

# SHARING OUR STORIES

BUILDING COMMUNITY  
RESILIENCE IN VANCOUVER







# CONTENTS

Background.....	3
Event Summary .....	3
Meaning of Resilience .....	4
Reflections on Personal Stories.....	5
Future Shocks and Stresses .....	7
Community Resilience Now .....	8
Resilience in the Future .....	9
Post-Event Survey .....	10
Conclusion .....	11
Acknowledgements.....	12



**Background:** What is resilience? What enables people and communities to survive and thrive in the face of crisis? What can we learn from the lived experience of residents to strengthen community resilience now and in the future? With support from 100 Resilient Cities – the City of Vancouver is working with stakeholders to create a Resilience Strategy aimed at building our collective capacity to navigate and withstand stresses (like social isolation) and shocks (like an earthquake) now and in the future. During the first phase of the strategy development process, the resilience team is engaging with community to evaluate local risks, social pressures, and future trends, and to understand the factors that will influence our collective ability to thrive in the face of change.

Resilience starts within community, and the lived experiences of our residents are among our greatest assets in shaping this strategy. The Sharing Our Stories event was hosted in recognition that members of the public have incredible, lived experience with personal and community resilience, and that teasing out some of these personal stories can deliver valuable lessons and information about how resilience is built and enhanced.

**Event Date**  
October 24, 2017

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**Workshop Time**  
7 pm – 9 pm



**Attendees**

**Event Summary:** On October 24th, 2017 the City of Vancouver, SFU Public Square and the Vancouver City Planning Commission hosted the Sharing Our Stories: Building Community Resilience in Vancouver event. The goal of this event was to bring together residents to hear and reflect on stories of personal resilience from residents, and to learn from these stories to build a more resilient Vancouver community. The purpose of the Sharing Our Stories event is to showcase the deep and valuable personal resilience that already exists within the Vancouver community, and to have residents delve into a guided conversation about resilience within the city context, and reflect on how individual, personal lessons in resilience

can deepen our understanding of broader community resilience. Ultimately, resilience starts at the individual and community level. The key themes and lessons from this two hour event will be analyzed and will help inform the development of Vancouver's Resilience Strategy (2019).

While a separate event was held on October 25th with industry professionals, the Sharing Our Stories event acknowledged that experts are not always those with academic backgrounds or industry professionals, but that people with lived experience have significant knowledge, experience, and ideas to offer to complex conversations about resilience.

The over 115 participants of the event worked in groups to describe the resilience challenges the city is facing and articulate their hopes for overcoming these challenges now and in the future. The event lasted for 2 hours and was structured mainly around small group discussions. 15 tables of 8-10 participants discussed resilience using a series of prompts. First, tables started with icebreaker questions. Next, the small groups reflected on the personal and local stories of resilience presented by community leaders (further described below), then followed discussions on the future of Vancouver and its likely shocks and stresses. The last discussion prompt focused on the resilience of participants' immediate communities and neighbourhoods. The small group work ended with another approach to eliciting thoughts on Vancouver's resilience: drawing their visions of resilience for Vancouver.

The primary questions of the evening were, "What can we learn from the lived experience of people and groups in our community that can shape the way we plan for resilience in the future? What's important in making sure that people and communities can adapt and thrive?"

### **Honouring the Traditional Territory: Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations**

Setting the tone for the event, Chief Janice George, Hereditary Chief of the Squamish Nation, shared powerful stories of resilience. One of these stories was of the 1886 Vancouver Fire in which the Squamish People paddled across the Burrard Inlet and rescued hundreds of people as they ran into the water bordering present-day Downtown Vancouver trying to escape the flames. The fire burned all but 3 buildings.

# MEANING OF RESILIENCE

With Chief George's words in mind, participants were then asked to introduce themselves at their tables and answer the question "What does resilience mean to you?"

In these discussions, there was a clear focus on personal, familial and neighbourhood-level attributes, but there was also a focus on larger community and city-level characteristics. The most common themes of these discussions included:

## **Personal strength:**

- One participant described resilience as being able to take what's around oneself in the environment and be able to use it to help oneself.
- Another described resilience as persistence inseparable from adversity.

## **Ability to cope:**

- Several participants described resilience in terms of the ability to bounce back from unforeseen events. One respondent said, "Something unexpected happens and you find a way to overcome it", and another said resilience was a "commitment and spirit to acknowledge events as they happen and decide how to bounce back". Still another likened resilience to the way in which a community recovers from catastrophic events.

## **Community cohesiveness:**

- Participants highlighted the importance of community coming together in face of adversity and of rebuilding with a strong sense of community.

## **Earthquake Preparedness:**

- It was clear that earthquake risk is front and center in the minds of many Vancouverites. Several participants raised the ability to prepare for, respond to and recover from an earthquake as directly related to resilience.

Many people spoke about resilience in the context of culture, social connectivity and disasters. Reconciliation was highlighted by many people as integral to Vancouver's resilience. The following statements reflect the ideas shared across the tables. Resilience is...

- Collective strength and the ability to recover.
- Adaptation without the loss of a core identity.
- Learning from challenges and becoming stronger.
- Reliance on the community to rebound and recover.
- Sustainability, adaptation, and community.
- People being able to help each other in times of crisis, disaster, social problems.

While not an overwhelming focus of icebreaker discussions, an important theme that was discussed was the model of resilience that indigenous communities have provided and continue to provide for Vancouver. Respondents made clear that there was a lot to learn from both the contributions of indigenous people to Vancouver, e.g., their role in saving residents during the great Vancouver fire in 1886, as well as their survival and resilience in the face of systemic oppression.

After groups had a chance to discuss this question, four keynote speakers (see Figure 1 on the following page) took the stage to set the agenda for the rest of the event, followed by four storytellers who shared their personal stories of resilience.





### **NOLA-KATE SEYMOAR,** *Moderator*

Nola-Kate Seymoar is the Chair of the Vancouver City Planning Commission and former President of the International Centre for Sustainable Cities.



### **JANET WEBBER,** *Speaker*

Janet Webber is the Executive Director of SFU Public Square, SFU's leading community engagement initiative.

### **KATIE MCPHERSON,** *Speaker*

Katie McPherson is the Chief Resilience Officer for the City of Vancouver and leads the creation of Vancouver's Resilience Strategy.



### **JEB BRUGMANN,** *Speaker*

Jeb Brugmann is the Director of Solutions Development & Innovation at 100 Resilient Cities.



### **SARAH BLYTH, Storyteller**

Sarah Blyth is a leader on the front lines of the community response to the Opioid Crisis. She is a longtime advocate for social justice and equity in our community.

### **TAQWA ZUBALDI, Storyteller**

Taqwa Zubaldi is a refugee from Iraq and a Youth Leader for the School Board Immigrant and Youth Program, helping other newcomer youths.

### **LANDON HOYT, Storyteller**

Landon Hoyt is the Executive Director of Hastings Crossing Business Improvement Association (HxBIA). HxBIA represents over 650 businesses and property owners in a portion of the Downtown Eastside.

### **DANNY RAMADAN, Storyteller**

Danny Ramadan is a Syrian-Canadian author, public speaker, storyteller and an LGBTQ-refugee activist.

## REFLECTIONS ON PERSONAL STORIES

In order to provide examples of the deep resilience that exists within the Vancouver community, four guest speakers gave told their own personal stories of surviving and thriving in the face of significant challenges. The four individuals included:

#### **Sarah Blyth**

- Sarah reflected on her lifetime of advocacy and social justice work, particularly in recent years responding to the Opioid Crisis both as a front-line worker and an advocate. Sarah spoke of the deep, personal impacts that this crisis has had on her and her community, and discussed the language around shocks and stresses – pointing out that the Opioid Crisis is, in fact, a shock.

#### **Danny Ramadan**

- Danny reflected on his experiences as a Syrian refugee and the isolation that newcomers often face when they come to Vancouver. While many people think of a refugee's journey as ending once they arrive to their

new home country, there is a tremendous amount of isolation and then adaptation that they experience even after arrival. This is particularly true of individuals who identify as part of other often marginalized communities, like the LGBTQ community.

#### **Landon Hoyt**

- Landon reflected on his experiences working in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside and seeing first-hand the incredible resilience that exists in this community. Specifically, the DTES is a deeply connected community often coming up with innovative solutions to problems and using support networks to help one-another.

#### **Taqwa Zubaldi**

- Taqwa spoke of the critical family and community support that she received and that she relied on in her long journey as a refugee from Iraq to Canada in 2009. She reflected on the fact that resilience comes from community and from sharing strength with one-another. She also discussed how her experiences have spurred her to help other young people in their journeys as newcomers to Vancouver as a Youth Leader for the School Board Immigrant and Youth Program.



In all four of these stories, there was a strong theme of community coming together in the face of adversity, and that local communities are often faster at responding to shocks and stresses than government. Community – whether made up of friends, neighbours, coworkers, or family – as evidenced by these stories, is a significant resource in overcoming challenges. In short, resilience and community are inextricably linked.

An important aspect of the Sharing Our Stories event was discussion among the participants of the important resilience lessons that emerged from these personal stories. In 15 groups of 10 people, participants were invited to reflect on the stories they heard, and to share any of their own stories of resilience. The key themes that came out of these discussions included:

#### **The importance of community in overcoming challenges.**

Participants highlighted:

- The common occurrence of local community being faster at responding to shocks and stresses than government officials.
- How strong community ties have eroded over time, leaving Vancouver less resilient.
- How, in Vancouver, islands of strong communities are juxtaposed with attitudes of passiveness.
- The importance of the built environment in creating resilience and how lack of public space, lack of venues for socialization and social interactions are limiting resilience. One respondent went so far as to say that from a planning point of view, developers are destroying resilience by taking away public spaces.

**Personal Characteristics of Resilience.** Participants highlighted how valuable personal attributes are in building resilience. They reflected on stories of:

- Being a single mother and finding resilience through struggle.
- Recovering from having a tumor and resultant depression.
- Integrating into a new community, as an immigrant, is personal resilience itself.
- How refugees and immigrants need to find sense of place in community that will build personal resilience.



**Education.** Participants mentioned that resilience-building should be part and parcel of the education system.

**Affordability.** Another major theme that participants highlighted was how affordability is impacting the resilience of Vancouver. One participant expressed concern that the city will turn into a gated community or a resource for vacation properties, or investment, etc., pushing out people who do want to live in the city and do work there.

**Culture.** It is important to learn from history and other cultures; many people who come from different places bring valuable experiences and perspectives.

**Immigration.** Integrating into a new community is personal resilience itself.

# FUTURE SHOCKS AND STRESSES

Next, participants were asked to choose one shock facing our city – whether an earthquake, flood, or other event, and discuss factors that could support a positive response and those that might impede it. The key themes discussed focused on: preparedness for earthquakes and other natural disasters, equitable economic development and affordability, and the need to build and maintain cohesive communities, both for being able to prepare for shocks and stresses but also to be able to recover from them in a resilient manner.

After the small groups reflected on the personal and local stories of resilience, the groups then began to discuss the future, focusing on the key shocks, stresses, trends or issues that would likely impact the wellbeing of the community. These discussions revealed an overwhelming concern about earthquakes and other natural disaster impacts, including forest fires and sea level rise. Participants highlighted everything from:

- Living on a fault line but becoming complacent about the earthquake risk, e.g., initially maintaining a preparedness kit when first living in Vancouver, but not maintaining it now.
- An inability of emergency services to operate in case of a major disaster.
- Difficulties with addressing these future risks, because of a need to address the problems of today.

Another area of major concern related to economic stability and equitable prosperity. Housing affordability was principle among these economics concerns, with participants highlighting:

- The uncertainty of housing, an extreme real estate market, and the renter's culture (and related fear of “renoviction”).
- An exodus of low and middle income people from Vancouver, including the inability of families to buy homes and raise children in Vancouver.

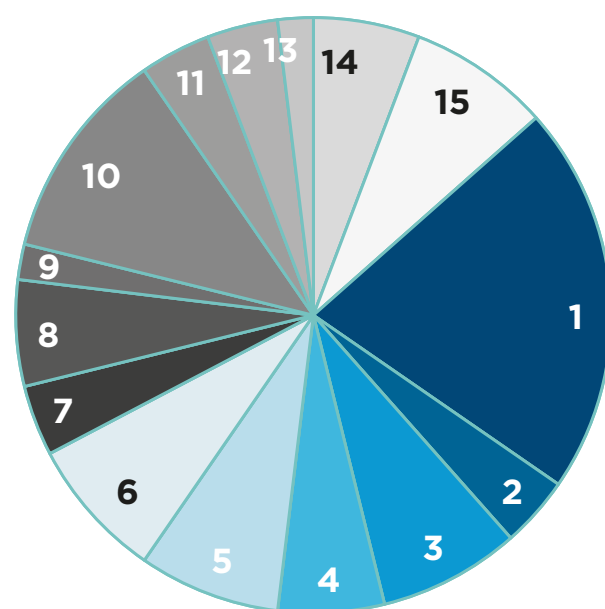
Employment was another area of major concern related to economic conditions, with participants highlighting everything from labour shortages for low-wage jobs (because of the city's unaffordability), to poor-paying low skill jobs, to skilled professionals moving out because wages for comparable jobs are higher in other cities.

Social isolation also emerged as a major area of concern both as a dynamic that would exacerbate some of the aforementioned challenges, e.g., disaster preparedness, and as a result of challenges related to

housing affordability and employment concerns. As one participant noted, “As population here grows, there might be an increase in social isolation. Also society is set up in a fairly competitive manner with resources and more marginalization. Need to change system. I am feeling that we are running out of time.”

The following chart (Figure 2) provides further insight into the concerns about the future that participants mentioned. Earthquakes were mentioned at every single table, while Housing Affordability was the second most referenced concern. Food Crisis, Job Loss/Shortages, Sea Level Rise, and Social Isolation were all tied for the third most-common concerns.

**Figure 2: Future Concerns – What Shocks will Impact Resilience?**



- |                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| 1 Earthquake         | 9 Net Neutrality                         |
| 2 Tsunamis           | 10 Housing Affordability                 |
| 3 Job Loss/Shortages | 11 Environmental/<br>Ecological Collapse |
| 4 Population Control | 12 Flood                                 |
| 5 Sea Level Rise     | 13 Senior Care                           |
| 6 Social Isolation   | 14 Forest Fire                           |
| 7 Water Security     | 15 Food Crisis                           |
| 8 Mental Health      |  |

# COMMUNITY RESILIENCE NOW

The third discussion question focused on current resilience levels of Vancouver communities and neighbourhoods. Participants were asked to describe how they thought their immediate communities would be affected by a sudden shock, factors that might hinder the community from responding in a resilient manner and factors that could support the community from responding in the best way possible. Several important themes were discussed. Some of these were presented as hindrances, others as positive characteristics:

**Partnership & Collaboration.** Partnerships between communities and municipalities can be improved, there are ample opportunities to learn from each other.

- The community can be motivated to help each other if they are connected, if not connected they will just want to leave the area.
- Volunteering helps with building relations and helps keep communities together.
- Healthy City Strategy highlights the importance of interconnectivity. It calls for reaching out to 3-4 friends in the case of emergency. If one lives alone, it is very useful to have this neighbourhood kind of 'watch'
- Everyone needs to make an effort to get to know neighbours and build support networks:
- There are opportunities to learn from others about resilience. Mexico recently experienced a major earthquake, and there are lessons for Vancouver on how that was managed.

**Pre-emptive action.** Since it is hard to predict what the "sudden shock or disaster" will be, we should start talking about every possibility.

- It's important to focus on preparedness. As one participant stated, "You need to have positive steps beforehand, rather than after".
- The high concentration of the population will affect the relief actions, and this needs to be accounted for in disaster response planning.

## Cascading Impacts.

- In case of a major shock, e.g., an earthquake or financial market decline, people would lose their houses and won't have money to buffer themselves from shocks.

**Encourage Resilience.** There are several opportunities to build resilience, especially in relation to disasters. These include:

- Community events to prepare for disasters. These events can be promoted by city/park/social media ("The city doesn't communicate and endorse the programs or workshops they have").
- Getting together a collection of community- and neighbourhood-specific information to enable preparedness
- Identify how the city can support personal and neighbourhood preparedness. One participant asked, "What can city planners do for us?" Another highlighted that the city needs to take leadership and support community groups to do their own planning.
- Policy change is also needed. One person called for having every business' license require holders to have a preparedness plan. Another called for more community-based governance.
- Funding is also very important. One person said, "Vancouver Foundation small grant used to do projects within neighbourhoods which got people together."

**Community is Key.** Participants highlighted an overriding need for a culture/connection that creates social cohesion, noting that:

- Responding to a crisis in a creative way makes your community stronger.
- Social aspects of resilience (the role networks and relationships play) should be an focus.
- There may be power in united communities, but what about those who don't have a community? Newcomers? Those who lost loved ones? Who helps them? These people need to also be included in community.
- The built environment creates barriers for community-building. There is a challenge in building community in vertical buildings, apartments etc. These could be overcome through more community-based governance, growing food, resilience-reconciliation and having more non-market housing.
- Lack of trust in communities is rampant.

**Future.** Create more safe, calm, protected and survivable futures for themselves and also, for their children.

- Envision a world that is self-sufficient.

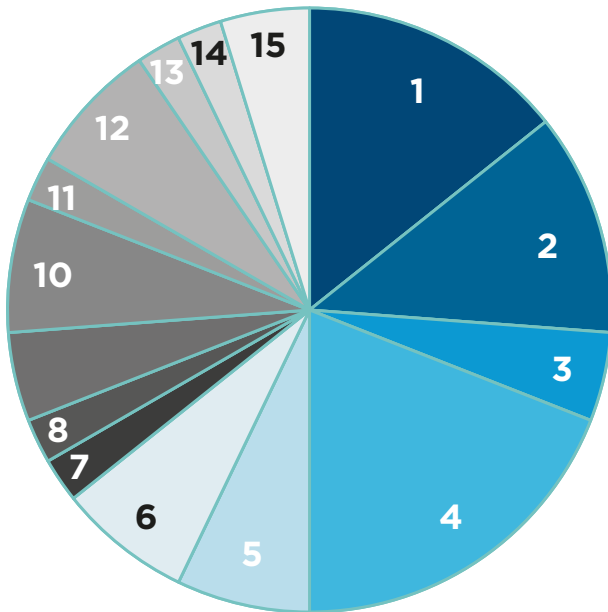
**Past.** History is spoken in treatments of resilience: past nation's dealing with disasters and lessons learned.



# RESILIENCE IN THE FUTURE

The evening concluded with the groups drawing their vision of a more resilient Vancouver in 2057 - 40 years from now. They drew their visions on posters that were used to animate further conversations at the Summit.

**Figures 3: What Stresses will Impact Resilience?**



- |                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| 1 Food Security           | 9 Diversity                             |
| 2 Housing Security        | 10 Public Gathering Spaces              |
| 3 Sustainability          | 11 Information Technology               |
| 4 Community Collaboration | 12 Government and Citizen Collaboration |
| 5 Transportation          | 13 Overpopulation                       |
| 6 Education               | 14 Sea Level Rise                       |
| 7 Drug and Alcohol Policy | 15 Child/Eldercare                      |
| 8 Minimum Income          |   |

Key themes that emerged from the drawing exercise overlapped with the discussions during the earlier part of the event and were calculated based on the number of tables reporting on these themes. The key themes are described in the chart (Figure 3) and included community collaboration, food security and housing security, among several others. Thematically, Community Collaboration was the most commonly expressed concept that would build a resilient future, followed by Food Security, and then closely behind was Housing Security.

Group discussions also referenced the importance of community connection, inclusion and trust in responding to shocks and stresses. In order to do this, groups indicated that there is a need to support vertical community-building, particularly in the context of increasing high-rise developments and shrinking numbers of public space for informal social connection. Additionally, technology can be seen to have both a positive and negative impact on resilience, depending on how it is used. While it is not a substitute for in-person connection, it can support connect for individuals and groups reaching outside of the community for support, advice and more. Ultimately, the resilience visions created by these groups sought to address the current gaps in resilience around basic needs (food, housing, etc.), and leverage community assets like the knowledge and experiences of newcomers and immigrants, increase and activate public spaces, collaborate on locally-based projects, and harness the positive uses of technology.



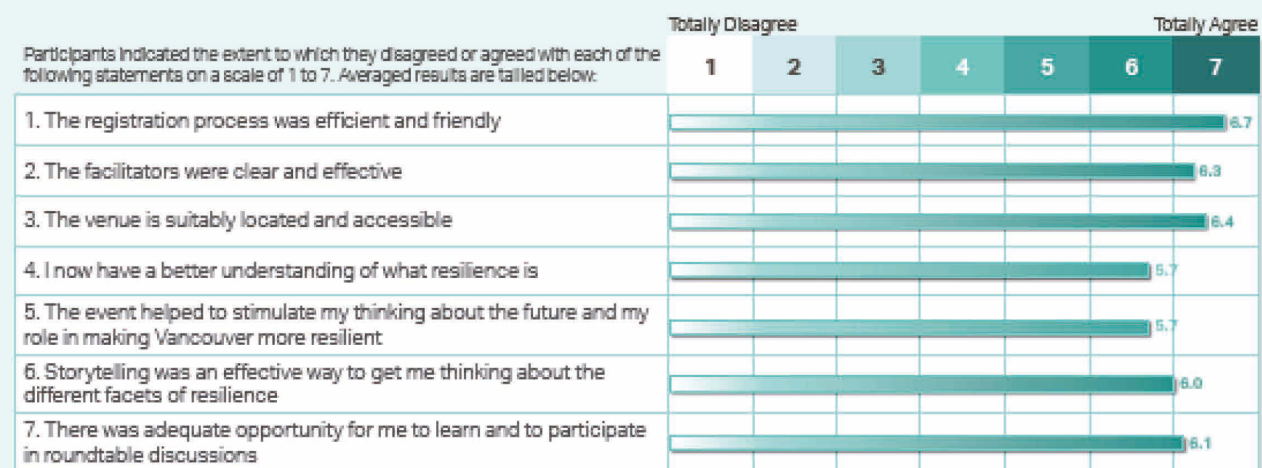
*Two Participants share their Resilience Vision*

# POST-EVENT SURVEY

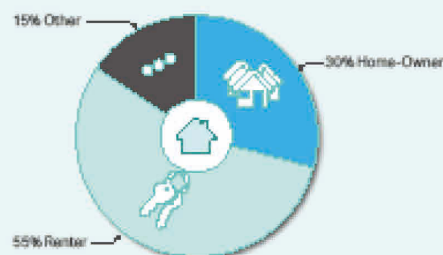
A post-event survey was also conducted to learn from participant experiences at the event. The results of this are tabulated in the following graphic.

## EVENT FEEDBACK/PARTICIPANT SUMMARY

### Sharing our Stories: Building Community Resilience in Vancouver



#### Sectors in Attendance



#### Age Profile



#### Time in Vancouver



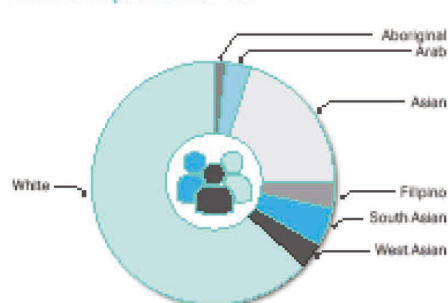
#### Top Current Shock or Stressors

1. Earthquake
2. Housing Affordability
3. Social Isolation
4. Income Inequality

#### Top Future Shock or Stressors

1. Earthquake
2. Climate Change
3. Environmental Issues
4. Food Security

#### Ethnic Representation





## CONCLUSION

In summary, the Sharing Our Stories event brought together Vancouverites to discuss, using their lived experience and personal knowledge, their hopes and concerns about current and future conditions, opportunities for resilience, and key priorities that should be addressed through the Resilience Strategy. A word cloud was created using the themes and key words that came up most frequently throughout the workshop (see below). The key themes discussed focused on preparedness for earthquakes and other natural disasters, equitable economic development and affordability, and the need to build and maintain cohesive communities, both for being able to prepare for and recover from shocks and stresses.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all of the participants of the event who shared their perspectives, knowledge and expertise on October 24th, 2017. Additional thank-yous to 100 Resilient Cities, SFU Public Square and the Vancouver Economic Commission, and specifically Jeb Brugmann, Janet Webber and Nola-Kate Seymoar for all of your help planning and facilitating this event. Finally, a special thanks to Chief Janice George for her opening remarks, and to the four storytellers for sharing their deeply personal stories of resilience: Sarah Blyth, Landon Hoyt, Danny Ramadan and Taqwa Zubaldi.





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