Designing effective public engagement: the case study of Future Melbourne 2026

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ABSTRACT
Public engagement can enrich policy-making, bringing a diversity of views and voices to policy decisions being made. By placing the experience of those affected by the outcome at the center of deliberations, it can also lead to better informed policies and programs aligned with citizens’ needs. The engagement process strengthens transparency and accountability in addition to building civic capacity. This paper examines the role of public engagement through the lens of a community engagement project for a 10-year local government plan which sets out the future direction of city life. The case offers insights for effective public engagement including the need for strong leadership from decision-makers, whether elected officials or senior public servants, and a commitment to inclusion, participation, and transparency in decision-making.

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1. Introduction

The rationale for public engagement in policy-making can range from strengthening democratic practice to providing citizens with a voice in policy choices to building institutional bridges between government and citizens (Bishop and Davis 2002; Head 2007). In each instance, public engagement involves citizens in the activities of government whether this is agenda setting, decision-making, or policy-forming (Rowe and Frewer 2005). What does vary is the level of participation afforded to the public. Engagement is a continuum which spans providing the public with information at one end through to empowering citizens to make the final decision at the other end of the spectrum.

This paper examines the role and process of public engagement through the case study of Future Melbourne 2026, a 10-year plan for the city of Melbourne in Victoria, Australia. Developed by the community, the plan charts a course for the future of the city and sets out a suite of long-term goals and priorities. The paper starts by reviewing the role of public engagement in policy-making and then discusses different
approaches to the engagement process. It describes the City of Melbourne context and outlines Future Melbourne’s community engagement approach. The paper concludes by reviewing the independent evaluation of the community process and outlines insights for public managers undertaking a community engagement project.

2. The benefits and risks of public engagement

Stewart (2009) conceptualizes engagement as “deliberate strategies for involving those outside government in the policy process.” In this context, the policy process means ways of making policy decisions and ways of implementing them. Sabatier (1999) further elaborates on the policy-making process as one in which “problems are conceptualised and brought to government for solution; governmental institutions formulate alternatives and select policy solutions; and those solutions get implemented, evaluated, and revised.” It is as an inherently political process involving multiple actors including elected officials, public servants, interest groups, and recipients of the policy itself (Hill 2013).

Stewart presents both normative and practical arguments in making the case for engagement. From a normative perspective (why should policy makers engage), Stewart draws on the work of Fung (2006) who argues that engagement helps to overcome democratic deficits that have emerged in the functioning of modern states.

The deficits occur at four points in the system:

1. Between the interests of citizens and the preferences they express. The deliberation process can address this deficit by bringing citizens together to debate and discuss policy issues in forums such as citizen juries. Citizens can form new preferences as a result of the debate.

2. Between citizens and their representatives. Elections are infrequent and elected officials can be captured by special interests. Consultation between representatives and constituents can improve representation.

3. Between representatives and the policies that are really produced by the Executive. The role of the bureaucracy and its control of processes can affect decisions by disregarding public preferences. Forms of engagement that enable citizens to have a direct input into bureaucratic decision-making mitigates against this.

4. Between the Executive and the outcomes that are produced. Direct participation and deliberation can help address the limitations of state capacity, especially when dealing with public problems that require cooperation or collaboration with non-state actors.

Stewart’s practical arguments about engagement relate to the benefits it brings to policy-making. These benefits include:

- improving information flows between service providers, clients, consumers, and decision makers;
- enabling a diversity of views and contributions to decision-making;
obtaining early warning of problems;
- tapping into community resources and knowledge of issues; and
- greater problem solving capacity.

The OECD (2009) views public engagement as a condition for effective governance as it enhances transparency and accountability and also builds civic capacity. Additionally, it can deliver improvements in policy outcomes and the quality of public services. The OECD has also identified a range of benefits that public participation brings to policy-making. Consistent with Stewart’s analysis, these benefits include:

- Better understanding people’s needs and addressing inequalities of voice and access to policy-making processes.
- Leveraging the information, ideas, and resources held by businesses, civic groups, and citizens to tackle complex policy challenges.
- Lowering costs and comparing policy outcomes by galvanizing people to act when success depends on changing individual behavior such as public health.
- Reducing administrative burdens and compliance costs during policy implementation.

As well as benefits, engagement can carry risks, especially if engagement is not inclusive or if it is seen as representing only particular groups or vested interests. A further risk is that the expectations of those who choose to be involved are not managed, resulting in cynicism if the engagement outcome is not what was expected.

A UK Parliamentary Inquiry on public engagement in policy-making recommended explicit consideration of these risks by undertaking a risk analysis at the outset and establishing appropriate mitigation initiatives. Additionally, policy-makers need to be clear about the purpose of engagement, the limits of what the process is intended to achieve, and also provide feedback on the findings of engagement activity and the reasons for decisions taken (Public Administration Select Committee 2013).

3. Approaches to public engagement

Public engagement can span different organizational forms including government initiating opportunities through surveys, consultations, forums, advisory boards, and delegating powers to community bodies (Head 2007). Citizens and community groups can also act outside of structured opportunities and formal channels through lobbying, petitions, and community activism.

There can be a continuum of approaches to engagement. Arnstein (1969) represents one such approach as a ladder, with each rung corresponding to the level of citizens’ power in determining the outcome. For Arnstein, participation is fundamentally about power as is “the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future.”

Arnstein proposes eight levels of participation or rungs. The bottom rungs describe levels of “non-participation” which have been manufactured as a substitute for genuine
participation. Their real objective is not to facilitate participation but for decision makers to maintain power and control. The next rungs are legitimate first steps toward participation such as informing and consulting but Arnstein categorizes these as “tokenistic,” viewing them no more than window dressing. Moving further up the ladder, increasing power is placed in the hands of citizens such as partnerships, delegation, and the top rung of citizen control.

Another approach to engagement is the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum of public participation which outlines five levels of participation: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower. The spectrum correspondingly outlines the public’s role in the engagement and most critically, the promise being made to the public at each participation level. This makes explicit the decision maker’s intent and sets the public’s expectations.

Table 1 illustrates the spectrum and its levels. Moving across levels, the public has an increasing impact on the decision being made. Correspondingly, the decision maker is also ceding more power at each level, culminating in the final level of empower and placing the final decision in the hands of the public.

The Auditor-General in the State of Victoria, Australia has acknowledged public participation is a critical input to government decision-making and developing effective strategies, programs, and projects. Failing to adequately engage the public can alienate the community and result in poorly informed and implemented decisions (VAGO 2015). The Auditor General’s office has developed a better practice guide to public participation for the Victorian public sector and the IAP2 public participation spectrum is a core element of this better practice framework.

4. City of Melbourne and public engagement

Melbourne is the capital of the state of Victoria in Australia. The Melbourne municipality covers 37.7 km² and includes the central city district and 14 inner city suburbs. It has a residential population of 160,000 people while another 768,000 people visit daily for work and recreation (City of Melbourne 2018). The population is diverse with 48% of residents speaking a language other than English at home.

Melbourne City Council is the local government authority that oversees the municipality. It is one of 79 municipal authorities in Victoria operating as a public statutory body under the Local Government Act 1989. Council comprises an elected lord mayor, deputy lord mayor, and nine councilors. Council has the authority to establish special committees with certain delegated powers, duties, and functions. One such committee is the Future Melbourne Committee which oversees the implementation of Council plans and strategies.

The City of Melbourne is the organization responsible for planning and providing services, facilities, and infrastructure to residents, businesses, and visitors. These range from arts and cultural programs, social support and maternal child health to urban planning, capital works, sporting reserves, and road maintenance. The organization employs 1653 people (City of Melbourne 2018) and is headed by a Chief Executive
| Public participation goal | Inform | Consult | Involve | Collaborate | Empower |
|--------------------------|--------|---------|---------|-------------|---------|
| To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions | To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions | To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered | To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution | To place final decision-making in the hands of the public |
| Promise to the public | We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision | We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision | We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible | We will implement what you decide |

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In 2017–2018, it comprised six groups and 29 branches including a Placemaking and Engagement Branch.

Public engagement at City of Melbourne is guided by a Community Engagement Policy, Charter, and Framework. These are internal documents and align City of Melbourne’s engagement processes to the IAP2 methodology. A small specialist engagement team supports the organization and additional resources include community engagement training and Participate Melbourne, a digital platform where the public can contribute to decision-making and programs.

The City of Melbourne engages the community in a range of circumstances such as when the community could be impacted by a project or decision; where community input can improve a project or enhance decision-making; to help identify community needs; and when required by law, policy or by agreement with a government agency or statutory body.

The Community Engagement Charter commits the organization to planning the engagement early; providing clear information to support the community’s participation; advising the community of the extent they can influence the decision; seeking input from a diversity of perspectives in the community; ensuring the community’s contribution is considered in the decisions that impact them; and telling the community how their input has influenced the decision.

The City of Melbourne is widely regarded as delivering best-practice community engagement. In recognition of its community engagement, the organization was awarded the 2014 Australasian Organisation of the Year and International Organisation of the Year from the IAP2.

| Table 2. Future Melbourne phases of development. |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Phase | Objective |
|-------|-----------|
| 1. Design | Develop an engagement process to facilitate a robust public participation process |
| 2. Ideas | Launch and promote the public conversation about the Future Melbourne Plan with activities online and in the community |
| 3. Synthesis | Collate and review the ideas and directions from phase two |
| 4. Deliberation | Design a deliberative process so that the community’s ideas are considered and a shared plan developed |
| 5. Complete | Finalize an engaging, high quality and easily accessible plan |

| Table 3. Comparison between Future Melbourne 2008 and 2026 vision and goals. |
|-----------------------------------------------|
| Future Melbourne 2008 | Future Melbourne 2026 |
| Vision | A bold, inspirational and sustainable city | In 2026, Melbourne will be sustainable, inventive, inclusive, vibrant and flourishing |
| Goals | 1. A city for people | 1. A city that cares for its environment |
| | 2. A creative city | 2. A city for people |
| | 3. A prosperous city | 3. A creative city |
| | 4. A city of knowledge | 4. A prosperous city |
| | 5. An eco-city | 5. A knowledge city |
| | 6. A connected city | 6. A connected city |
| | 7. A deliberative city | 7. A deliberative city |
| | 8. A city managing change | 8. A city managing change |
| | 9. A city with an Aboriginal focus | 9. A city with an Aboriginal focus |
5. Future Melbourne refresh

In March 2015, a new Chief Executive Officer at City of Melbourne commissioned a capability review to assess the organization’s ability to meet future objectives. Capability reviews are independent and forward-looking. They consider an agency’s leadership, strategy and delivery and how well equipped the organization is to respond to challenges in the medium to long term (Panchamia and Thomas 2014). A number of international jurisdictions have reviewed their public sector’s capability in recent years, including the UK, New Zealand, Canada, and Australia. This was the first time that an Australian local government used the review model.

The City of Melbourne reviewers found that community engagement was highly valued and embedded in the organization’s approach to work (Adams, Munro, and Parker 2015). They also observed that Future Melbourne, a 10-year strategic vision for the City, would be drawing to a close in two years. Developed collaboratively with the community in 2007, Future Melbourne is Melbourne’s plan for the future direction of city life which envisages Melbourne to be a bold, inspirational, and sustainable global city.

The review advocated that planning and consultation should commence for Future Melbourne’s successor. In the seven years since Future Melbourne 2008, the city was facing a new suite of economic, social, environmental, and demographic changes that needed to be addressed. For example, while more than 122,000 people called the municipality home and a further 732,000 people visited the central city every day, this population was expected to continue growing rapidly, with a forecast 38.3% increase by the year 2030.

The rapid innovation and adoption of new technologies was also opening up economic opportunities, bringing disruption, and shaping new forms of civic governance. With the municipality’s C02 emissions trending upwards, there was also a need to mitigate human-induced climate change by de-carbonizing the economy and preparing the city for the already emerging changes of a hotter, drier climate.

In June 2015, Council agreed to refresh the Future Melbourne plan in line with the review’s recommendation.

6. Developing future Melbourne 2026

The Future Melbourne Committee of Council endorsed the Future Melbourne 2026 Project Plan in September 2015. The Plan set out the proposed project scope, timing, governance, objectives, and community engagement for the refresh. A core objective was that community participation underpins the development process and that the resulting plan was community owned.

In December 2015, the City of Melbourne appointed six leaders from Melbourne’s community as ambassadors to lead and guide the refresh of Future Melbourne. The ambassadors were chosen on the basis of their expertise, representing one of the following areas: urban density and growth; digital city; climate change; future economies; and citizens and government.

The ambassadors’ role was to make sure that Future Melbourne 2026 was an authentic expression of the community’s vision for the future of Melbourne and the...
process of engagement was inclusive. It was also the ambassadors’ role to deliver the completed plan to Council on completion of the project in August 2016. Table 2 outlines the project’s five phases.

Geoff Mulgan writes:

There are the “bees”: the creative social entrepreneurs or junior officials, community groups or professionals who develop ideas – driven by passion, anger or loss, or just by the urge to make things better. In the other group are the “trees” – the big public agencies, companies and non-government organisations with roots, power and money. (Mulgan 2007)

The Future Melbourne engagement plan was predicated on seeking a diversity of perspectives and involving the city’s “bees and trees” – a community of institutions, organizations, and individuals – to co-create the plan. Engagement objectives included:

- working with the community to identify and prioritize topics, innovate and test/prototype new ideas;
- providing creative and accessible opportunities to imagine, deliberate, and learn from one another;
- giving people the necessary means to meaningfully and effectively participate in the plan’s development. There was also a commitment to transparency at all stages and communicating how contributions influenced Future Melbourne 2026.

There was also a commitment to transparency at all stages and communicating how contributions influenced Future Melbourne 2026. Figure 1 summarizes the engagement approach which was aligned to the IAP2 spectrum.

7. Public engagement and Future Melbourne 2026

In February and March 2016, City of Melbourne invited businesses, institutions, residents, students, visitors, and workers to share their ideas for the future of Melbourne. Face-to-face workshops, forums, seminars, the interactive Future Melbourne website, and a survey were the main engagement tools. A range of thought leaders – including
the Future Melbourne ambassadors – informed and stimulated the development of these ideas. A series of future trend papers about the city supported the key themes identified in the ideas phase: urban planning and density; digital city; climate change; future economies; and citizens and governance.

By the end of the ideas phase, the community had contributed 970 ideas for the future of Melbourne and submitted 350 surveys. More than 2000 people also joined the conversation at 31 events including events for culturally and linguistically diverse people, Aboriginal people, senior citizens, children, young people, and people with a disability. Pop up events were held at libraries, community festivals, and cultural events to engage groups who may have been unaware of the digital campaign and also those whose participation could have been limited because of language issues or access to technology.

The synthesis phase saw the analysis of the community contributions and the publication of the *Bringing Your Ideas Together* report. Prepared by an independent company, the report brought together the community’s ideas and survey results. The Future Melbourne Ambassadors reviewed the report as assurance to confirm it accurately captured the community’s ideas and discussion. Publication and dissemination of the report fulfilled the City of Melbourne’s commitment to release the outcomes of the ideas phase.

In the deliberative phase, the City of Melbourne appointed a citizens’ jury of 52 people to review and revise the Future Melbourne plan. A citizens’ jury brings together a group of randomly chosen citizens to deliberate on a specific issue. During jury proceedings, participants are provided with background information about the issue; hear from expert witnesses; and also have the opportunity to cross-examine the witnesses. Proceedings generally last for several days and trained moderators facilitate the deliberations so that they are fair and meet their purpose. At the conclusion of the process, the jury produces recommendations in the form of a report to the sponsoring body (Smith and Wales 2000).

The citizens’ jury is a key mechanism in a deliberative democratic process which “promises more trustworthy and legitimate forms of political authority, more informed decisions and a more active account of citizenship” (Smith and Wales 2000). It epitomizes community led decision-making. What sets a citizens’ jury apart from other participatory models is that it combines information, time, scrutiny, deliberation, independence, and authority (Coote and Lenaghan 1997). While other forms of public involvement have some of these elements, the citizens’ jury process is designed so that all these features are present.

The Future Melbourne jury was selected from the respondents to 7000 invitations sent to people who lived, worked, or owned a business in the municipality. This resulted in a jury that broadly represented the municipal demographic, with a mix of business owners, employees and residents, and a matching gender and age distribution profile.

The citizens’ jury used the ideas and information developed in phases one and two, including the *Bringing Your Ideas Together* report, to inform the refresh of the plan. Jury members deliberated over six weeks in a private online forum and in face to face workshops held over three and a half days.
At the conclusion of proceedings, the jury prepared a draft of Future Melbourne 2026. The draft comprised a preamble, a vision for Melbourne’s future, 9 goals for realizing the vision and 53 priorities for achieving the goals. The jury reached agreement on these elements through a voting process. A minimum of 80% of jurors present had to agree for an element to be included in the draft. All jurors had the opportunity to submit minority reports where they disagreed and eleven minority reports were in the final draft report.

The jury’s draft of Future Melbourne 2026 together with the minority reports were provided to the ambassadors group for review. The ambassadors supported the vision, preamble and all nine goals. They made some minor changes to the priorities to avoid duplication and improve clarity thereby reducing the number of priorities to 49. They also reviewed the minority reports and provided written commentary on each issue raised. Table 3 compares the vision and goals between Future Melbourne 2008 and 2026.

In August 2016, the chair of the ambassadors group and three jurors commended Future Melbourne 2026 to Council. The plan is now being used as the basis of Council’s four-year plan and as a resource for other Council initiatives.

8. Evaluation of Future Melbourne 2026 community engagement

The City of Melbourne commissioned an independent evaluation of the Future Melbourne community engagement process. Data were collected through 16 in depth interviews with jurors, ambassadors, and stakeholders as well as a stakeholder focus group. Documents and communication materials used in the engagement process were also analyzed.

Overall, the evaluation found that the community engagement program fulfilled its objectives. These were:

- Seek out and facilitate the involvement of people who are affected by or interested in the plan.
- Acknowledge and build on existing relationships and networks and build new relationships to enable the plan’s implementation.
- Design a flexible engagement approach that enables organizations, institutions, groups, and people to design, deliver, or influence their participation now and into the future.
- Work with organizations, institutions, groups, and people to identify and prioritize topics, innovate, and test/prototype new ideas.
- Provide people with the information and opportunities they need to participate in meaningful ways.
- Be transparent at all stages of the plan’s development and close the loop by communicating how contributions influenced the plan’s development.

The evaluation identified that the engagement process engaged a diverse cross-section of the community and participants were well supported with relevant information and the input, guidance and knowledge of selected experts and the ambassadors. It
aligned strongly with achievement of IAP2 Core Values for public participation and engagement generated goodwill and ownership among community members with the development of a refreshed plan that reflected their needs and vision for Melbourne’s future (EY Sweeney 2016).

The ambassadors and jurors overwhelmingly believed the process was worthwhile and that the final plan was representative of the community’s needs and vision. Stakeholders considered that the extensive public consultation delivered a more relevant and valuable outcome than other approaches. The evaluation identified several lessons learned including longer timeframes to the preparation phase and addressing time-pressure issues experienced by jurors during the deliberative phase (EY Sweeney 2016).

9. Future Melbourne 2026 insights and effective engagement

Assessing the quality of engagement involves several dimensions: procedural quality, responsiveness quality, and the quality of outcomes (Friedman and Miles 2006). Procedural quality entails how the engagement process was undertaken and whether it was consistent with the stated purpose. Other factors include the ability of participants to initiate engagement and empowering participants to raise issues most important to them.

Neligan (2003) has identified four further characteristics of procedural quality have: access to timely and accurate information; terms of engagement; legitimacy of engagement; and procedures for redress. As validated by the evaluation outcomes, all of these elements were evident in the Future Melbourne 2026 engagement process. When it came to the capacity for redress, this was reflected in citizen jurors being able to submit a minority report. The ambassadors also served as stewards of the process, safeguarding its integrity.

The execution of Future Melbourne’s community engagement approach was consistent with the Victorian Auditor-General principles for effective engagement in government decision-making (VAGO 2017). These principles are:

- clearly defined objectives and scope;
- an appropriate methodology that reflects understanding of affected stakeholders and their needs;
- a plan for identifying and mitigating risk;
- appropriate resources and time lines; and
- plans for review and evaluation.

For public managers, the Future Melbourne 2026 engagement process offers the following insights for effective community engagement projects:

- Commit the necessary resources (fiscal and people) at an organizational level to support planning and execution of the engagement plan.
- Embed engagement at all stages of the project from planning to implementation to evaluation.
• Define clear and specific engagement objectives and communicate these to a variety of audiences.
• Create meaningful opportunities for public participation.
• Provide community members with the necessary support and information so they can participate to their fullest ability.
• Uphold the promises made to community members about their level of influence.
• Close the feedback loop and advise participants how their input influenced the decision.

Effective engagement also has implications for policy capabilities. Wu, Ramesh, and Howlett (2015) present a framework for policy capacity which has three types of skills or competences: analytical, operational, and political. Each of these three competences involves capabilities at three levels – individual, organizational, and systemic. The framework covers all aspects of the policy processes including agenda setting, formulation, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation.

At the individual level, the OECD (2017) has identified three sets of capabilities for effective engagement:

• Professional: the traditional building blocks of engagement including communication marketing, consultation, facilitation, conflict resolution, community development, and outreach.
• Strategic: using engagement skills to achieve specific outcomes.
• Innovative: innovation skills applied to engagement to expand and redesign engagement through cocreation, prototyping, social media, crowdsourcing, ethnography, data analytics, and digital service environments.

These skills were embedded in the City of Melbourne community engagement team that supported the development of Future Melbourne 2026.

10. Conclusion

Public engagement can enrich policy-making, bringing a diversity of views and voices to the issue at hand. By placing the experience of those affected by the outcome at the center of deliberations, it can also lead to better informed policies and programs aligned with citizens’ needs. But there can be a risk of skepticism and cynicism if engagement is a tokenistic exercise or decision makers do not heed the contribution of engagement participants.

This paper examined the role and process of public engagement through the case study of Future Melbourne 2026. It considered public engagement in policy-making from both normative and practical perspectives, outlining both benefits and challenges as well as different approaches to the engagement process. These approaches were presented as a continuum with corresponding levels of involvement and participation from the public.

The case study of Future Melbourne 2026 illustrated that effective engagement is more than a well-designed engagement plan. Engagement needs to be embedded at all
stages of a policy project, supported by appropriate levels of resourcing. It requires strong leadership from decision makers, whether elected officials or senior public servants, and a commitment to inclusion, participation, and transparency in decision-making.

Note
1. Detailed information about the functions and operations of the City of Melbourne and Melbourne City Council is available at https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au.
2. For a jurisdictional analysis of capability reviews, see https://www.dpc.wa.gov.au/ProjectsandSpecialEvents/ServicePriorityReview/Documents/BP_Agency_Capability_Reviews.pdf.
3. The Future Melbourne 2026 project plan can be read in full at https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/future-melbourne-2026-project-plan.pdf.
4. A complete list of community engagement events is available at https://participate.melbourne.vic.gov.au/future/events.
5. The Bringing Your Ideas Together report is available at https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/sitecollectiondocuments/bringing-your-ideas-together-global-research.doc.
6. The Citizens Jury Report including minority reports can be read at https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/future-melbourne-2026-citizens-jury-report.doc.
7. View the final Future Melbourne 2026 plan at https://www.melbourne.vic.gov.au/SiteCollectionDocuments/future-melbourne-2026-plan.pdf.

Disclosure statement
The author was one of the six ambassadors appointed to the Future Melbourne 2026 refresh.

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