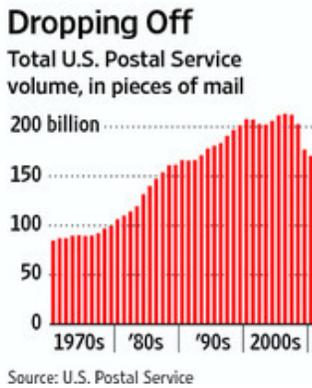
An old scale at the Millville post office. Most post office scales have been replaced by digital versions.

As closure notices go up, citizens are rallying around their post offices in Millville, W.V., Hamilton, Tenn., Prairie City, S.D., and elsewhere, fearing not only a loss of convenience but a death knell for their small towns.



"It ain't right doing this to our community," says Delmer Clark, a 70-year-old retired coal miner in Eastern Kentucky's Appalachian Mountains, in the no-stoptlight town of Holmes Mill. The post office here is set to close next month after more than 100 years. About the size of a garage, it has long been a part of the town's identity, and the pending closing is fueling local suspicion that public officials don't care about them. The local school closed years ago and reliable cable, Internet and cellphone reception has yet to arrive, residents say. "When they close the post office, they probably won't even come up here anymore and clean the roads," says Mr. Clark.

"It will hurt us real bad," says Esther Sizemore, a 62-year-old retired school-bus driver. Not owning a computer, and aching from hip arthritis that makes driving significant distances difficult, Ms. Sizemore drives down the street to the post office to mail her handmade quilts, trade news with friends and pick up packages, since she does her shopping by catalog. She also feels her mail is safer using a post office box; mail thefts have been a problem in the area, says Deputy Winston Yeary, of the Harlan County Sheriff's Department.



The Holmes Mill post office is closing in a consolidation set to claim more than 30 small Kentucky post offices this year, according to local postal officials. It's in the red, costing the postal service \$12,748 in fiscal year 2010, according to the agency.

Residents will still have home delivery, and can use the post office and maintain P.O. boxes in the next town, but some locals fear the drive: The 12-mile roundtrip is on a winding mountain road bordering a steep drop-off to the river and named "Coal Miner's Highway" for the coal trucks that take much of the road.

Some lawmakers say closing post offices is the wrong answer. Sen. Susan Collins (R., Maine) says the agency should instead cut waste in its ranks. Although the postal service has cut its work force through attrition in recent years, it is still weighed down by overly generous employee benefits, she says.

Postal workers pay "significantly" lower premiums for their health and life insurance plans than other government employees because of union agreements, according to a September study sponsored by the Office of Inspector General. The report said the postal service could save \$700 million this year alone by asking employees to pay more. The report, however, also said the postal service's contribution into employee benefits has started to decline, and that more reductions are planned as a result of recent union agreements.

"One of my frustrations is that the first approach the post office seems to take is to reduce service...when instead it

needs to tackle a benefit structure that is too expensive, and it needs to look for ways to stay in business and deal with the digital age," says Sen. Collins.

Related

Pushing the Envelope: A drop in business for U.S. Postal Service is ominous, but the importance of the written word is not at risk in the age of email. (Life & Culture, March 6, 2010)

Small Business: Good News for Junk-Mail Senders (Jan. 14, 2011)

Communities that lose post offices will still get deliveries, either at homes or at clusters of mailboxes set up in town, and there are multiple options for getting postal services, including stamps by mail, said Mr. Granholm of the postal service. Also, he says, many rural dwellers already travel to nearby cities for groceries and other services. "Why can't they go there for the post office?" he says.

Under U.S. law, mail delivery is a "basic and fundamental" government function meant to "bind the nation together" by providing service to "all communities" at a reasonable price. The nation's philosophy of universal postal service has resulted in stamp prices that are among the lowest in the industrial world and post offices from the far reaches of Alaska to easternmost Maine. Yet more than half lose money and "are located in areas where people no longer live, work or shop," U.S. Postmaster Patrick Donahoe testified to the Senate in December.

Legislation filed in Congress and supported by Mr. Donahoe would make it easier for the postal service to close the thousands of unprofitable post offices.

A bill introduced by Sen. Thomas Carper (D., Del.) would repeal wording in U.S. law that says "no small post office shall be closed solely for operating at a deficit." Currently, the postal service must cite other reasons—in addition to finances—such as unsafe conditions or a retiring postmaster.

Mr. Carper says it isn't his intent to reduce access to service, and says the postal service could explore moving more postal counters into existing retail establishments, like banks or supermarkets. "Allowing the postal service the ability to close offices that fail to cover their costs is a huge step toward our future viability," Mr. Donahoe said.

While government owned, the postal service is an independent agency supported primarily by postage fees, though it's allowed to—and does—borrow from federal coffers. Mail traffic, particularly the more lucrative first-class mail, peaked in 2006 at 213 billion pieces, then fell 20% by 2010. The recession contributed to the drop. But a digital revolution is also at play, and with fewer people sending letters, mail volume could fall further to 150 billion pieces, an unprecedented decline, in the next 10 years, according to a September study sponsored by the Office of Inspector General.

Along with shifting consumer behavior, the agency is saddled with billions in unusually burdensome retiree health costs, the inspector general said. Historically, the postal service, which employs 532,800 workers, paid for retiree health benefits when they came due. But postal reform law passed by Congress in 2006 mandated the agency to plan ahead by pre-funding retiree health benefits at around \$5 billion a year for 10 years starting in 2007. "No other federal agency or private sector companies have a similar burden," Mr. Donahoe testified.

Both Sens. Collins and Carper have introduced legislation addressing retiree-health funding.

The pre-funding obligation contributed heavily to recent record losses, and has forced the postal service to borrow from the federal government to meet shortfalls, he said. The agency now owes the U.S. Treasury \$12 billion, and said it expects to max out its statutory \$15 billion line of credit by the year's end.

In towns losing post offices, some citizens believe they are paying for mismanagement at the agency. "From what I understand, the upper crust in the post office gets plenty of money, but they can take away what we have," says Ruby VanDenBerg, who is 86, and lives in Prairie City, S.D., a ranching community of more than 100 farms. The post office officially closed on Dec. 30 after 102 years. Ms. VanDenBerg now drives 40 miles to a post office.

The Prairie City post office cost \$19,000 a year after revenue, says the postal service, which blamed "safety deficiencies" for the closing. Residents say the problem was a faulty furnace, and say they offered to make repairs themselves but were ignored. They have appealed the closing with the Postal Regulatory Commission; their case is under review.

Prairie City postal clerks kept a pot of coffee brewing and posted birth and death notices. "That was the gathering place for people to come in the mornings, have a cup of coffee or a can of pop, and visit, but we don't have that no more," says Daniel Beckman, a recently widowed farmer. "All that's left in the town now is just a church; it's totally depressing."

The closing also crimped an informal local method for delivering medicine to isolated corners of the prairie, rural doctors and pharmacists wrote to the commission.

The area's only major hospital and pharmacy is in Hettinger, N.D., 40 miles away and over the state line from Prairie City. Before, when an elderly person or farmer in Prairie City quickly needed an antibiotic or other medication, a pharmacist in Hettinger would rush prescriptions to the Hettinger post office, catching the mail carrier who each day traveled from Hettinger to the Prairie City post office.

The closing eliminated that direct route, and now Prairie City mail is sorted and delivered on a rural route out of Bison, S.D., delaying the delivery of medicine from Hettinger by two or three days, says Dr. Brian Willoughby, of West River Health Services in Hettinger.

"When they cut these services, there are multiple spinoff consequences for these older people out there in the middle of nowhere, but the bureaucrats sort of forget about that," he says.

More on U.S. Postal Service

[Closing Post Offices Can Be Tricky](#)

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Write to Jennifer Levitz at jennifer.levitz@wsj.com

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The Trentonian (trentonian.com), Serving Trenton, NJ

News

Feds to close historic Chambersburg post office in Trenton

Thursday, April 21, 2011

Staff Report

Trenton's historic Chambersburg post office on South Broad Street is closing on July 1 because it's not handling as much mail as it once did, the U.S. Postal Service announced today.

"Given the extraordinary decline in mail volume — a decline of nearly 26 billion pieces last year alone — we must take action to reduce the size of our retail and delivery network," said Joshua D. Colin, acting district manager for southern New Jersey.

"By consolidating, streamlining and adjusting our operations, the Postal Service becomes a more efficient and effective organization."

Colin said postal employees from the Chambersburg station will be reassigned in accordance with applicable collective bargaining agreements and established repositioning processes.

"Local mail delivery will not be affected by this move. Full retail services will still be available and our customers will continue to receive the same excellent service they always have," said Colin.

Customers wishing to conduct postal business at a local retail office can continue to do so at the:

-- Downtown Post Office – 20 S. Montgomery St. in the city (08608).

-- Independence Station - 2465 South Broad St. in Hamilton (08610).

-- Villa Park Station – 1137 Hamilton Ave. in Trenton (08629).

Customers can skip the trip to the post office altogether and purchase stamps and shipping labels online using the Postal Service's website, **usps.com**.

Customers can also request free package pickup at **usps.com**. The Postal Service will pick up packages during regular mail delivery the next business day – and, unlike other shipping companies, there is no fee for this service.

Postage stamps can also be purchased at 1.800.STAMP 24, thousands of banking ATMs and in more than 63,000 retail outlets across the nation.

This announcement updates a review process which began in the summer of 2009 that examined approximately 3,300 stations and branches in urban and suburban areas across the country, focusing on those facilities in relative close proximity

to one another to determine where consolidations might be feasible, while maintaining customer access to postal services.

URL: <http://www.trentonian.com/articles/2011/04/21/news/doc4db0675c66434859000548.prt>

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Kenansville post office on closing list

County News

Wednesday, 20 April 2011 15:00



Photo/United States Postal Service

Kenansville residents rallied April 12 at a meeting with U.S. Postal Service officials hoping to persuade them not to close the Kenansville post office.

Good Sam site to close Friday

By Fallan Patterson

Staff Writer

With some residents facing up to 100 miles round trip from their ranches to the main St. Cloud post office, Kenansville residents are fighting to keep their post office open.

The office is one of two Osceola County post offices on a list of hundreds the United States Postal Service is considering closing due to budget constraints.

"We're looking at a lot of different things right now," Gary Sawtelle, public information officer for the Southwest Florida USPS district, said, adding changes such as relocating carriers to backroom duties to increase efficiency are being implemented.

Myra McWhorter, president of the Kenansville Community Association, rounded up nearly 150 residents April 12 for a midday meeting with USPS officials, including Sawtelle, at the post office. The meeting was held outside with the officials standing in the bed of a pickup truck filled with hay and mulch because the post office's lobby only fits 10 people.

Residents outlined several reasons they are "fighting tooth and nail" to save their post office, most important of which is the distance one would need to

travel to mail a package.

A round trip from the Kenansville post office at 140 N. Kenansville Road, to the main St. Cloud post office at 4701 Old Canoe Creek Road, is 74 miles. That does not include residents who live on ranches farther south.

"They are angry," County Commissioner Fred Hawkins Jr., who represents Kenansville and attended the meeting, said.

"People can say they chose to live out there but the post office has been in Kenansville since the 1800s."

The original post office opened in 1892, according to a resolution by the Osceola County Board of County Commissioners passed Monday opposing the closing; the current office opened in 1914, Sawtelle said.

Historical significance and a sense of identity are other factors the residents want to keep the office open.

"We've always had a post office in Kenansville," McWhorter said. "We will lose our identity if they take our post office. We'll eventually become (part of) St. Cloud. That's what happened to Holopaw."

The other reason is safety, for both residents and the rural mail carrier who would have to carry cash to make change for people on her route.

"Our concern is for her safety and security," Mc-Whorter said.

Residents use the P.O. boxes mainly for security and temperature control of medications. McWhorter said many residents order their medications through the mail and enjoy the security the P.O. boxes provide.

Sawtelle said the reasons for closing post offices vary on several factors including distance to the nearest post office, costs of salary and leasing space, and the daily traffic and revenue earned by the office.

In 2008, due to traffic flow, the Kenansville post office's hours were shortened to 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Monday-Friday and closed Saturday. McWhorter said USPS told her the daily transactions in the office is \$28.70, on average, a "pathetic" amount McWhorter blamed on the decreased hours.

"And they wonder why the revenue decreased?" she said. "They must think we're a bunch of country bumpkins who wouldn't figure it out."

Sawtelle said the final decision on Kenansville could happen as late as this fall.

Good Samaritan location closing

Due to consolidation to make the post office run more efficiently, the post office branch at 4191 S. Orange Blossom Trail will close Friday.

George Weber, communications director for Good Samaritan Village, said many of the 1,500 residents in the community drive only golf carts and scooters and lack reliable transportation to the other post offices. The nearest location at 1415 W. Oak St. is nearly four miles away.

"It's very distressing. It's really going to be a hardship on a lot of people," Weber said. "I'd rather see them run it a half day than not at all."

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Tiny town hopes to keep post office

Posted: Apr 20, 2011 3:47 PM MDT
Updated: Apr 20, 2011 4:27 PM MDT

By Dal Cannady - [bio](#) | [email](#)

DAISY, GA (WTOC) - Customers outside the post office in Daisy said Wednesday they'll fight Washington if they must to keep their post office open.

"I'm upset because I don't have anywhere else to get the mail and I don't want to drive to Claxton just to get some mail," stated 79-yearold Clara Brewton.

"The post office has just been one of the best things for Daisy. It's just part of the community," added Priscilla Hearn.

Mayor Inman Brown said a representative from the U.S. Postal Service called last week to schedule a public meeting to discuss the office's possible closure.

"I started calling everybody and we started writing letters and doing everything we can do," he said.

That same representative tells WTOC the purpose of the meeting will be to ask customers about the post office and whether it should be closed.

Nancy Ross, a regional spokesperson for the U.S. Postal Service, said by phone no decisions on closures have been made on any offices. The USPS expects to close 500 offices nationwide by the end of the year, but no decisions have been made on which ones. She said costs, especially rising fuel prices, are forcing the USPS to examine how it operates.

A post office was established in Daisy in 1890, making it a quarter century older than Evans County itself. The post office currently rents 180 boxes here, that's more than the 137 residents of Daisy. But the mayor said it goes beyond numbers.

"We are starting to add homes and families and grow ever so slightly," he noted. "If you lose your post office, you lose your identity and we could dry up."

He hopes enough people show up for the meeting next week to keep the small office open. That meeting will take place in the community room between the post office and town hall at 4:30 p.m. April 26.

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