

***SOUTH DENALI
RESORT
DEVELOPMENT
PROPOSAL***

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

FINAL REPORT OF DOWL ENGINEERS FOR THE DENALI STATE PARK MASTER PLAN UPDATE

MARCH 1989

This paper summarizes the major recommendations of DOWL Engineers for the Denali State Park Master Plan. DOWL, under contract, has studied the park and surrounding region for the past year, identifying recreational and development issues, researching park resources, analyzing visitation trends, working with the park advisory board, and conducting public meetings. Recommendations fall into nine major categories, discussed below.

Copies of the full report are available from Alaska State Parks, Marie Castel, Box 107001, Anchorage, AK, 99510, phone 762-2617. A \$5 fee helps defray printing costs.

1. South Denali Visitor Complex, Commercial Lodging. Visitor complex at the park's north end. Major element would be visitor center with 15-20,000 square feet, including parking, information counters, office space, interpretive displays, mountain viewing stations, media rooms, theater, coffee shop, rest rooms, medical aid room, tour staging area, interpretive trails, and employee housing. Medium-size lodge (100-250 rooms) at High Lake, with interpretive emphasis, including trails, displays, etc. A hostel (number of beds unspecified) and campground with 50 regular units and 10-15 walk-in units are also proposed for the complex.

Development of visitor facilities in the park's south end should be considered in the future, if a series of problems are resolved, including the need for land use controls to protect against spillover development.

2. Tokositna Lodge. Small-scale lodge, with 20-40 beds, located in the Long Creek area of the Tokositna Valley, focusing on views of McKinley/Alaska Range and natural history interpretation/appreciation. Designed for low-volume, high-quality experience, with low-rise construction of natural materials. Access by special four-wheel vehicles or air; in either case arrivals and departures would be limited to control noise and disruptions.

3. Zoning of Parklands. Wilderness designation of most of the Curry/Kesugi Ridge, plus the inaccessible area northwest of the Chulitna River (totalling approximately 33% of the park). Natural zone in most of the remainder of the park (about 60% of the total), with a "special management" overlay for the non-wilderness alpine areas of the ridge line and the swan staging/nesting areas of the Tokositna lowlands. Five development zones (about 7%): High Lake, Byer's Lake, Tokositna, South Curry Ridge, and Eldridge Knob. One small cultural zone, where the old Curry Hotel built a viewpoint on Curry Ridge. In sum, these recommendations represent a relaxation of the classification system of the 1975 master plan.

With respect to private lands, DOWL recommends that the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) work with the borough to strengthen the provisions of the Denali State Park Special Use District as a means of controlling undesirable spillover development. DNR should also consider using its zoning authority over private land inside park boundaries.

4. Park Boundary Adjustments. Four adjustments are proposed. A land trade with National Park Service encompassing approximately 5,500 acres would redraw boundaries along the Ruth/Coffee/Chulitna rivers to simplify field management. A 300 acre state-owned parcel north of

the Tokositna River would bring the river's entire length into park status. A 300 acre state-owned parcel north of Blair Lake would be added to ensure protection and provide access. A 500 acre state-owned parcel bounded by the railroad, Indian River, and Susitna River with very high scenic, habitat, and recreational values would be added to enable active management by the Division of Parks.

5. Public Use Cabins. Extensive network proposed along the road system, on lake shores, and in the back-country. Exact locations and numbers would be determined after more detailed study, but general areas and numbers are the Susitna River (several), Chulitna River (4-6), Tokositna River (several), Peters Hills (several), Byer's Lake (6), Lucy Lake, Spink Lake, and Eldridge Glacier Knob (1-2).

6. Wildlife Management. Park should be designated as a separate game management subunit, enabling more comprehensive consideration of park wildlife issues. Petition Board of Game to prohibit bear baiting, which has potential of encouraging negative bear-human encounters. Work with Board of Game and ADFG on possible wildlife viewing designations for certain areas (Eldridge Knob, High Lake, Tokositna, etc).

7. Vehicles. Snow machines would be allowed outside wilderness areas when snow depths are adequate. Off-road vehicles would be prohibited in summer. Airplane landings would be limited to gravel bars and beaches outside wilderness areas on the Tokositna, Susitna, and Chulitna rivers. Landings also would be allowed on Spink, Lucy, Ermine, and Home lakes, plus all un-named lakes intersected by the park's southern boundary. Landings on Curry/Kesugi Ridge prohibited. One designated fixed-wing landing site for Tokositna lodge. Commercial helicopter landings limited to two sites: Eldridge Knob (if interpretive facility is not built); and Tokositna lodge site (outside park if possible). Motorboats would be prohibited on lakes, and upstream of Bunco Lake on the Tokositna River.

8. Recreation Facilities. DOWL recommends a facility development program oriented towards the highway corridor, existing development nodes, and trails. A group campground and additional single camping units are proposed for the Byer's Lake area. A 20-40 unit RV campground and 15-30 unit conventional campground are proposed for the old gravel pit at the park's north end. A system of up to 11 remote campgrounds, each with 3-4 tent sites and pit latrine, is proposed for the trail network. An unspecified number of train stop shelters (probably at Curry and the Gold Creek bridge) would serve as shelters and staging areas for river rafters, train passengers, skiers, and other back country travelers. A Susitna River boat launch is proposed in the Gold Creek bridge area, and a system of raft put-in/take-outs are recommended for the Chulitna River (one suggested site is Honolulu Creek). Major trail proposals include relocating the existing Troublesome Creek trail head and the trail itself between the highway and Optima Pool waterfall. Three new trail heads are proposed on the Parks Highway. The Byer's Lake loop is slated for completion. A new trail would connect Byer's Lake and the Veteran's Memorial. New scenic pullouts are suggested along the Parks Highway, as well as improvement and expansion of existing overlooks.

9. Interpretive Program. In addition to the interpretive elements of the South Denali and Tokositna proposals, DOWL recommends developing an interpretive facility at Eldridge Knob, overlooking the Eldridge Glacier. The facility would be a small enclosed space, with displays and presentation areas, rest rooms, glacier overlook, telescopes, and snack bar. The eight-mile road would be an interpretive facility in itself, with a number of developed turnouts focussing on particular natural features. The road would be restricted to special rubber-tired trams, operated by a concessionaire.

A system of scenic and wildlife viewing overlooks is also proposed, entailing viewing platforms, boardwalks, roofed shelters, displays, and telescopes. Exact locations and numbers are unclear, although Horseshoe Creek and clear water sloughs adjacent to the Chulitna River are mentioned.

SOUTH DENALI PROJECT

DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
MARCH 1989

Introduction. Denali State Park, located mid-way between Anchorage and Fairbanks on the Parks Highway, offers spectacular views of Mt. McKinley and excellent opportunities for recreation and interpretation of the region's natural history. There have been numerous proposals over the years for a major viewing/interpretive complex on the south side of the Alaska Range, including a visitor center, lodge, trails, and camp grounds. "South Denali" is envisioned as a public/private venture, with federal funding of the visitor center, state funding of infrastructure and recreation facilities, and private funding of lodging. The Division of Parks and Outdoor Recreation (with funding and cooperation from the Department of Commerce and Economic Development and National Park Service) is currently updating the Denali State Park master plan as a means of deciding whether the state should proceed with the South Denali project.

Background. "The Mountain" tops the list of visitor attractions in Alaska. Denali National Park has been operating at or near capacity for over a decade, while the number of tourists visiting Alaska has continued to increase annually. The national park has no plans for expanding its capacity, resulting in the supply of Denali region tourism facilities lagging far behind demand.

Proposals for a south side viewing facility date back to the mid-1960s. Since then, several proposals have been advanced, only to fall short of implementation.

The current master plan update is taking a comprehensive view of the Denali region, identifying and analyzing the full range of social, environmental, and economic issues related to Denali State Park. The master plan will recommend if, when, where, and under what conditions South Denali should proceed. It is scheduled for adoption in April, 1989.

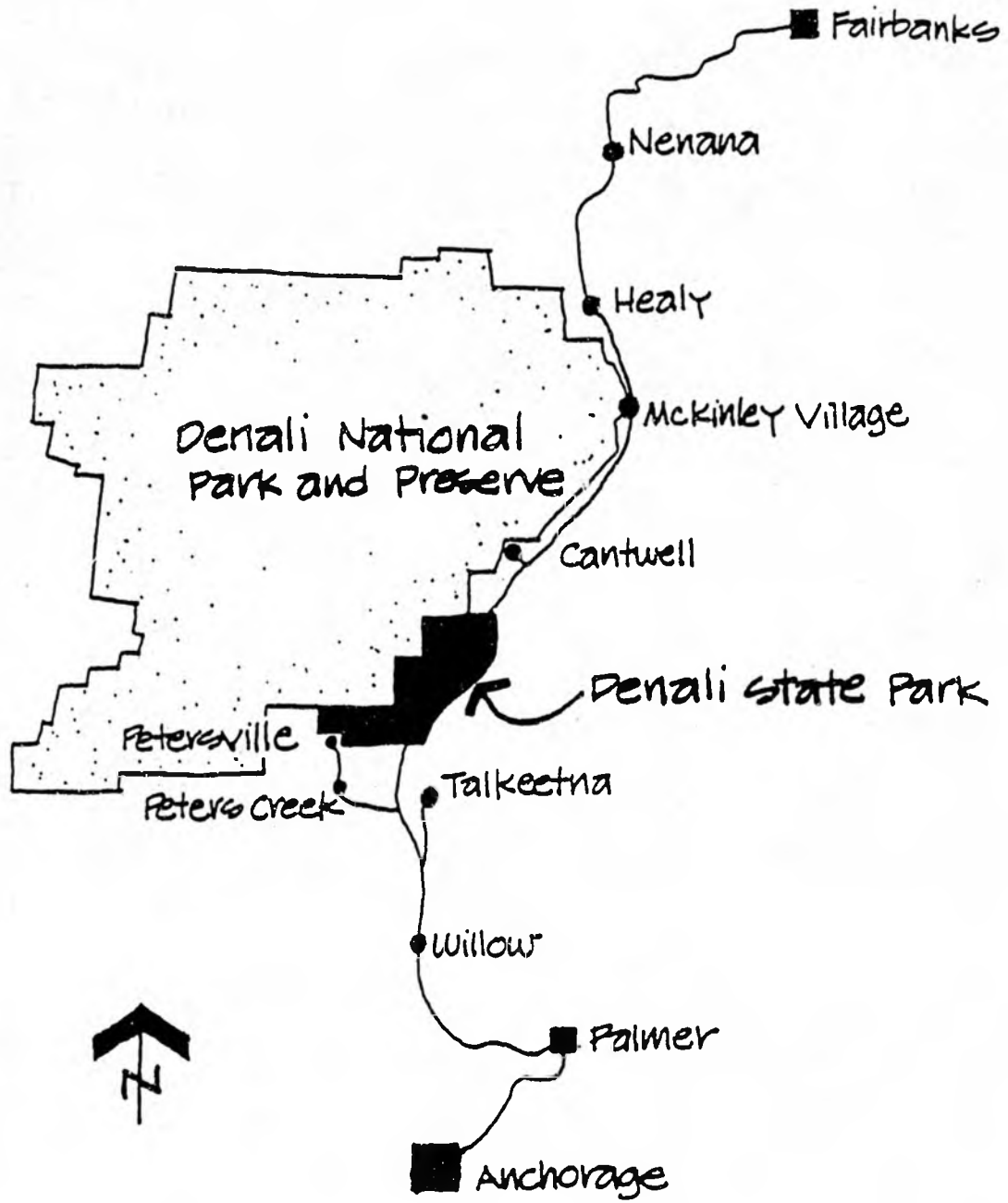
Issues. There is broad support for a visitor center in the Denali State Park (operated jointly by the State and the National Park Service). An important issue centers on whether overnight lodging should be built in the park, as part of the visitor complex. Some argue that commercial lodging should be located outside the park on private (or Alaska Railroad) lands. Others believe that quality control within the park would be much more rigorous, guaranteeing the quality such a project warrants. Another issue concerns the best location for the South Denali complex. A detailed site selection study was conducted as part of the plan update, analyzing sixteen sites inside and outside the park. The park's northern end is the preferred site at this time.

Status. DOWL Engineers, under contract to update the plan, recently delivered its final report. DNR will review DOWL's work, in cooperation with its advisory board, prior to final plan adoption. If the plan directs, DNR will begin implementing the South Denali proposal according to the state concession law. Public hearings would be held in May 1989. A Request For Proposals (RFP) would be issued in September 1989, and construction would begin in mid-1990.

Role of the Legislature. The nature and scale of the South Denali proposal assures a lot of public interest and some controversy. DNR will continue to inform the legislature of its activities and solicit guidance. The National Park Service has offered to fund construction of the visitor center itself, and DNR may request future capital funding for infrastructure and other recreation facilities, as well as operating funds.

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Review DOWL Report, Public and Board Comment

Plan Preparation and Adoption

Commissioner's Preliminary Decision

Public Comment Period

Public Hearings

Review of Comments

Commissioner's Final Decision

Prepare Request For Proposals (released 9/15/89)

Receive Proposals (1/15/90 deadline)

Review Proposals

Negotiate Contract

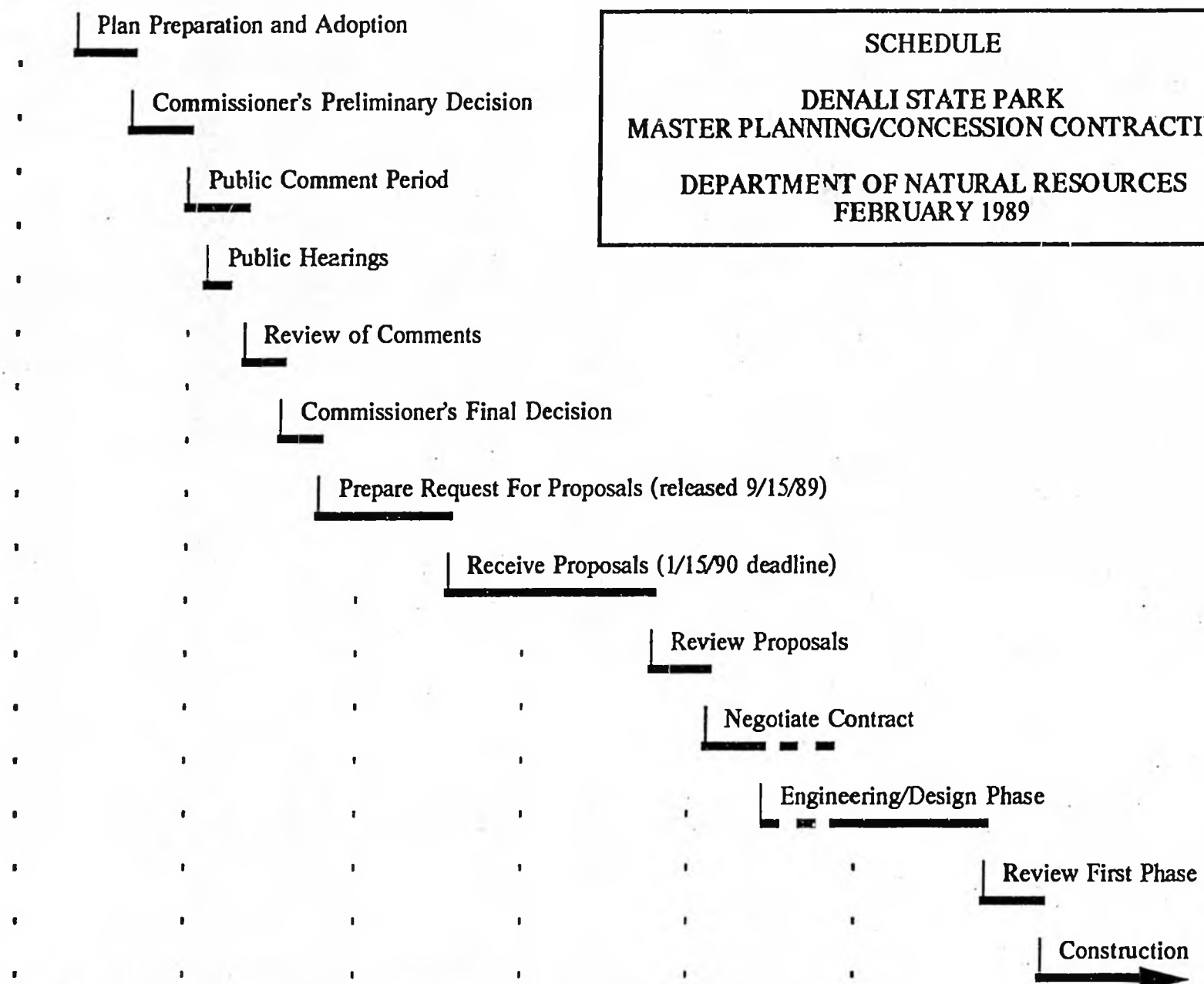
Engineering/Design Phase

Review First Phase

Construction

SCHEDULE
DENALI STATE PARK
MASTER PLANNING/CONCESSION CONTRACTING
DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
FEBRUARY 1989

Feb 89 Mar 89 Apr 89 May 89 Jun 89 Jul 89 Aug 89 Sep 89 Oct 89 Nov 89 Dec 89 Jan 90 Feb 90 Mar 90 Apr 90 May 90 Jun 90 Jul 90 Aug 90 Sep 90 Oct 90 Nov 90



CHASE COMMUNITY COUNCIL RESOLUTION 89-04

A resolution making comments on the Denali State Park Master Plan.

WHEREAS planning is now in process for development of Denali State Park,

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that as adjacent neighbors to the southeast of Denali State Park, the Chase Community Council makes the following comments on the Denali State Park Master Plan:

We feel that many of the recommendations by Dowl Engineers were good. We were also pleased that the public was involved in the process, although we feel that DNR, (Alaska Department of Natural Resources), has their own agenda contrary to public testimony concerning large scale development. We feel large scale development inside the Park conflicts with the outdoor recreational needs of Alaskans, and is detrimental to the resource base and serves as an attraction in and of itself.

We agree that major tourism lodging facilities should be located outside the Park, at the north end, on private, state, or railroad lands, where there is road and rail access, where there is the opportunity to regulate development on state and railroad lands and where less incidental development will occur.

We feel the same for moderate sized hotels also. High quality lodging, with restaurant, gift shop, associated facilities for patrons and employee housing, is better suited outside the Park so as to ensure a quality experience inside the Park.

We recommend a visitor center close to the highway and close to the lodging outside the Park. If a visitor center has to be inside the park boundary, it should be of modest proportion. If a visitor center has to have office space for Denali State Park and National Park Service, media rooms, coffee shop, gift shop, theater, and employee housing, we feel the Park is best served by having the visitor center outside it. DNR's goal should not be to create idyllic villages in Parks. Hotels, employee housing, tour staging areas, offices, ~~ORCA~~ IMAX theatre, shops and the like are best situated outside the Park.

We also oppose a high quality backcountry lodge in the Tokositna area because: 1) of local opposition, 2) because a road to a hotel precludes backcountry, 3) because controlled access by a concessionaire in practice discriminates against Alaskans, 4) traffic due to running a concessions is contrary to a backcountry area. We would not be opposed to an unmanned 20-40 bed shelter accessed by foot, snowmachine, dogsled, skis--i.e. other than by a private road ruled by a concessionaire. This system would better serve the purpose of a low-volume, high-quality experience, and likewise give Alaskans an equal chance at reservations as opposed to something run by a concessionaire.

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We oppose the Eldridge Glacier Center, primarily because of objections to access. We feel that helicopter access is unsuitable for a quality experience and has a negative impact on wildlife. We feel road access has too many drawbacks to be a solution. A limited access tram lane would be too expensive for the State to run; a concession run tram lane would not allow equitable treatment for Alaskans since a concessionaire would allot seating to his hotel patrons first; unlimited road access would be too disruptive for the back country nature of the area; and further, a bridge would be an outrageous expense when money could better be spent on such mundane but important improvements as road pullouts, scenic overlooks, winter plowing for parking, acquiring private inholdings, etc. that enhance the potential for a high-quality park experience.

Except for the major development facilities mentioned, we are in agreement with most of Dowl's recommendations.

We are in favor of the general zoning recommendations, particularly the recognition of the necessity for continuing the wilderness status of Curry Ridge.

We are in favor of the acquisition of inholdings; of DPOR, (DNR's Department of Parks and Outdoor Recreation), working with the Borough to strengthen the provisions of the Denali State Park Use District as a means of controlling inappropriate spillover development; of formalizing cooperative management agreements with appropriate entities, and of working with ADF&G, (Alaska Department of Fish and Game), to establish management practices for enhanced wildlife viewing.

We support the boundary adjustments.

We support public use cabins.

We support the Wildlife Management recommendations.

We support Dowl's recommendations for vehicles, particularly that airplane and helicopter landings on Curry/Kasigi Ridge be prohibited. We are opposed to commercial helicopters in association with Park activities. We also are opposed to motor boats upstream of the Bunco Lake outlet.

We are in support of the recreation facilities concerning campgrounds and trails.

We feel that interpretive programs should be oriented to appreciating and experiencing Denali State Park, not in interpretive facilities that are attractions themselves as tour stops. Theatres showing movies of Mt. McKinley and wildlife are better suited outside the Park, close to the hotels, employee housing, gift shops, media rooms and offices.

Passed Unanimously

3/3/89

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