

11/5/13

The Honorable Kathy Lantry
President, St. Paul City Council
320-C City Hall
15 Kellogg Blvd., West
Saint Paul, MN 55102

Dear Council President Lantry:

While I understand you are sponsoring a resolution (Res 13-1653) to authorize the Parks & Recreation Department to issue an RFP to privatize the operation of Phalen and Como golf courses, and possibly the Highland courses as well, I am respectfully asking you to change your mind and pull the resolution from consideration.

I cannot claim to understand the way the Parks & Recreation Department does budgeting for the golf courses and how much of the department's overhead is assigned to each course, and thus cannot offer an informed opinion on all of the causes of the current "loss" the courses are causing the city budget.

And while I can offer an opinion on a number of decisions I have seen the Parks & Recreation Department's administration make over the years that have appeared to me to cost the courses rounds played and thus revenue, the only relevance that has to your discussion about the RFP is who if anyone should be held accountable for the overall losses: the administration of the Parks & Recreation department; or the men and women who actually work at the courses and put such a good face on the City of St. Paul for the golfers enjoying our courses.

I also understand that the city council has dealt with this privatization of golf in St. Paul before, and has rejected such in the past. I have attached articles from the Pioneer Press from a previous effort to do so, an effort I notice from the articles you were quoted as opposing. And certainly the circumstances were different then and at the time and you did not have the responsibilities of being council president, but that decision and the subsequent decision by the council to have the city rebuild Highland has in part led to the current situation.

But as to that current situation I can personally attest to the incredible work the city employees have done at Phalen Golf Course. Those individuals are a credit to the city. And even though I cannot personally comment on the employees at the other courses I can assure you that when I have played those courses it has been an enjoyable experience. These are not lean-on-the-shovel employees, and it has to frustrate all public employees when they observe that policy-makers and administrators cannot or will not recognize excellent work when it is being done.

Consequently I will close by again asking you to reconsider your resolution, and work with the Parks & Recreation administration to resolve this issue another way. Thank you for consideration of this request.

Sincerely,
Craig Stone
1377 Cleveland Ave. S.
St. Paul

c.c. St. Paul city council members



Paper: St. Paul Pioneer Press (MN)

Title: ST. PAUL GOLF COURSE PROPOSAL SCRUTINIZED//COMPANY WOULD REBUILD HIGHLAND, OFFER SPECIAL, NONPUBLIC USE AT TIMES

Date: November 19, 1998

St. Paul is considering a proposal that could turn the Highland Golf Course into a golfer's dream but leave city residents with a bad lie.

Under the plan, which took St. Paul City Council members by surprise Wednesday, a private developer would lease the municipal course for \$1 and pour about \$3 million into improvements.

In return, the course would be closed to the public many weekday afternoons while private corporate outings were staged there, said Vic Wittgenstein, manager of special services for the city's Parks and Recreation Department.

Wittgenstein said the city is only in the early stages of listening to the proposal by **Blackheath**, a company represented by D. Ward Johnson of St. Paul. No decision is likely before spring.

Johnson could not be reached for comment Wednesday, but Wittgenstein said the **Blackheath** proposal calls for raising private donations and loans and for bringing in a major golf course designer, such as Tony Jacklin or Dave Stockton, to perform a major overhaul of the course.

In exchange for the \$3.5 million investment, the company would seek a five-year lease to run the course, with a five-year renewal option, Wittgenstein said.

During the weekends, the course would be open to the public, as it is now. However, **Blackheath** would be working in conjunction with conventions at RiverCentre, using the upscale course as a lure to draw conventions to the city, Wittgenstein said.

It would mean that in the afternoons, the course would be closed to the public. In the mornings, under the plan, the public would be going out in shotgun style, starting at the fourth hole, for example, and then finishing on the third. The proposal would affect only Highland's 18-hole course, not its nine-hole layout.

Greens fees at Highland would remain about the same as they are at Phalen and Como golf courses, but for the private, corporate outings, the company could charge much more, Wittgenstein said.

"The city gets a pretty good golf course, no debt service and maybe some economic development," Wittgenstein said, referring to more conventioners filling restaurants and hotels. "Our biggest issue is how to ensure public access - how do we keep it from being perceived as a private rather than a public course? There are a whole mess of questions that have to be answered."

City Council Member Kathy Lantry criticized parks superintendent Bob Piram for not informing the council about the ongoing talks. She said that she learned about it at church Saturday night when someone there asked her about it.

"He was ticked," Lantry said of the parishioner. "He was absolutely irate."

Lantry said the council needs more information about the proposal because it represents a major shift in policy. She said she expects a lot of other people to be as upset as her friend at church.

"Do we want Pebble Beach in Highland Park, or do we want a good, accessible course for the

people of St. Paul?" she asked. "And this wasn't put out for bids. If **Blackheath** can do it for X amount of dollars, maybe somebody else can do it for less. All of these decisions without our knowledge is not good government."

Lantry and Council Members Jay Benanav and Chris Coleman also sent a memo to city finance director Joe Reid telling him they wanted more information on this project and a complete report on Compete St. Paul, an initiative by Mayor Norm Coleman to turn more city services over to private companies.

Peggy Lynch, executive director of the Friends of the Parks and Trails of St. Paul and Ramsey County, also said the matter should be put out for bids, but only after determining if the plan is good for the residents of the city.

"I'm very concerned about this," she said. "I don't think there is any question it (the course) needs upgrading. I have played there for years. But does this amount to a sale of public property purchased by the taxpayers?"

Both Como and Phalen were improved over the past 15 years by the city, Wittgenstein said, and it is now time for Highland.

If this plan is not accepted, the city will look at using revenue bonds or some other method to improve the course and its clubhouse in the next few years, he said. Each of the three courses brings in about \$100,000 to \$150,000 a year and pays for its yearly operating costs, he added.

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Paper: St. Paul Pioneer Press (MN)

Title: PROPOSAL FOR GOLF COURSE REJECTED//ST. PAUL COUNCIL WON'T PRIVATIZE HIGHLAND, WILL STUDY RENOVATIONS

Date: December 3, 1998

The **Highland Golf Course** will not be turned over to a private group for management and investment after all, the St. Paul City Council decided Wednesday.

In killing the proposal, the council also asked the mayor's finance director, Joe Reid, and the interim parks and recreation superintendent, Vic Wittgenstein, to return March 4 with a plan for fixing up the municipal **course** and its clubhouse, an estimate of the cost and a way to pay for it.

The council members were emphatic that they had no interest in the parks department pursuing last month's proposal by Blackheath, a limited liability partnership, which wanted to lease the **course** for a dollar, raise several million dollars privately and turn the links into a top-flight **course**.

In return, Blackheath would have scheduled corporate outings, primarily from the RiverCentre convention traffic, on several afternoons a week, limiting public use.

"The message we got out (to the public) is that we will not privatize the **golf** courses in St. Paul," Council Member Kathy Lantry said during the budget hearing. "It seems to me going to a private developer is a last-ditch effort, and I don't know if we've done a first-ditch effort."

D. Ward Johnson Jr., one of the principals of Blackheath, was not at the meeting but was philosophical when told that his group's offer had been rejected.

"That is the public debate we wanted," Johnson said. "At least we know where everybody stands. I think it is terrific the city is going to try to find some money to improve the **course**."

Johnson also said that the city improvements also might allow for groups from RiverCentre or downtown hotels to reserve occasional times for tournaments. And if the city later decides it needs private help, his group would be willing to talk about it again, Johnson said.

Wednesday's discussion was spurred by recent newspaper stories on the Blackheath proposal and the deluge of calls to council offices, most of them opposed to accepting Blackheath's offer. Council Member Mike Harris brought in a proposal for his colleagues to consider while setting the city's budget.

He estimated it would cost about \$3 million to update the **course** and driving range and another \$1.6 million to \$2.4 million to improve the clubhouse, pro shop, bathrooms and other facilities. He suggested a complicated shifting of \$1 million, which ultimately would come from the parking and transit fund balance so the work could begin in 1999. He proposed then selling \$2 million in revenue bonds to complete the work in 2000. The bonds would be paid off by golfers paying to use the **course** and driving range.

"This has been an issue in the parks for several years," Harris said. "If we don't want Mr. Wittgenstein to look at other proposals, then we better work on this."

His colleagues, however, were not willing to rush into Harris' plan, just a week before finishing their work on the budget, even after Wittgenstein said \$300,000 would be enough to do hydrology studies on the **course** and come up with a preliminary design. Instead, the council compromised on having a more complete report presented on March 4.

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Paper: St. Paul Pioneer Press (MN)

Title: GOLF COURSE TO CLOSE FOR RENOVATIONS//HIGHLAND FACILITY UPGRADE TO TAKE 2 YEARS, MAYOR SAYS

Date: August 9, 2002

Highland Golf Course will close in October for a \$4 million overhaul and reopen late in the 2004 **golf** season with a new design, larger greens, more sand traps, ponds it didn't have before and, of **course**, higher fees.

In announcing what he called an upgrade of the 75-year-old public **course**, St. Paul Mayor Randy Kelly said Thursday that it will be financed through internal city loans and eventually revenue bonds, but no general-fund tax dollars.

"Our city had the foresight to build this great amenity for all at a time when **golf** was associated with wealth and exclusivity ... and it is time to update it," he said.

Plans for the upgrade have been in the works for more than three years, delayed mostly because of financing. The changes have been supported by most of those who use and live around the **course**, according to City Council Member Pat Harris, who represents the area.

Leslie Carney, president of the **course's** Women's Club, said it suffers from drainage problems and can be a taxing **course** for senior citizens.

"There is water on the fairways a lot, and it can be hard to walk. The changes will fix the water issue and make it easier to get around," she said.

But Bud Flanagan, who said he has been playing the **course** since 1932, said it should not be necessary to tear up the **course** and close it for two years .

"At 78, I might not make it to two years away," he said.

He also thinks raising the fees might drive away more golfers than the upgrades might attract.

Greens fees at **Highland** are now \$27 for an 18-hole weekend round and \$25 for a weekday round. More than 40,000 rounds are played at the **course** annually, making it one of the more popular public courses in the area. Its prices are also among the lowest for a quality **course**.

According to a financial analysis and projection for future play at the **course**, fees will be \$34 on weekends and \$31 on weekdays in 2005, rising slowly to \$48 and \$45, respectively, by 2022.

Mike Hahm of the city Parks and Recreation Division said these prices are representative -- if not low -- for premium metropolitan-area **golf** courses.

The changes will make **Highland** a premium **course** that is more challenging and better to play, Hahm said. Improvements include lengthening the maximum yardage from 6,265 to 6,606, reorienting many of the holes from east/west to north/south, moving the parking lot and access to Montreal Avenue and improving the practice range.

The ornate brick clubhouse, thought to have been designed by noted city architect Clarence Wigington, will not be altered. Nor does the renovation involve the city's nine-hole **course** across Montreal Avenue, Hahm said.

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Graphic

Design development for **Highland Park golf course.**

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Section: Local

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Paper: St. Paul Pioneer Press (MN)

Title: GREENS WITHOUT GREENBACKS//MUNICIPAL GOLF COURSES IN THE TWIN CITIES ARE STRUGGLING FINANCIALLY, AND THERE ARE MANY REASONS WHY.

Date: July 28, 2002

When the city of Mounds View borrowed to build a **golf course** in 1995, it had high hopes the project would be a moneymaker, cashing in on the game's then-booming popularity and paying for itself.

Seven years later, the city is still waiting.

The Bridges at Mounds View, a nine-hole **course** aimed at novice as well as experienced golfers, fell prey to an unexpected downturn in the **golf** industry. It's been popular with players, but the **course** has not generated the kind of revenue expected, leaving local taxpayers on the hook to help make payments totaling nearly \$300,000 a year.

Mounds View isn't the only city mired in **golf's** financial rough. In Ramsey, Dakota and Washington counties, six of the 17 publicly owned courses lost money last year.

Across the Twin Cities, **golf** courses are struggling, posing serious concerns for golfers and non-golfers alike, a Pioneer Press analysis has found.

Among the issues:

- Too much competition. Local golfers are just minutes away from 112 courses -- 47 publicly owned, 65 privately owned -- that are open to the public. Most offer similar facilities and prices and compete for a stagnant supply of golfers. Two consecutive seasons marred by rain-soaked springs and a sagging economy haven't helped, either.

- Crushing debt. Some courses have sunk millions of dollars into expensive improvements. Now they are saddled with loans that must be repaid. Even Ramsey County, which operates three popular, time-tested courses, has seen one of them -- Goodrich -- fall into the red as it struggles to repay costs for a new clubhouse.

- Poor planning. There is no guarantee a new **course** will make money. Woodbury's new Eagle Valley **course**, drawing golfers from a pocket not already saturated with courses, has been able to meet its debt payments and even make money. Contrast that with Cottage Grove, where a new clubhouse and bad weather have combined for more than \$1 million in losses at the River Oaks **course** since 1999.

Despite that spotty scorecard, yet another municipal **course** will open next year. Still other communities, such as Eagan and Hastings, have considered plans to build courses of their own to spur development.

Some say it is time government got out of the **golf** business.

"I don't think in today's environment a strong case can be made for developing a new municipal **golf course**," says Curt Walker, executive secretary for the Minnesota **Golf** Owners Association, an organization of privately owned courses open to the public.

THE CLIMATE

Many associated with municipal courses agree Twin Cities **golf** is overbuilt.

Al McMurchie, club manager at Inver Wood **Golf Course**, owned by the city of Inver Grove Heights, says there are enough 18-hole municipal courses. But he says there is room for more nine-hole learning facilities dedicated to bringing new players into the sport.

"There's significantly less profit inherent to those facilities," McMurchie says. "The private sector really shows absolutely no interest in that type of facility."

Dick Tollette, head professional at Bunker Hills, which is owned by Coon Rapids, likens the situation to the bowling craze of the early 1960s.

"All of a sudden there's a **golf course** on every corner," he says. "If you have options and choices, you'll try them all."

Is the situation even tougher for the privately owned courses? Walker thinks so. His group has nothing against the municipal courses, he says, except when they pop up a few miles down the road from privately owned courses. And that's something he says has been happening all too often in recent years.

Walker said he doesn't mind the competition, as long as it's fair.

"The **golf course** owner wakes up every single morning, looks in the mirror, and has the right to exercise one of America's great freedoms: to go broke all by himself. Whereas the municipality is almost duty-bound to continue it, despite whether the market will bear it or not, and oftentimes private enterprise is the victim."

Walker says his members have to scrape for every dime of revenue to advertise, maintain their courses and keep greens fees low. Publicly owned courses can turn to the taxpayer for more money.

"The two huge advantages that municipalities have that private owners don't is the absence of property taxes and unlimited access to bonding," he says.

Walker concedes there once was a historical need for municipal courses, but he believes that time has passed.

"Many people were brought into **golf** by learning at municipal **golf** courses," Walker says, citing courses such as Como Park, **Highland** Park and Phalen in St. Paul and Hiawatha in Minneapolis that have attracted new players since the early 20th century.

Majestic Oaks in Ham Lake was one of the first privately owned public courses built in the metro area. Others followed and lived in peace with their municipal competitors until the **golf** business slumped.

Courses tend to cluster where land is both compatible and available, which is what's happening in the Blaine-Coon Rapids area, home to Bunker Hills, Majestic Oaks, the new private Tournament Players Club **course** and a proposed youth **course** at the National Sports Center.

Bill Fowlkes, the general manager at Majestic Oaks, remembers when golfers lined up to play the **course**. Now, even at peak times, it's rarely full.

"If you came here any time last year on a Saturday or Sunday after 11 a.m., you could get right out," Fowlkes says.

A FISCAL BOGEY

If operating a municipal **course** can be likened to a round of **golf**, Mounds View has encountered just about every hazard imaginable at the Bridges. Even before the first tee shot, there were signs of trouble ahead.

First, the city sued the contractor over problems with the **course**. The city won, but its legal fees exceeded the court-ordered award. The **course** finally opened in 1995, but revenues lagged and the city fell behind on its debt payment schedule.

Then came allegations of financial mismanagement. Last year, the City Council determined that a quarter-million dollars in incentive pay to **golf course** employees was never authorized, and it fired the **course** manager and city finance director. A \$1.5 million nine-hole expansion has been discussed but was tabled after questions arose about a study that claimed the **course** could make money.

Last year, the **course** reported losses of \$25,000.

For some, the brouhaha has dampened any enthusiasm they might have had.

"I'm very weary of the city running the **golf course**," says David Jahnke, a Mounds View resident who doesn't **golf** and opposes paying for the Bridges **golf course**. "I just don't think we should subsidize this. No one subsidizes my recreation."

In fact, it is not unusual for cities and counties to provide their residents all kinds of recreational opportunities, from parks and bicycle trails to soccer fields and hockey rinks. The difference, according to municipal **golf course** opponents, is there are few, if any, privately owned alternatives in which the public can enjoy those activities.

Meanwhile in Mounds View, taxpayers continue to pick up the tab.

Over the past several years, more than \$780,000 has been withdrawn from city funds and loaned to the Bridges to help pay principal and interest on bonds sold to build the **course**. The money otherwise would have been invested in government securities.

Despite its money problems, the Bridges is one of the most popular public courses in the Twin Cities. Golfers have played more than 40,000 rounds on the **course** each year since 1999.

Tim Mazzoni, a New Brighton resident who practices his **golf** game there, says the **course** fills a niche. He leaned on a shaded wooden fence at the Bridges recently and looked out over the expansive driving range.

"I hope now the City Council is as happy with the **course** as the patrons are," Mazzoni says.

BLAME IT ON THE RAIN

Other municipal courses also have struggled to reach the green in recent years.

Last year, six courses in Ramsey, Dakota and Washington counties suffered combined losses of nearly \$300,000. Two others barely broke even. And more than halfway through the current season, some **course** operators say the picture this year doesn't appear to be much brighter.

Among the biggest losers last year were Ramsey County's Goodrich and Cottage Grove's River Oaks. Those courses, stung at least in part by debt resulting from recently built clubhouses, lost more than \$102,000 and \$74,000, respectively.

River Oaks ranks second in number of rounds played at publicly owned area courses, but two bond payments have left the city more than \$1 million in the red during the past three years. In addition to the clubhouse built in 1999, the city is paying for the 1991 construction of the **course**.

Cottage Grove city administrator Ryan Schroeder says the city miscalculated how much money the **course** would bring in when first built. The city planned to pay just interest during the first three years of the loan. As it turned out, it could have paid on the principal as well.

"If they'd made bond payments in the first few years, we wouldn't have had this problem," Schroeder says.

He described the new \$1 million clubhouse, which caters to groups of up to 300, as an investment that began paying for itself last year.

Bruce Anderson, River Oaks **golf course** manager, says the glut of courses in the Twin Cities and two consecutive rainy springs also have hurt the operation. Kevin Finley, who oversees Ramsey County's **golf** courses, says those same factors contributed to the losses last year at Goodrich.

Even the courses that are making money have been hit by the slump. Eagle Valley in Woodbury, which has netted more than \$287,000 during the past three seasons, has put a long wish list of **course** improvements on the back burner.

"The timing of all those planned projects is just delayed until we're able to see a better weather pattern," says general manager Shaun Peltier.

MONEYMAKERS

those who operate municipal **golf** courses reject the notion that they are bullet-proof from the game's financial woes because they can turn to taxpayers for a handout.

"If we don't provide a quality service and don't provide value, we're just as susceptible as anybody," says Mike Hahm, who oversees St. Paul's three municipal courses, which are still operating solidly in the black.

Hahm said if his courses don't take in enough money, they have to raise prices or cut expenses.

With the recent exception of Goodrich, the Ramsey County courses -- including Keller and Manitou Ridge -- have operated profitably. That success led the county to begin construction this spring of a \$3.5 million, nine-hole **course** in Maplewood. The **course**, called the Ponds at Battle Creek, could be open next year and will cater to young players and beginners, with a large driving range.

Ramsey County officials are convinced the Ponds can begin showing a profit in four years and say it will fill a niche in a growing population center not met by the nearest 18-hole **course**, Woodbury's Eagle Valley, three miles away.

GROWING THE GAME

everyone in the **golf** business recognizes that there are not enough new golfers to fill the courses. One solution is to try to grow the junior **golf** programs that bring kids to the game.

That's the primary purpose of a nine-hole **course** like Brightwood Hills in New Brighton, where John Torborg recently took his 13-year-old son, Jacob, and 7-year-old daughter, Lauren, for a round of **golf**. He likes the fact that kids are welcome there and that there's enough variety in the landscape that he doesn't get bored, either.

"I like the way it's laid out, with hills, trees and water," Torborg said as his daughter smashed a roller about 50 yards down the first fairway.

Under the theory that kids -- even those who have never played the game -- deserve a decent place to play **golf**, the Minnesota Amateur Sports Commission received \$3.1 million from the state Legislature to develop an 18-hole youth **course** in Blaine, near the soccer fields and hockey arena at the National Sports Center.

The **course**'s political supporters have grand designs for it.

"We've got over 1,000 kids signed up at the National Sports Center, and the **course** isn't even done yet," says state Rep. Bob Milbert, a DFLer from South St. Paul.

"We had over 10,000 rounds played on our putting **course**," he says. "It doesn't matter where you put it; this **course** meets a need far beyond the local community."

NEIGHBORHOOD FRICTION

it matters to Tollette, who runs Bunker Hills.

"We've got a fabulous junior program," Tollette says. "We have a very good executive nine, with par 4s and par 5s. We don't take tee times. They might have an hour wait, but they know they'll get off. We've got parents playing with the kids on Sunday afternoon."

Almost every **golf course** has a junior program of some kind.

Fowlkes, whose Majestic Oaks **golf course** is just five miles north of the Blaine sports center, is proud of his junior program and the number of high school teams that use his **course** for practice rounds. His deeper concern, however, is how the 7,000-yard youth **course** in Blaine would support itself when kids are in school. He suspects the **course** would need adult play to survive, including the kind of corporate events that Majestic Oaks competes to attract.

That his own tax money might be used to subsidize a direct competitor is especially hard to swallow, Fowlkes says.

"I live in Coon Rapids," he says. "I don't want it to happen. I'm outraged we would spend millions of dollars of the taxpayers' money."

Paul Erickson, executive director of the Minnesota Amateur Sports Commission, believes Fowlkes' self-interest is shortsighted. He says a **course** at the Sports Center is the answer the industry has been looking for.

"It confirms all the reasons why we're important," Erickson says. "The industry is flat, so we really need a center to introduce more people to the game. If they come up from Burnsville or Bloomington, they're going to go back and play at the courses in their neighborhood."

Computer-assisted reporting coordinator Janet Roberts contributed to this report.

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Related stories

Page 10A: New **course** projects are being planned, discussed

Page 11A: City **course** fit blueprint for failure//Poor planning sped North Mankato foreclosure

3 PHOTOS: NATE THOMSON, PIONEER PRESS

Troy Diercks putts Tuesday at River Oaks, a municipal **golf course** in Cottage Grove. Although River Oaks is one of the Twin Cities' busier public courses, it has suffered more than \$1 million in losses since 1999, largely because of bad weather and the construction of a new clubhouse.

A land marker blows in the wind at the construction site of the Ponds at Battle Creek, Ramsey County's new, municipally owned nine-hole **golf course** on former county correctional institution land in southern Maplewood. The **course** is expected to open in 2003.

Majestic Oaks plays host to the informally organized "400 Club," which includes among its members (left to right) Rex Brown, Dick Chelgren, Don Dahl, Jim Fraser and Tom Carlson.

4 photos: Bill Fowlkes; David Jahnke; Bruce Anderson; Mike Hahm

3 graphics (charts): Pioneer Press

*(Leader board

Top moneymakers and money-losers in 2001. Includes publicly owned **golf** courses in Ramsey, Dakota and Washington counties.

*Who's on the green?

Some **golf** courses are money makers for the cities or counties that own them.

But over the past three years others barely broke even or even lost money.

Here's how the publicly-owned courses in Ramsey, Dakota and Washington counties fared during a three-year period from 1999 through 2001.

***Course** *Owner *Year built * Total revenue minus expense 1999-2001

*Lines on the links

How busy is your favorite **golf course**? Some publicly owned courses have been more popular than others with area golfers over the past three years.

***Course** *Average rounds per year, '99-'01

(see microfilm for complete details)

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