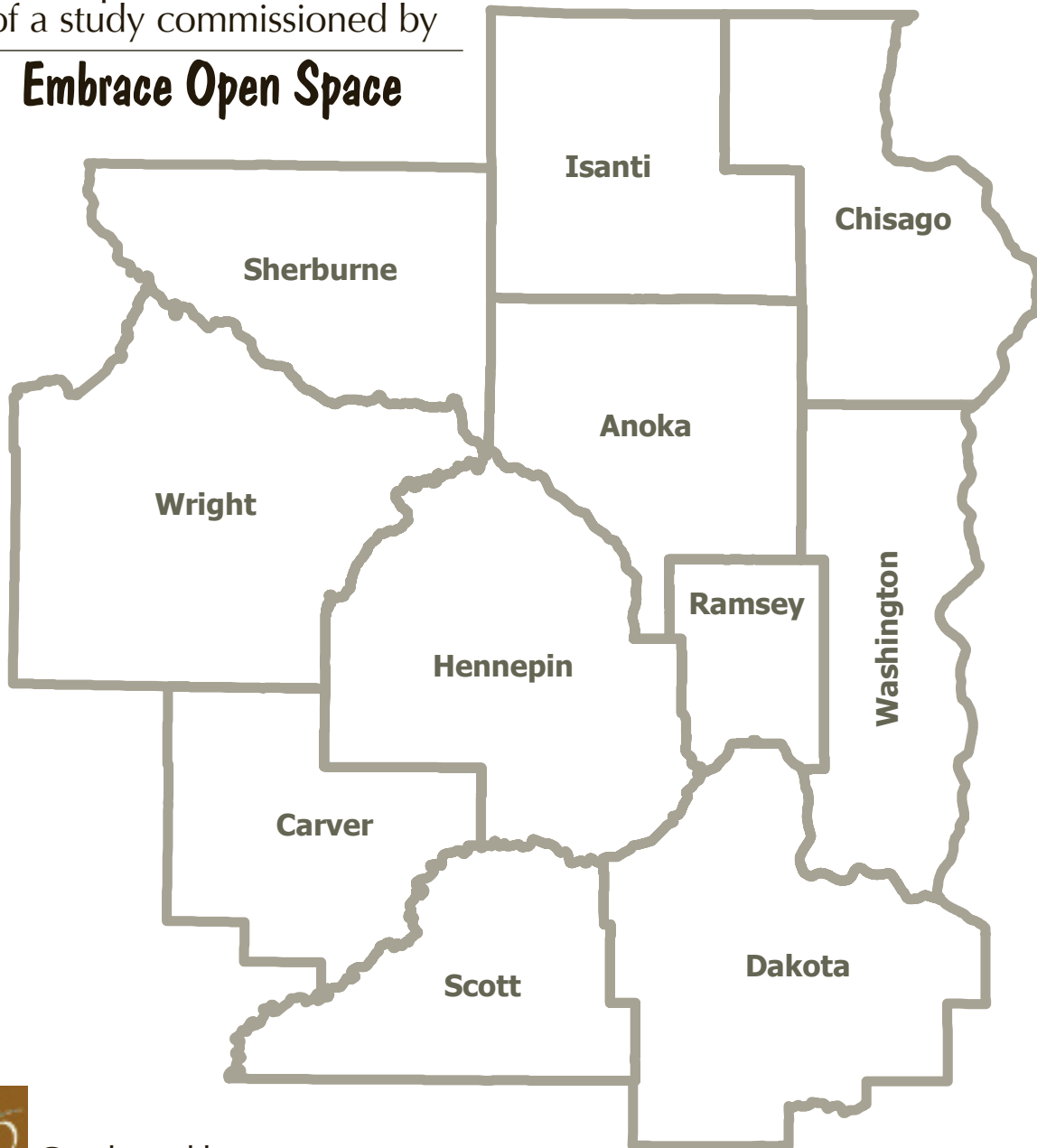


A Look at Community Capacity To Conserve Open Space in the Twin Cities Area

A report on the results
of a study commissioned by

Embrace Open Space



Conducted by
1000 Friends of Minnesota



An Embrace Open Space Report

May 2008

PARTICIPATING COMMUNITIES

County respondents

Anoka County
Carver County
Chisago County
Dakota County
Hennepin County
Isanti County
Ramsey County
Scott County
Sherburne County
Washington County
Wright County

City respondents

City of Afton
City of Andover
City of Annandale
City of Anoka
City of Apple Valley
City of Arden Hills
City of Bayport
City of Becker
City of Belle Plaine
City of Bethel
City of Big Lake
City of Blaine
City of Bloomington
City of Braham
City of Brooklyn Park
City of Buffalo
City of Burnsville
City of Cambridge
City of Center City
City of Centerville
City of Champlin
City of Chanhassen
City of Chaska
City of Chisago City
City of Clearwater
City of Cokato
City of Columbia Heights
City of Coon Rapids
City of Corcoran
City of Cottage Grove
City of Crystal
City of Dayton
City of Deephaven
City of Delano
City of Eagan

City of East Bethel
City of Eden Prairie
City of Edina
City of Elko New Market
City of Elk River
City of Excelsior
City of Falcon Heights
City of Farmington
City of Forest Lake
City of Fridley
City of Gem Lake
City of Golden Valley
City of Grant
City of Hamburg
City of Ham Lake
City of Hampton
City of Hanover
City of Harris City
City of Hastings
City of Hilltop
City of Hopkins
City of Howard Lake
City of Independence
City of Isanti City
City of Jordan
City of Lake Elmo
City of Lakeland
City of Lakeland Shores
City of Lake St. Croix Beach
City of Lauderdale
City of Lexington
City of Lilydale
City of Lino Lakes
City of Little Canada
City of Long Lake
City of Mahtomedi
City of Maple Grove
City of Maplewood
City of Marine on St. Croix
City of Mayer
City of Medicine Lake
City of Medina
City of Mendota Heights
City of Minneapolis
City of Minnetonka
City of Minnetonka Beach
City of Minnetrista
City of Montrose
City of Mounds View
City of New Brighton
City of New Hope

City of Newport
City of New Prague
City of New Scandia
City of North Branch
City of Northfield
City of North Oaks
City of North St. Paul
City of Norwood Young America
City of Oakdale
City of Oak Grove
City of Orono
City of Osseo
City of Otsego
City of Plymouth
City of Princeton
City of Prior Lake
City of Ramsey
City of Richfield
City of Robbinsdale
City of Rockford
City of Rosemount
City of Roseville
City of Rush City
City of Savage
City of Shafer
City of Shakopee
City of Shoreview
City of Shorewood
City of South Haven
City of South St. Paul
City of Spring Park
City of St. Anthony
City of St. Francis
City of Stacy
City of Stillwater
City of St. Louis Park
City of St. Michael
City of St. Paul
City of Sunfish Lake
City of Vadnais Heights
City of Victoria
City of Waconia
City of Watertown
City of Waverly
City of Wayzata
City of West St. Paul
City of White Bear Lake
City of Willernie
City of Woodbury
City of Wyoming
City of Zimmerman

Township respondents

Albion Township
Baytown Township
Belle Plaine Township
Burns Township
Camden Township
Chatham Township
Chisago Lake Township
Denmark Township
Empire Township
Eureka Township
Fish Lake Township
Grey Cloud Island Township
Hampton Township
Hassan Township
Haven Township
Helena Township
Hollywood Township
Laketown Township
Lent Township
Linwood Township
Livonia Township
Louisville Township
Maple Lake Township
Marysville Township
May Township
Nessel Township
Orrock Township
Oxford Township
Palmer Township
Rockford Township
San Francisco Township
Sand Creek Township
Shafer Township
Silver Creek Township
Spencer Brook Township
Spring Lake Township
Springvale Township
St. Lawrence Township
Stanchfield Township
Stillwater Township
Sunrise Township
Vermillion Township
Watertown Township
West Lakeland Township
White Bear Township
Wyoming Township

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May 2008

A report on the results of a study
commissioned by
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Conducted by
1000 Friends of Minnesota

Report published by
Embrace Open Space
St. Paul, Minnesota

*Embrace Open Space is a collaborative serving as a catalyst
for greater citizen and elected leadership to conserve and steward natural areas
and parks, lakes and rivers in the eleven-county Twin Cities area.*

This questionnaire was commissioned by Embrace Open Space, a collaborative serving as a catalyst for greater citizen and elected leadership to conserve and steward natural areas and parks, lakes and rivers in the eleven-county Twin Cities area.

The questionnaire was conducted by the Growing by Design Technical Resource Center at 1000 Friends of Minnesota. The Technical Resource Center offers community-based technical assistance, including geographic mapping, visualization, data collection and analysis.

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Special thanks to:

- **Advisors, reviewers and testers for this work**, including Ann Beckman, Lisa Bigaouette, Larry Blackstad, Gina Bonsignore, Jean Coleman, Will Craig, Debra Detrick, Sandi Dingle, David Fulton, Amy Geisler, Jane Harper, Dan Marckel, Danny Nadeau, Gregory Page, Cordelia Pierson, Sharon Pfeifer, Michael Pressman, Shelley Shreffler, Jim Solem, Erin Stwora, Ben Welle and Josh Williams.
- **The Land Use Advisory Committee of the Metropolitan Council**, whose members affirmed that this information will be of significant value to participating communities as an opportunity to compare themselves to other communities throughout the metropolitan area.
- **The individuals representing the 194 communities** (cities, townships and counties) who committed their valuable time to completing this questionnaire. Thanks to their thoughtful responses, insights and perspectives, this first-time look at “community capacity” to conserve parks and natural areas will provide valuable information for the communities themselves, as well as for Embrace Open Space and other entities desiring to support the efforts of these communities in the future. (For a complete listing of participating communities, see inside front cover.)
- **Sally Wakefield**, 1000 Friends of Minnesota, for coordinating and analyzing the questionnaire results, and for creating all tables and graphs.
- **Communities and organizations** that submitted photographs for this report.

For additional information or copies of the complete report, contact:

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The complete 80-page report includes additional information about the methodology of the study, graphs of key findings, comparisons of metro county and collar county results, and comparisons of results by community classification types. The full report also includes an appendix of easy-to-read tabulated results for each of the 62 questions, as well as all individual comments from respondents. Along with total responses, tabulations illustrate results by city/township/county respondents and by metro/collar county respondents.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why this study?

Embrace Open Space (EOS) is a collaborative that works to catalyze citizen and elected leadership to conserve and steward natural areas and parks, lakes and rivers in the 11-county Twin Cities area. Formed in 2001, EOS provides a framework for its partner organizations to work together on issues related to preserving open space in the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area.

This report is based on results of a questionnaire that examined local government capacity (“community capacity”) to conserve parks and natural areas in the 11-county Twin Cities metro area. Community capacity is defined as the resources, regulations, relationships and operations that enable a community to conserve open space. Sponsored by Embrace Open Space and conducted by 1000 Friends of Minnesota, the study reflects Embrace Open Space’s goal of seeking a deeper understanding of the multiple factors in place within local communities that could influence their ability and capacity to balance development and conservation.

Understanding these factors can shape assistance for longer-range local planning and policies. Periodic replication of this questionnaire over time can reveal trends that may help identify which activities act as critical precursors to park and natural area protection and restoration efforts. This study will also provide valuable information to inform the efforts of Embrace Open Space and others to help communities establish parks and open space.

Administering the questionnaire

The geographic scope of the questionnaire included what is known as the “greater Twin Cities metropolitan area.” This 4,700-square-mile area includes seven Twin Cities “metropolitan” counties (Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott and Washington), as well as four surrounding northern “collar” counties (Chisago, Isanti, Sherburne and Wright).

1000 Friends of Minnesota, with guidance from Embrace Open Space, The Trust for Public Land, and an advisory committee, developed a questionnaire to be completed by local government staff. 1000 Friends of Minnesota made direct telephone contact with 279 government agencies, inviting local government staff to complete an online questionnaire.

A total of 211 communities responded to the initial contacts made to 279 local units of government, representing an initial response rate of 76%. Of the 211 initial respondents, 194 completed the questionnaire, for a final response rate of 70%.

KEY FINDINGS

Key findings from the results of the questionnaire focus on seven identified areas of community capacity to conserve parks and natural areas in the 11-county Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area.

Planning and zoning

- A wide variety of ordinances are used to protect open space and natural areas. The majority of responding communities have ordinances related to park dedication (80%), planned unit development (71%) and stormwater management (62%).
- For protection of specific natural resources, a majority of responding communities have ordinances related to floodplains (69%), shoreland protection (67%) and wetland buffer zones (53%).
- Of those responding communities with planned unit development (PUD) ordinances, 68% report that PUDs are actively used to protect natural resources and features.
- A large percentage of responding communities (63%) do not rely on or partner with another governmental unit for planning and zoning functions.

Parks and open space planning

- 73% of responding communities have an adopted park and/or open space plan. 97% of these plans include parks, 84% include trails, 58% include open space conservation and 50% include natural area conservation.
- 62% of these approved plans include proposed acquisition of parks, open space and/or natural areas.

Implementation of plans

- In implementing the plans, purchase of land is cited more often (43% report it as a tool) than conservation easements (36% report it as a tool).
- 86% of responding communities say that total staff time spent on natural resource planning is less than one full-time-equivalent (FTE) position.
- 68% of responding communities report that **development** topics appear on council or board meeting agendas *often or regularly*, while 38% report that **open space or natural area protection** topics are on their agendas *often or regularly*.

Conservation funding

- In reporting the tools used to implement parks/open space plans, park dedication is the most widely used tool (used by 84% of responding communities), followed by park fees (63%) and annual budget allocations (51%).
- 16% of responding communities have held a voter referendum to fund park, open space and/or natural area conservation. At the same time, 23% of those who haven't held a referendum report that it is *possible to very likely* that they would consider one in the future.

Citizen interest and urgency

- Responding communities see higher citizen **interest** in protecting open space and natural areas (81% report *moderate interest, increasing interest or lots of interest*), but lower citizen **urgency** (58% report *moderate urgency, increasing urgency or lots of urgency*).

- 49% of responding communities report that citizens attend development-related hearings *frequently*, and 20% report *increasing* attendance over the past two years.
- 33% of responding communities report that they have an active citizen group (or groups) focused on community growth, natural area and park protection, or other land use-related topics; 30% report that they have an active nonprofit organization working on land conservation and/or water quality issues.
- 75% of responding communities report that local newspapers provide *full coverage* or *moderate coverage* of issues related to **development** topics in their communities, compared to 44% providing *full coverage* or *moderate coverage* of **land protection** topics. 52% of responding communities report that local newspapers provide *little coverage (rarely, if ever)* of integrating land protection into the community as it grows.

Natural resource information for decision-making

- Maps are available to local policymakers in multiple ways: hard-copy maps at government center (64%), electronic maps in PDF format (43%) and online interactive mapping (17%).
- 56% of responding communities indicate that natural resource information is *regularly taken into consideration* by policymakers when making development decisions. 34% indicate that natural resource information is *sometimes* taken into consideration.
- 48% of responding communities have used natural resource inventory information or other methods to prioritize **natural resource** protection efforts. 46% have used natural resource inventory information or other methods to prioritize **water quality** protection efforts.

Local staff expertise and experience

- 49% of respondents have worked for their communities for 5 years or less; 20% have worked for their communities for 5-10 years; and 31% have worked for their communities for more than 10 years.
- 22% of respondents have worked in the planning field for 5 years or less; 15% have worked in the planning field for 5-10 years; and 31% have worked in the planning field for more than 10 years. (The remaining 32% of respondents are not planners.)
- More than half of responding communities report having at least one full-time-equivalent (FTE) planner, either in-house or through contracted services. The remaining 48% indicate having less than 1 FTE, having no dedicated planning staff, or *not applicable*.

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS

Areas of assistance

- *Education for elected officials* is the area of assistance requested the most by responding communities (74%), followed by *workshops* (55%) and *increasing awareness through local media* (40%).

Comparing metro county and northern collar county results

Questionnaire results were analyzed to identify any significant differences between communities in the seven Twin Cities metropolitan counties (Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, Scott and Washington) and communities in the four northern “collar” counties (Chisago, Isanti, Sherburne and Wright). The results gathered from responding communities did demonstrate differences in a few areas. The findings themselves were not surprising, but differences in the indicated areas were less than might have been expected.

Comparing results by community classification types

Results of the questionnaire were also analyzed based on different types of communities. Questionnaire results were separated and reviewed to assess whether any differences can be observed between **developing** communities (both *developing job centers* and *developing bedroom communities*) and **developed** communities (*central cities and stressed municipalities, developed job centers and affluent residential areas*).

Based on a hypothesis that developing communities face greater challenges related to development and conservation, it was expected that a comparison of **developing** communities and **developed** communities would demonstrate differences in results. The comparative analysis, however, did not reflect any notable differences as measured by the results of this questionnaire, suggesting that many communities representing different classification types experience similar challenges related to development and conservation.

INITIAL CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

- This initial look at current conditions in Twin Cities metropolitan area communities provides an understanding—based on the perspectives of the communities themselves—of the multiple factors that can influence a community’s capacity to balance development and conservation. The results also suggest that, at least to some degree, all communities face challenges related to a community’s capacity to balance development and conservation.
- A clear understanding of the factors that can affect open space conservation performance may provide important insights of value to the communities themselves, as well as to Embrace Open Space and others seeking to provide support to these communities.
- Embrace Open Space recommends repeating this questionnaire over time to reveal trends that may help identify which activities are critical precursors to natural area conservation and protection.
- As a follow-up to this report, Embrace Open Space expects to publish a guide for local governments. The guide will be based on a more comprehensive analysis of these questionnaire results, as well as perspectives on what the results mean for communities seeking to assess and enhance their community capacity to conserve and protect parks and natural areas into the future.

Questions Asked of Community Respondents

The 62 questions that were asked of respondents are listed below and on page 6. Tabulated results for each question are included in the full 80-page report of the results of this study. For more information about the full report, or to obtain copies, see “For additional information” box on page ii.

Introduction and Definitions

1. Embrace Open Space is interested in learning more about how local communities define these terms as well. Please feel free to use the white space below to tell us how YOU define open space and/or natural areas.

Community Identification

2. Which type of community are you completing this survey for?

3. Please add the name of the community you are completing this survey for.

Planning and Zoning

4. Please indicate ordinances your community utilizes to protect open spaces and/or natural areas.

5. Please indicate ordinances in place in your community that are more restrictive than what is required by federal, state or local standards.

6. Please explain in what way they (ordinances) are more restrictive.

7. If you have a PUD ordinance (planned unit development), is it actively used to protect natural resources or features?

8. Does your community rely on, or partner with, another governmental unit for any part of your planning or zoning functions?

9. If yes, please describe.

10. Does your community have an adopted park and/or open space plan?

Parks and Open Space Planning

11. When was your parks and/or open space plan approved? If unsure, just enter “unsure.” If more than one plan, please enter the date for each plan, if known; if not, simply enter “more than one plan—dates unknown.”

12. Which of the following are included in your plan?

13. Does the plan include proposed acquisition of parks, open space and/or natural areas?

14. What implementation tools are included in the plan?

15. Which departments are involved in implementing the plan(s) in your community?

Local Government Activities

16. What percentage of total staff time within your organization (FTE) is spent on natural resource planning?

17. In your estimation, how often is the topic of *development* included on the agenda of city council or town/county board meetings?

18. In your estimation, how often in the past year has the city council or town/county board addressed the topic of *open space and/or natural area protection*?

19. Has your city council or town/county board directed an official group to address issues related to planning for and protecting open space/natural areas?

Land Protection Funding

20. Has your community held any voter referendums to fund park, open space and/or natural area conservation?

21. If yes, have you had a successful referendum to fund park, open space and/or natural area conservation?

22. If your community has not held a referendum or previous efforts have been unsuccessful, what is the likelihood that your community might consider a referendum to fund park, open space and/or natural area conservation?

23. Have funds been budgeted for any of the following activities related specifically to land protection efforts?

24. Are funds for open space and/or natural area protection planning included in your community’s current budget?

25. If yes, what activities are these funds intended to support?

26. Approximately what percentage of the budget does this represent?

Citizen Interest and Urgency

27. How often has your community surveyed its residents in the past 5 years?

28. Please tell us if any of the following topics were included on a recent (past couple of years) survey.

29. What is your estimate of the sense of *interest* in your community to protect open space/natural areas?

30. How do you gauge that level of interest?

31. What is your estimate of the sense of *urgency* in your community to protect open space/natural areas?

32. How do you gauge that level of urgency?

Questions Asked (continued)

33. Please describe attendance at development-related hearings over the past two years. How often do citizens attend?

34. Has citizen attendance changed over the past two years?

Media/Public Interest

35. Are you aware of any active citizen group(s) in your community that focus locally on community growth, natural area and park protection, or other land use-related topics?

36. If possible, please provide the name of any active group(s).

37. Are you aware of any nonprofit organization(s) working on land conservation and/or water quality issues that are active in your community?

38. If possible, please name any nonprofit organization(s) working on land conservation and/or water quality issues that are active in your community.

39. Have local newspaper(s) included articles about open space or natural area protection in your community in the past two years?

40. In your estimation, how thoroughly have local newspaper(s) covered issues related to *development* in your community in the past two years?

41. In your estimation, how thoroughly have local newspaper(s) covered *integrating land protection* into the community as it grows in the past two years?

Natural Areas Assessment

42. Do staff have access to *maps* of land cover and/or natural areas for your community?

43. Do staff have access to *digital data* for land cover and/or natural areas in your community?

44. If yes, is your community able to analyze digital data either with in-house staff or through outside contracted services?

45. If you are in the 7-county metro, your community should have received a mapping and data tool called *The Natural Resource Digital Atlas* from the Metropolitan Council. Do staff currently use or intend to use this tool to support land use decisions?

46. If NOT, is there a particular reason?

47. Which of the following methods are used to provide local policy makers access to information about land cover and/or natural areas in your community?

48. Is natural resource information regularly taken into consideration by policy makers as part of development decision-making?

49. Which of the following methods are used to provide local citizens access to information about land cover and/or natural areas in your community?

50. What 1-3 key maps or data layers related to natural resource planning would you find useful that you do not currently have?

51. Has your community conducted a natural resources inventory (NRI)?

52. Is your community using a natural resources inventory (NRI) compiled by another agency, like a watershed organization or soil and water conservation district?

53. Has your community used an NRI developed in-house or by another agency to prioritize *natural resource* protection efforts?

54. Has your community used an NRI developed in-house or by another agency to prioritize *water quality* protection efforts?

Embrace Open Space Assistance

55. Subject to certain criteria, Embrace Open Space (EOS) may provide communities with technical, communications or other targeted assistance. Of the activities below, please indicate which might be of greatest interest or assistance to your community. Please select any of the following types of *communications* assistance that would be helpful to your natural resource planning efforts.

56. Please describe below any *technical* assistance EOS could provide that would be helpful to your natural resource planning efforts (such as visualization of growth options, data development or mapping).

Community Information

57. What is your title?

58. How long have you worked for this community?

59. How long have you worked in the planning field?

60. What percentage of your job is devoted to planning for this community?

61. How many staff does your community's planning department have, either in-house or contracted services (in FTE hours)?

62. How many staff does your parks department have, either in-house or contracted services (in FTE hours)?



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