

Polk County Conservation / 2022

# ANNUAL REPORT





# Letter from the Director

It was a good, good year for Polk County Conservation. Park visitation continues to rise, programs and participation have increased, and our wildlife areas are positively contributing to the county's ecosystems.

That's not to say the 365-day journey was easy. The organization is in a state of growth and that can feel overwhelming. County residents and park visitors should be proud of the way our staff looked at this dynamic as an opportunity, not a challenge. They showed up with creativity and optimism for the positive potential this growth will have on our environment, wildlife and park users. You'll find examples of Polk County Conservation's creativity on every page of the annual report. But keep in mind that this is just a fraction of the work undertaken in 2022. For every completed project this year, there are two or three others that are in-progress. Make sure you carefully read the last few pages, where you can learn about the exciting efforts expected in 2023 and beyond.

See you on the trails!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Richard A. Leopold". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Richard Leopold  
Director



# Strategic Accomplishments



Solar panel array near the Longhouse at Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt

## Going Solar

Eleven key facilities at various parks are newly outfitted with solar panels. Working through a contractor who will own and maintain the equipment, Polk County Conservation paid no money up-front. The effort will offset more than **95 percent energy use** while eliminating around 200 metric tons of CO2 emissions each year.

## More Public Land

The citizens of Polk County empowered the organization to acquire more public land when they voted for funding to do so through the Polk County Water and Land Legacy Bond. In alignment with this strategic support, the organization purchased **553 acres** in 2022. These tracts of land are in strategic locations, often adjacent to existing parks or trails, and support the mission to provide outdoor recreation and protect the county's natural heritage. 💧

## DEIA: Looking Inward

Fostering diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) is vital to effectively serve Polk County's diverse community. In its first year, the DEIA committee asked all full and permanent part-time staff to complete individual assessments. This provided Polk County Conservation with a broad understanding of staff awareness and attitudes, so the organization can effectively move forward on its DEIA journey.

## Good Money to Good Use

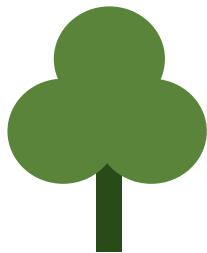
This year the organization drew down its first infusion of funds from the 2021 Polk County Water and Land Legacy Bond. Some of the \$21 Million has been used to purchase Sleepy Hollow, buy needed equipment, and engage designers on a number of park projects including a new mountain bike park. Many more projects are in-progress. 💧

# Good Stewards of Land and Water

Maintaining park and wildlife areas is vital to supporting natural ecosystems and contributing to the health of the environment. This work takes time, careful planning, and valuable resources. In 2022 Polk County Conservation worked daily, using well-established conservation practices, to maintain and improve public lands.



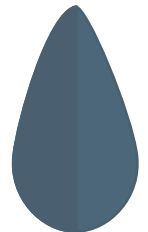
**145 acres**  
of prairie planted



**119 acres**  
of woodland restored



**1,724 acres**  
of prescribed burning



**5.3 acres**  
of wetland restored



## Water Quality

Twice every month volunteers with the Water Quality Monitoring program took samples and recorded observations at more than 70 sites in Polk County. In total they captured **24,497 data points** during the '21-'22 fiscal year. Results from testing revealed notable themes. Primarily, the drought continues to negatively impact the county's water. Dry or stagnant water bodies resulted in lower dissolved oxygen and higher phosphate concentrations throughout the year. Nitrite, rarely detected as it quickly converts to nitrate, is an indicator of poor water quality and was also reported throughout the year at sites across the county.



# 56+ Million

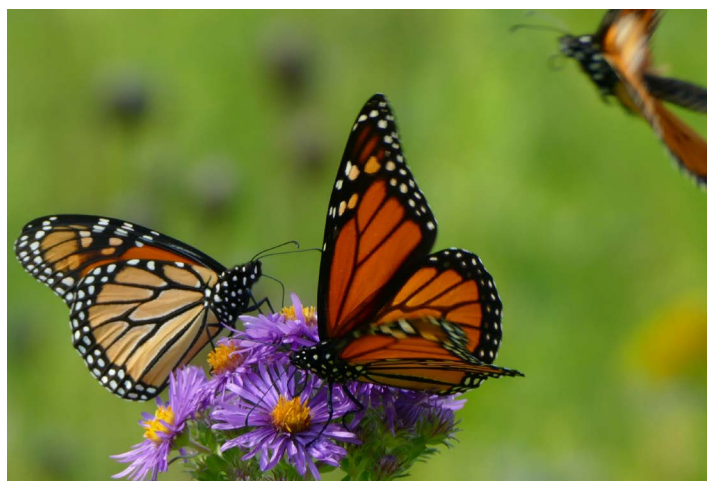
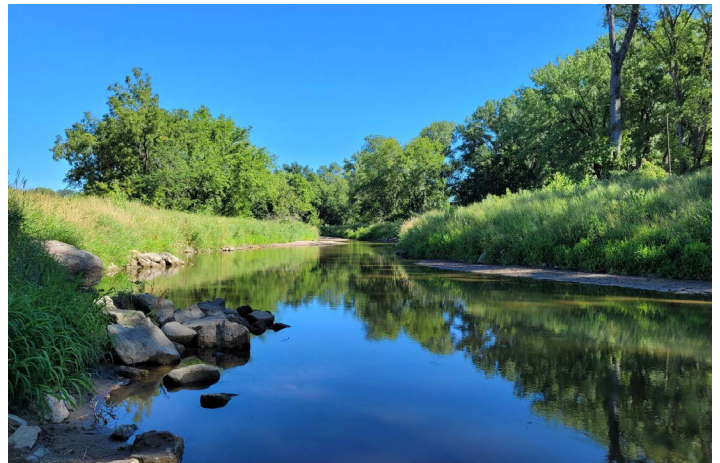
pounds of carbon captured by Polk County Conservation prairies and woodlands in 2022.

Purple Prairie Clover (*Dalea Purpurea*) at Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt.



## Wetland Construction: Fourmile Creek Greenway

The 35th Street stormwater wetland is complete and actively intercepting water runoff from a nearby 21 acre Des Moines neighborhood. The wetland is designed to naturally remove pollutants like sediment, bacteria, and excess nutrients before the water enters Fourmile Creek. The wetland also benefits the community by creating wildlife habitat and protecting humans from natural disasters like floods. 💧



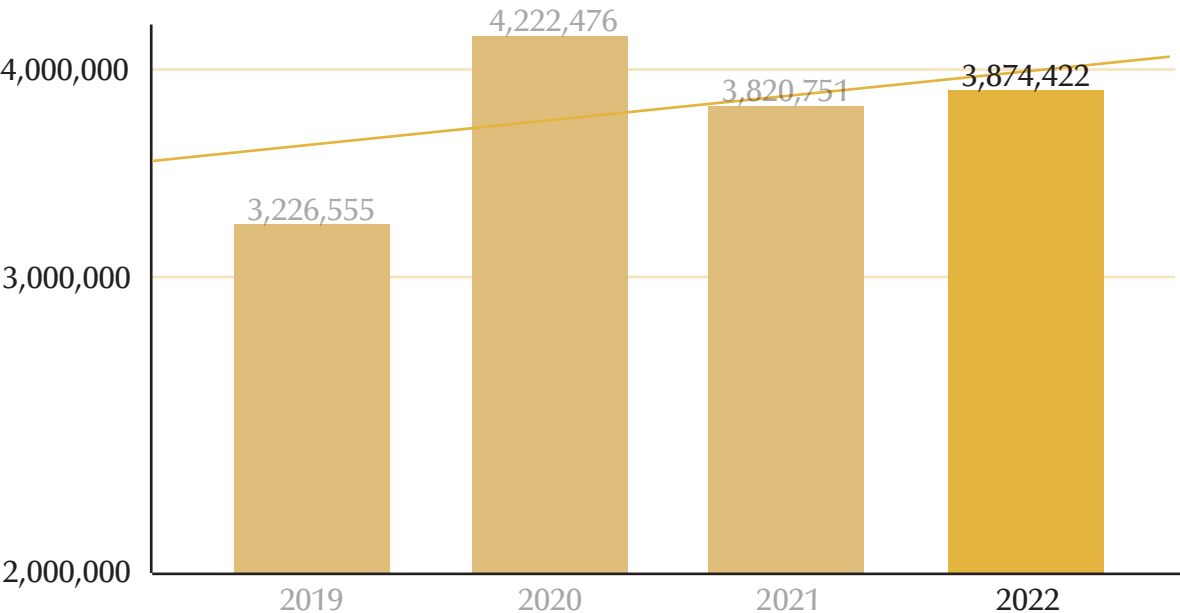
## Wildlife Species Study

Researchers concluded a three-year inventory of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, butterflies, and Odonates within Polk County parks this year. They recorded a total of 316 species from 5,973 observations. Excitingly, seven species of conservation concern and two candidate species for federal endangered status were found. However, the study also revealed many declining songbirds and notable absences like Woodland Salamanders and Blanding's Turtles.

# Parks and Trails Abuzz

Despite notable closures on two popular trails, more than 3.8 million visitors hiked, biked, swam, paddled, fished and more in 2022. Easter Lake Park continues to be the most heavily used with nearly 1.2 million visitors.

## Annual Visitors



**402**  
cabin reservations



**1,287**  
shelter or lodge reservations



**5,002**  
campsite reservations



## Sleepy Hollow Joins the Family

After more than a year of discussion, the deal is done. Polk County Conservation officially purchased Sleepy Hollow in September. In the following months, newly-hired staff began a deep evaluation of the property, buildings, and equipment. This effort continues and is vital for future planning. 💧

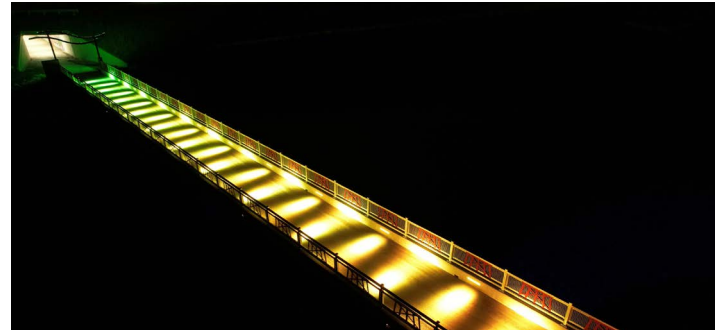


## Fully Funded

Community leaders and Polk County Conservation staff raised more than \$8.6 Million in 2022. Each dollar was donated with the singular goal of creating **the most universally accessible** waterfront in the nation. Easter Lake Park will soon be home to zero-entry ramps into the lake, accessible recreation equipment and boats, a fully-accessible playscape, and programming designed to meet the needs of all. 💧

## A Bridge to Everywhere

The Trestle to Trestle Trail bridge is complete, re-opening a major artery between the cities of Des Moines and Johnston. Construction of the bridge, dubbed Beaver Crossing, was a \$2 Million, three-year labor of love. It now offers expansive views of Beaver Creek and a rainbow of colors for nighttime walkers and bikers.



Jester Park Nature Center continues to be a heavily used facility for Polk County Conservation hosting most educational programming and special events. Average daily attendance climbs to more than 180 in peak summer season.

32,038  
TOTAL ATTENDANCE





# Powered by People

Polk County Conservation owes much of its success to the many volunteers and partners who invest their time, skill, and dollars into parks and wildlife areas. From water quality monitoring to leading equestrian camps to native gardening to wildlife monitoring and event staffing, the impact of Polk County volunteers is as varied it is deep. In fact the State of Iowa values the time contributed at more than \$426,914.



## 16,171 Hours

of volunteer work over 3,631 shifts

1,290 native flowers and grasses planted



1,125 native trees planted





## Wildlife Species Monitored

- Bats
- Bluebirds
- Butterflies
- Cranes
- Kestrels
- Snakes
- Barn Owls
- Frogs and Toads



Sandhill Crane (*Antigone Canadensis*)  
Photo Credit: Walter Rollman

## Litter Eliminated

Nearly 90 percent of the trash removed from Polk County Parks was gathered by a very dedicated group of area volunteers at Easter Lake Park and the adjacent Yeader Creek. Easter Lake Stewards has been so successful the volume of trash they were able to collect dropped off at the end of the year. As one volunteer put it, they readily locate “more turtles than trash.” Now that’s a success!



**6.2+ Tons**  
of trash collected and removed



“Working in our parks with Youth Corps is important to me because I am helping out people and the environment so that we have a better place to hike, hangout, and we are helping our native plant species.” - Sam



## Youth Corps

Forty-seven youth from Polk County provided more than eleven thousand hours restoring or maintaining the local prairies and wetlands. The youth’s hard work was rewarded with a paycheck, as well as opportunities to learn more about nature, and experience camping, fishing and boating. This program is an incredible example of how Polk County Conservation strategically executes its mission while living its values of diversity and inclusion. Twenty-seven percent of the youth represented a racial or ethnic minority and 24 percent qualify for public schools’ free or reduced lunch program.



# Engaging, Educating the Public

As operations normalized in a post-pandemic environment, the organization offered 30 percent more programs than in 2021. But the true benefit is filling a child with wonder, creating family connections, or enriching adult pursuits of wellness. And you simply cannot assign a number to that value of personal growth and connection to the natural world.



**40k+**  
collective attendance



**1,691**  
total programs



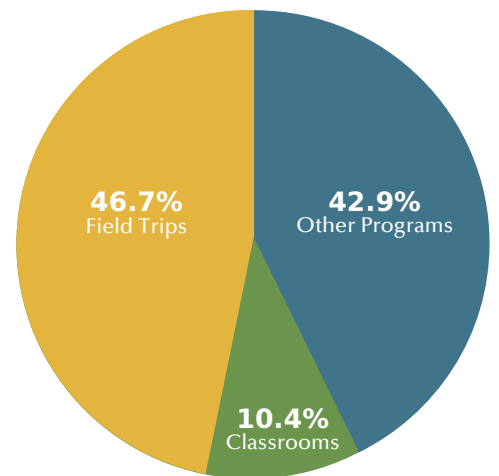
**57k+**  
staff contact hours

## Supporting Local Schools

Trained naturalists and equestrian specialists provide a vital service to the county's schools. Field trips and in-class programs comprise nearly 52% of programs and 57% of attendance in 2022.



### Attendance







## Hooved Ambassadors

The Jester Park Equestrian Center cares for a herd of 25 horses. These four-legged members of the Polk County Conservation team serve the public through a myriad of programs that range from recreation to animal anatomy to therapy and wellness.

- 6 draft horses
- 16 average size horses
- 3 ponies

## Raptor Mews

Located at Jester Park, this safe enclosure for raptors that can no longer live in the wild was built and donated by a group of students from Johnston High School. A peregrine falcon and great horned owl moved in late fall and are now important members of the education and outreach team!



## Native American Artifact Exhibit

This new educational exhibit at the Jester Park Nature Center celebrates Iowa's archaeological history and the presence of Native American Indians on Polk County land. Check out the exhibit which showcases artifacts like hunting tools, pottery and fossils spanning 12,000 years.

## Carriage Driving Program

Given the proven success of Horses Helping Heroes, the scope of the equine-assisted therapy program has been expanded to include carriage driving. Veterans who participate in the new program will build their confidence through relationship development with the carriage horses, as well as improving their fine motor skills and coordination.



# Financials

## REVENUES

	General Basic	General Supp.	Insurance Reserve	REAP	PCWLL BOND	Enterprise Fund	TOTALS
Property Taxes .....	\$6,458,429	\$1,476,571	\$8,997	\$	\$	\$	\$7,943,997
Recreational Fees.....	\$724,635	0	0	0	0	0	724,635
Concession.....	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Miscellaneous Federal Grants.....	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Miscellaneous State Grants & Reimbursements.....	16,319	0	0	0	100,000	0	116,319
Land Rent.....	68,582	0	0	0	0	0	68,582
Building & Shelter Rentals.....	104,788	0	0	0	0	0	104,788
Misc Business Permits & Licenses.....	1,865	0	0	0	0	0	1,865
Firewood Sales .....	22,395	0	0	0	0	0	22,395
Miscellaneous Sale of Commodities .....	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
FEMA .....	83,839	0	0	0	0	0	83,839
Returned Check Fees .....	30	0	0	0	0	0	30
Miscellaneous Contributions & Reimb. Other Govts.....	200,000	0	0	0	34,416	0	234,416
Easements.....	47,046	0	0	0	0	0	47,046
Fee Based Program Revenues .....	161,142	0	0	0	14,738	0	175,880
Commissions .....	12,750	0	0	0	0	0	12,750
Motor Vehicle Fuel Refunds .....	3,166	0	0	0	0	0	3,166
Miscellaneous Contributions & Donations .....	45,370	0	0	0	250,161	0	295,531
Miscellaneous Receipts.....	62,687	0	0	0	5,229	0	67,916
Fixed Assets Sold .....	35,671	0	0	0	0	0	35,671
Recoveries on Losses.....	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
REAP Annual Per Capita Payment.....	0	0	0	114,934	0	0	114,934
Bond Revenues.....	0	0	0	0	3,639,873	0	3,639,873
Golf Course Revenues.....	0	0	0	0	0	372,271	372,271
Mitigation Banking Revenues.....	0	0	0	0	0	418,424	418,424
Jester Park Lodge Revenues.....	0	0	0	0	0	105,190	105,190
Jester Park Cabin Revenues.....	0	0	0	0	0	135,174	135,174
Miscellaneous Revenues.....	0	0	0	0	0	23,770	23,770
Laurisden Skatepark.....	0	0	0	0	0	31,206	31,206
Transfers in from Enterprise Fund.....	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fund Balances Used.....	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Fund Interest.....	0	0	0	1,345	9,383	951	11,679
<b>TOTAL REVENUES.....</b>	<b>\$8,048,714</b>	<b>\$1,476,571</b>	<b>\$8,997</b>	<b>\$- \$116,279</b>	<b>\$4,053,800</b>	<b>\$1,086,986</b>	<b>\$14,791,347</b>

## EXPENDITURES

	General Basic	General Supp.	Insurance Reserve	REAP	PCWLL BOND	Enterprise Fund	TOTALS
Conservation Infrastructure/Equipment.....	\$1,403,247	\$-	\$-	\$	\$	\$	\$1,403,247
Environmental Education.....	614,407	150,799	0	0	0	0	\$765,206
Natural Resources .....	1,082,239	330,236	0	0	0	0	\$1,412,475
Administration .....	1,349,885	201,949	0	0	0	0	\$1,551,834
Community Outreach .....	184,863	35,273	0	0	0	0	\$220,136
Conservation Grants .....	60,272	0	0	0	0	0	\$60,272
Parks Advocacy .....	1,307,229	288,735	0	0	0	0	\$1,595,964
Fleet Services .....	601,098	94,664	0	0	0	0	\$695,762
Construction, Maintenance, Operations .....	754,040	190,551	0	0	0	0	\$944,591
Equestrian Center .....	691,434	184,364	0	0	0	0	\$875,798
Insurance, Unemployment, & Workers Comp. Medical.....	0	0	8,997	0	0	0	\$8,997
Conservation Special Projects & Development .....	0	0	0	0	0	0	\$-
Resource Enhancement & Protection .....	0	0	0	151,705	0	0	\$151,705
PCWLL Bond Expenditures .....	0	0	0	0	4,053,800	0	\$4,053,800
Enterprise Transfer to Operations & Reserve .....	0	0	0	0	0	0	\$-
Golf Course Minor Repairs & Maintenance .....	0	0	0	0	0	32,793	\$32,793
Golf Course Project Note Repayment .....	0	0	0	0	0	300,000	\$300,000
Mitigation Banking Restoration .....	0	0	0	0	0	10,730	\$10,730
JP Lodge Minor Repairs & Maintenance .....	0	0	0	0	0	13,388	\$13,388
Miscellaneous Enterprise Minor Repairs & Maintenance.....	0	0	0	0	0	18,034	\$18,034
JP Cabins Minor Repairs & Maintenance .....	0	0	0	0	0	62,560	\$62,560
Laurisden Skatepark .....	0	0	0	0	0	124,676	\$124,676
Gain/(Reduction) in Fund Balances .....	0	0	0	(35,426)	0	524,805	\$489,379
<b>TOTAL EXPENDITURES.....</b>	<b>\$8,048,714</b>	<b>\$1,476,571</b>	<b>\$8,997</b>	<b>\$ - \$116,279</b>	<b>\$4,053,800</b>	<b>\$1,086,986</b>	<b>\$14,791,347</b>





# Summary

General Basic funds expended for the various departments covered salaries, supplies, and services. General Supplemental funds covered employee benefits. Insurance expenditures were for Unemployment Insurance, Workers' Comp Disability, Workers' Comp Medical Expense, and Liability Insurance premiums.

Projects continued with REAP (Resource Enhancement and Protection) funds were wayfinding signs, various grant matches, and various supplies and equipment.

Projects completed or continued with the Polk County Water and Land Legacy (PCWLL) dollars have been highlighted throughout the annual report by the blue water drop designation.

Polk County Conservation continually monitors revenues and expenses to assure budget compliance. In addition, a user fee committee annually reviews the various direct user charges for camping, shelter rentals, educational programs, special events, and other fee-based activities to assure that a fair mix of user fee charges and general Polk County taxpayer support is maintained in the annual budget.

# Grants

The following are grants and reimbursements awarded during FY21-22. Depending upon the grant specifics the award may be received in one year or over a multi-year period.

Veterans' Affairs Adaptive Sports Grant.....	\$46,811
Destination Iowa Easter Lake North Shore.....	\$2,500,000
Iowa Dept of Cultural Affairs - Artifacts Collection.....	\$25,000
Wellmark Easter Lake North Shore.....	\$100,000
Iowa Finance Authority 35th Street Wetland.....	\$337,000
REAP, Growing River Literacy.....	\$16,762
Polk City to High Trestle Trail Connection TAP Grant.....	\$250,000
North Polk Pheasants Forever, Bailey Acquisition.....	\$30,000
<b>TOTAL GRANTS.....</b>	<b>\$3,305,573</b>

# Looking Ahead

In 2023 the public can expect to see forward movement on some long-anticipated projects. Below is a snapshot of major initiatives.



## Planning to Re-wild Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt

In 2023 Polk County's ecologists will work with Public Works staff to design a strategic plan for the park's drainage system. The goal is to correct the hydrology of the land so the water will flow in more "wild" or natural patterns, rather than through engineered drainage ditches. It's a long and complicated process, making the 2023 strategic planning a critical step forward. 💧

## Installation of Snowflex at Sleepy Hollow

What is snowflex, you ask? It's an all-weather turf surface that will be installed on the tubing hill. Yes, that means once installed the public can fly down the hill in the height of summer! Crews will begin earthwork in the spring with installation occurring mid-late summer. The goal is to open in August 2023. 💧



## Timber Stand Improvements

All along the Fourmile Creek Greenway natural resource technicians will be working to improve the quality of the timber stand. This requires removing invasive trees and ground cover that are not beneficial to the local ecosystem. In some cases it will be done using a large forestry mower, in others it will be done manually. The team is even hiring a herd of goats to eat up invasive plants near Easter Lake Park! 💧





## Construction of Athene North Shore Recreation Area

Starting late spring 2023 heavy equipment will move in. From earthwork to building construction the beachfront of Easter Lake will transform into one of the most accessible parks in the country. The official opening is slated for spring 2024. 💧



## Critical Park Upgrades

When the weather turns warm, park and construction staff will be running in high gear. At Jester Park the staff is installing new restrooms and shower houses at critical campsites. And Thomas Mitchell Park is getting a new playground. 💧

## Programming Near You

In summer 2023 the naturalists are designing programs to be hosted at parks in some of Polk County's underserved neighborhoods. Expect nature hikes, STEM learning, survival skills programs and more, at places like Fort Des Moines Park, Easter Lake Park and Yellow Banks Park.



## Proposed Parking Lot

In partnership with the Board of Supervisors, Polk County Conservation will construct a 100-space parking lot to serve the Lauridsen Skatepark, Riverwalk Dogpark, and future recreation trail. The lot will ease traffic flow and increase safety for all pedestrians in the area. The project, slated for Fall 2023-Spring 2024 is creating easier access to the nation's largest skatepark which sees 220,000+ visitors annually. 💧





### **Leadership**

Director

Richard Leopold

Deputy Director

Kami Rankin

Board Members

Jill Altringer, Board Chair

Greg Lewis, Vice-Chair

Pamela J. Mollenhauer, Secretary

Ryan Crane

Jim Cataldo

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