



Remote Workers As a Source of Economic Development

How Small Communities Can Stay Competitive in a Digital World

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ABOUT ME

ALEXANDER BENISHEK



- Originally From Sarasota, Florida

Wait.... WHY IS THIS ALLIGATOR IN MY CORNFIELD?!



ABOUT ME

ALEXANDER BENISHEK



- M.A. Community Economic Development from Western Illinois University
- Former Illinois Institute for Rural Affairs Fellow in Community Development
- Five-time AmeriCorps Alum
- Returned Peace Corps Volunteer who served in the Republic of Macedonia.
- Currently serving as the Community Development and Planning Director for the City of Mattoon
- Board President of Mattoon in Motion, and Co-Chair of our Housing Action Team





The Situation in 2023

The COVID-19 Pandemic has permanently altered the dynamic between workers and the geography and physicality of where they perform the functions of their jobs.



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March 2020

Estimated by 2025

**5 Million
Remote
Workers**



**36.2 Million
American
Employees**

~22% of the American Workforce



Sources: Upwork Future Workforce Report (2022)



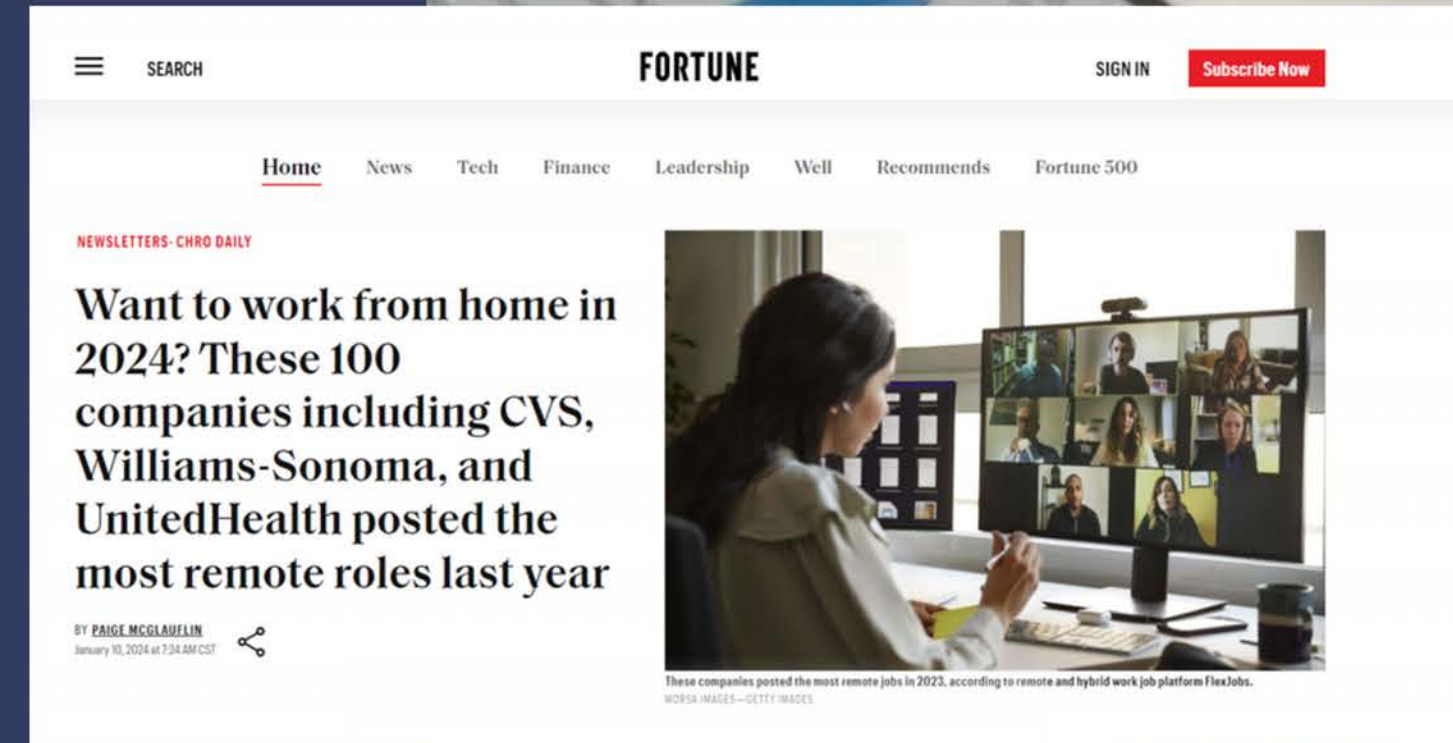
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Potential

Towns like Mattoon are able to attract tech workers and their high-incomes.

Down the road, this could lead to new startups or even new offices opening from multinational companies.

Rural towns are able to be extraordinarily competitive when compared to urban areas, but they need to market it correctly to make urbanites and suburbanites realize this opportunity to improve their quality of life.



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**"Every remote worker these places
successfully attract and retain is like
gaining a fraction of a new factory or
corporate office, with much less
expenditure and risk."**

– Mark Muro

Senior Fellow & Policy Director
Brookings Institute



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Lower Cost of Living



Short Commute Times



**Better & Individualized
Schooling**



Quality Healthcare



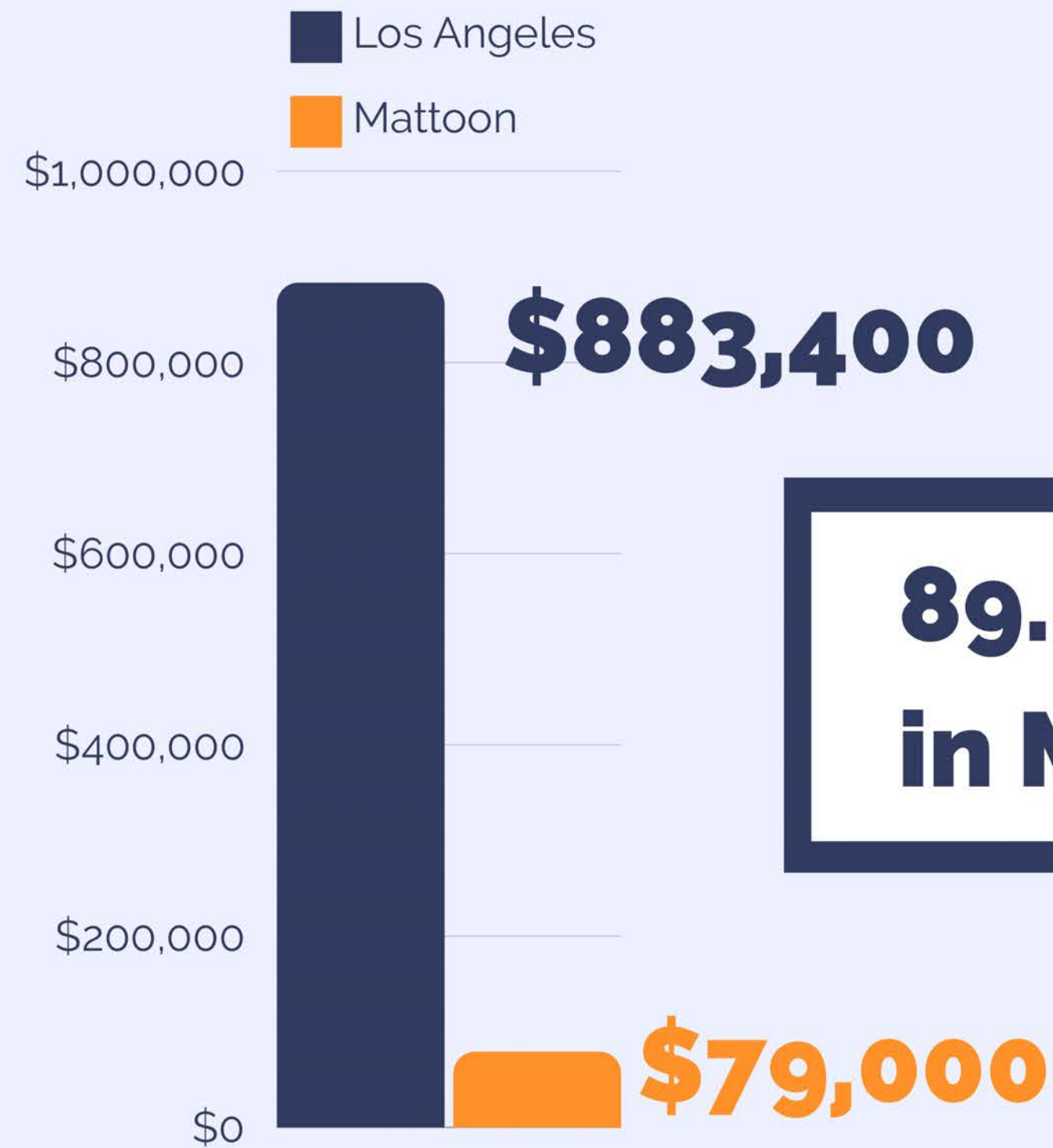
Low Crime



Closer to Nature

Why Move From The Big City?

Numbers



**89.4% More Affordable
in Mattoon**

Average Home Price: Los Angeles, CA v. Mattoon, IL

[*Bestplaces.net cost of living comparison](#)



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Differences

Remote Worker

\$89,178

- Requires little to no infrastructure if internet is accessible
- Youth are more likely to have remote jobs
- Provides more disposable income to use in the community
- No risk of remote jobs leaving because they are not geographically constrained

*salary data provided by



[LINK](#)

Manufacturing Worker

\$37,710

- Requires physical infrastructure (ex: buildings/roads)
- Hard to attract locals (especially local youth) to work here
- Doesn't provide much disposable income to use in the community
- Factories can close or leave a town

*salary data provided by



[U.S. BUREAU OF LABOR STATISTICS](#)

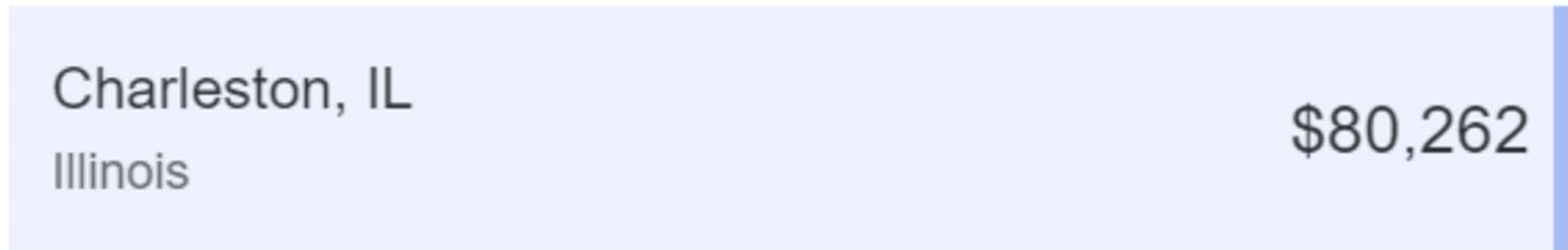
[LINK](#)

****Surprisingly enough, there is a severe lack of federal data on remote workers. However, it is incredibly easy to locate federal data on the BLS website for nearly any other type of profession or industry.**



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Remote Salary Comparison by Location



*Remote annual salary statistics from ZipRecruiter Report

Manufacturing Salary Comparison by Location

Nationwide
United States

\$25,794

Mattoon, IL

\$31,256



Charleston, IL
Illinois

\$23,215



*Remote annual salary statistics from ZipRecruiter Report

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What Incentives Exist?

What Incentives Exist?

Land

**Relocation
Reimbursement**

**Living
Expenses**

**Home
Construction**

Gifts

**Student
Loans**

**Tax
Credit**

**Home
Ownership**



How Did Mattoon Build Their Incentive Program?



would not have happened without the chamber's support!



It all started here.....

a random email from a chamber member in 2019.

Please see the attached article from the Wall Street Journal that I found very interesting. Is it possible the City and Chamber can work to come up with a program? I'm not saying it has to be \$10,000 cash but if we can put together a list of incentives to publicize it could be a really interesting publicity thing plus tell people "hey, we're here, we're great and we want YOU!"

Please excuse that this is not a fully developed plan, I just threw some ideas together for discussion purposes.

If our business community comes up with a list of "freebies" and the City+LLC+CUSD2 can do some type of incentive, then we could advertise some significant incentives plus gain a bunch of publicity. Local businesses looking to bring in workers could talk about the program as another incentive to locate here.

"Enjoy your work at home job in peaceful Mattoon Illinois."

"Great parks, great schools, beautiful historic Mattoon Country Club"

"Low cost of living, welcoming small-town feel, and we'll help you get started!"

"Total incentives of up to \$9,000 to relocate to Mattoon!!

Fine print:

Must be new relocation to Coles County from at least 100 miles away from previous full-time residence.

Must have a job with annual family income of \$70,000.

Must live as a full-time resident in the City of Mattoon for 1 year or certain incentives must be repaid.

Certain incentives are issued only at the end of 1 year of residency.

(Want to avoid part-time/temporary doctors from needlessly taking advantage of the program, or maybe that's okay?)

Application and approval to program required, open to only 20 families per year, offer may be withdrawn at any time.

Just an idea to kick around and see if we can come up with something.

Appreciate your thoughts,



Rebate on property taxes paid of X% (up to \$XXXX) from the City, LLC and CUSD2

(Can the city use hotel/motel tax funds??)

(What to do if they are renting?)

Free 100MB Internet service for 1 year courtesy of Consolidated Communications, a \$960 value.

Free Meal monthly for a year from Luigi's Italian Dining, \$180 value.

Free Meal monthly for a year from Honey Bee Café, \$180 value.

Free Villa Special pizza a month for a year, \$180 value.

Free monthly steak dinner at Alamo Steakhouse, \$400 value

Free 8x10 storage unit for 1 year at Willaredt Self Storage, \$600 value

\$1000 extra discount on any car purchase from KC Summers Buick GMC Toyota.

\$250 Gift Card for food from County Market.

\$250 Gift Card for meat at Morgan's Meat Market

One year full family golf, tennis, swimming, & dining membership to Mattoon Golf And Country Club, \$2100 value.

One year full family membership to the Mattoon YMCA, \$480 value

Over \$9000 in potential incentives!!!

We approached over 20+ local businesses who signed on to the program.

It was as simple as giving a brief presentation during a chamber meeting, asking if anyone is interested, and following up with an email or in person visit.

Literally ANY community can do this!



With the support of the local business community, we raised nearly \$12,000 in cash and cash-value per remote working family.



You might be thinking:

\$12,000?!?!?! PER FAMILY?!?!!

My town could NEVER Raise That Much Money!!!!



Cat food is really expensive I get it

**This is why clear
program objectives are
a good place to start.**

Move to Mattoon

Pilot Program Objective

To Bring Five High Salary Remote Executives and Their Families to Mattoon Within a Year of Program Launch

Operational Pilot Costs

\$10,000 Per-Family

Initial framework.
We over fundraised.

\$7,200 Minimum

We will
get into
this later.

Subscription Fee (MMM)

\$57,200 Annually

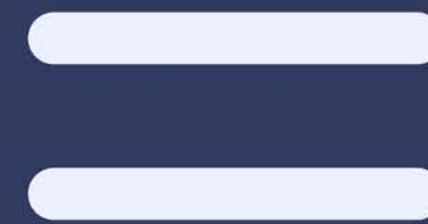
Assuming
5 Families
As Target.

Fundraising

\$60,000 Raised from Local Businesses
Approximately \$12,000 Per-Family



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Memberships to local organizations (ex: coworking space, YMCA, gyms, etc) make up the most valuable individual incentives, and quickly increased the dollar amount of our total incentive.



\$95/mo = \$1,140 Incentive!

They also highlight community buy-in and give applicants an opportunity for participating in the community the moment they arrive in town.



Direct cash incentives (ex: cash, gift cards and meal vouchers) are a great way to encourage movers to experience places they might not have visited. These are simple dollar amounts that would not add up to much by themselves.

But by expanding your reach to multiple businesses, it quickly scales.

How did you build the incentive?



























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Move to Mattoon

\$11,707

-  \$5,000 Cash Towards Moving Expenses
-  \$500 in Local Restaurant Vouchers
-  1-Year Free Membership at Elevate Coworking Space
-  6 Month Family YMCA Membership
-  \$500 Rural King Gift Cards
-  6 Months Free - Storage Unit
-  \$250 Gift Card to Slumberland Furniture
-  \$200 Professional Headshot with Melissa Harden at Studio 21
-  \$200 Gift Card to Morgan's Meat Market

-  \$200 Gift Card to Morgan's Meat Market
-  \$100 Gift Card to Broadway Appliance & Home Center
-  \$50 Chamber Bucks
-  \$20 Gift Card to Alamo Steakhouse
-  MarsPetcare Welcome Package
-  \$1000 Off Car Purchase or \$200 Service Gift Card
-  6 Months Free 1GB Internet
-  Wellness Assessment from Sarah Bush Lincoln Health Systems
-  2 Hours of Go-Karting & Axe Throwing at Zax Trax for 5 Family Members
-  Maranatha Christian Academy Registration Waiver
-  4 Private Music Lessons per-family from Sound Source Music
-  3 Credit Hour Tuition Waivers from Lake Land College
-  Douglas-Hart Nature Center: \$25 Acorn Level Annual Membership
-  All For Them - Latonya's Petcare Services: \$200 Credit towards Petcare Services
-  Clyde's Animal Clinic - Free Pet Exam and ID tag

[Apply Now](#)

What Works for Mattoon?



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These incentives are further complimented by the current and upcoming amenities our community has

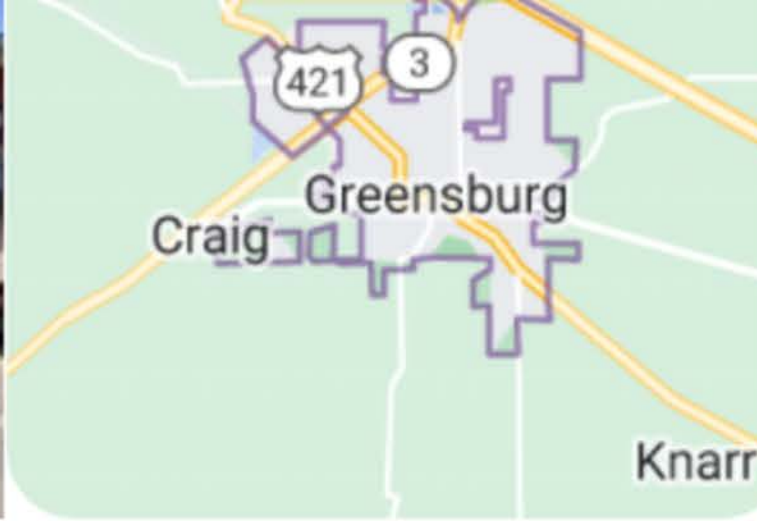
- **LIFT (especially daycare)**
- **Parks / Lakes**
- **Lincoln Prairie Grass Bike Trail**
- **EIU / Lake Land College**
- **School District Class Sizes**
- **Upcoming Sports Complex**
- **Cross County Mall**
- **Movie Theater**
- **and so on.....**

What Works for Mattoon?



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**EXAMPLES
IN OTHER
COMMUNITIES**



Greensburg

City in Indiana

Greensburg is a city in and the county seat of Decatur County, Indiana, United States. The population was counted at 11,492 at the 2010 census. [Wikipedia](#)

Elevation: 958'

Area: 9.3 mi²

Weather: 64°F (18°C), Wind SW at 9 mph (14 km/h), 36% Humidity [weather.com](#)

Hotels: 3-star averaging \$124. [View hotels](#)

Population: 11,228 (2019)



Cash

\$5000



"Grandparents on Demand"



YMCA Membership



Co-Working Space



Playhouse Tickets

Total Incentive Value

\$7,000

ELIGIBILITY

- Must relocate to Greensburg, IN within the next 6-12 months.
- Must have a remote position or be self employed outside of Greensburg.
- Must be at least 18 years old.
- Must be eligible to work in the U.S.
- Must be selected



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Incentive Package

- ✈️ \$10,000 relocation incentive
- 💰 Up to \$9,000 in homebuyer incentives

Total Incentive Value

\$19,000

ELIGIBILITY

- Must be a full-time remote worker
- Must currently live 300+ miles from downtown [REDACTED]
- Must be at least 18 years of age
- Must be able to relocate to [REDACTED] within 6 months of program acceptance
- Must be eligible to work in the United States

Cash isn't always king.
Where do you see community support
or something unique about the town?



Stillwater

City in Oklahoma

Stillwater is a city in, and the county seat of, Payne County, Oklahoma, United States. It is located in north-central Oklahoma at the intersection of U.S. Route 177 and State Highway 51. As of the 2010 census, the city population was 45,688, making it the tenth-largest city in Oklahoma. [Wikipedia](#)

Elevation: 984'

Area: 30.06 mi²

Weather: 81°F (27°C), Wind SW at 10 mph (16 km/h), 11% Humidity [weather.com](#)

Population: 49,952 (2019)

Incentive Package

- 🏠 \$5,000 down payment assistance for homebuyers
- ✈️ Up to \$1,500 in relocation expenses reimbursement
- 🏠 \$300 towards closing costs
- 🎁 Red Dirt Music Tour with legendary musician John Cooper
- 🎁 Free tickets to a live concert at Tumbleweed Dance Hall
- 🎁 Free tickets to Gypsy Cafe Music Festival
- 🎁 A \$2k tab at Aspen Coffee
- 🎁 Martial Arts Classes

Total Incentive Value

\$9,000

ELIGIBILITY

- Applicants must be first time buyers of a home in Stillwater
- Home must be located within city limits
- Home must be owner-occupied



MakeMyMove

They provide the website traffic and tools to enable cities like Mattoon to curate the types of remote workers they wish to attract. You can see their income, family makeup, and other important demographical information to help make your decision for who should qualify for your recruitment programs.

Founded by former Co-founders of Angie's List. Connects remote workers to communities that want to attract them.

Offers a free 45 day trial of their services to prove what they do works.



Make My Move



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Make My Move Backend Application System

MakeMyMove X

Movers Home

- Movers
- MANAGE
- My Organization
- My Communities
- My Offers
- Templates
- Playbooks

		HOUSEHOLD	2 Adults, 0 Children
		MOVE TIMELINE	ASAP
<input type="checkbox"/>	<div>MR</div> <div>political consulting</div> <div>Lead Created: 07/30/2022</div>	<div>STATUS</div> <div>TOTAL INCOME</div> <div>CURRENT LOCATION</div> <div>HOUSEHOLD</div> <div>MOVE TIMELINE</div>	<div>Applied</div> <div>120000</div> <div>Orlando FL</div> <div>2 Adults, 0 Children</div> <div>ASAP</div>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<div>AM</div> <div>Software Engineer</div> <div>Lead Created: 07/30/2022</div>	<div>STATUS</div> <div>TOTAL INCOME</div> <div>CURRENT LOCATION</div> <div>HOUSEHOLD</div> <div>MOVE TIMELINE</div>	<div>Applied</div> <div>270000</div> <div>Chesterfield MO</div> <div>2 Adults, 3 Children</div> <div>Within 1 Year</div>

< 1 2 3 4 5 6 >



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mattooninmotion@gmail.com

MakeMyMove Subscription Plan

Community

Up to 25 Movers Per Month
\$24 per additional

\$599/mo

Save \$25 per Mover

Select

Community Plus

Up to 50 Movers Per Month
\$20 per additional

\$999/mo

Save \$29 per Mover

Select

***"You can have the best marketing website
in the world, but if nobody sees it, there's
no point"***

-Make My Move

MakeMyMove.com Stats

For 2021:

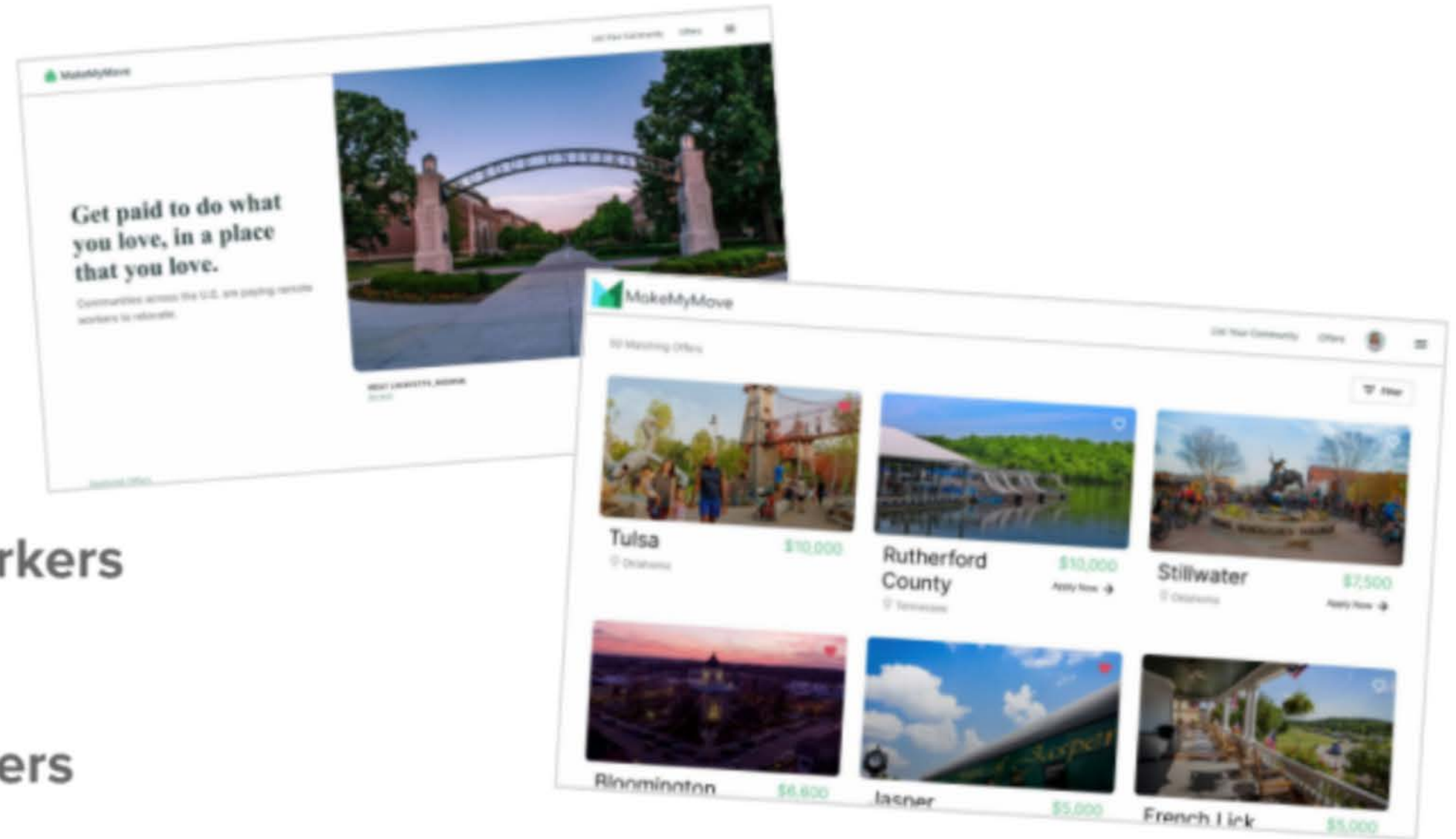
- 630,000 unique visitors
- 45,000 active users

Case Studies:

- In 5 months, West Lafayette IN has **20 workers**
- In 2 months, Stillwater, OK has **4 workers**
- In 3 months, Bloomington, IN has **10 workers**
- In 6 weeks, Greensburg, IN received **over 1,700 applications.**

*Stillwater, OK movers averaged a salary of **\$110,000 per year***

*Lafayette, IN movers averaged a salary of **\$97,600 a year***





Moving Incentives

Why Mattoon?

Move Here



Scroll to learn more



Interview Process Flowchart



Step 6

MOVE TO MATTOON!!!!



One Year Results

1000+ APPLICATIONS

APPLY NOW

Average Income \$65,000

Over 30+ States Represented

And Two Countries!



What They Have To Say

IT Analyst

\$132,000

2 Adults 3 Children

Signed MOU! Moves in July!

What appeals to you most about Mattoon?

I want to live in a place where I can own a home with a big lawn, a swing set, and a slide. I want a less urban life for my family (I live on the outskirts of Greater Los Angeles at the moment, and the traffic is horrible). I want a place where I can afford a home with enough bedrooms for my children, a playroom, and a home office. I currently pay \$2250 per month for a 1200 sq. ft. apartment with no yard of its own. Because of the high expenses in California, despite having a master's degree and a good job, my family struggles to make ends meet. I want the white-picket-fence American dream, and I feel that Mattoon is the place that I can make that happen.

Boeing Executive

\$150,000

2 Adults 0 Children

What appeals to you most about Mattoon?

We are looking for a break from Seattle and it's hub bub, but don't want to give up and become hermits. The vibrant downtown, lakes and community are exciting. We want a quiet place to call home, but still be able to stop at a local coffee shop or diner. We want to be able to enjoy the outdoors and simply slow down a little. Mattoon has that for us.

Commercial Real Estate Agent

\$80,000

2 Adults 1 Pet

What appeals to you most about Mattoon?

My husband and I both work in tech. I work with a commercial brokerage using AI technology in Phoenix, my husband works with Standard AI based in San Francisco. We are remote now and have spent only months at a time in the Midwest. We want to settle down and build a home. We've researched Mattoon and love the great schools for kids eventually and the dog friendly community. We have a one year old pug named Whiskey. He loves being outside. Arizona weather can be brutal and we want to be able to take him on walks around the neighborhood. We look forward to hearing more about Mattoon and think we both have a lot to offer. My husband loves to cook and previously operated a food truck. We are excited to get a feel of the town and try every restaurant we can.

Better Cities for Pets

Certification is always a fun topic for applicants with pets!



*70% of all households in the United States have pets according to Apartments.com AND the Humane Society.

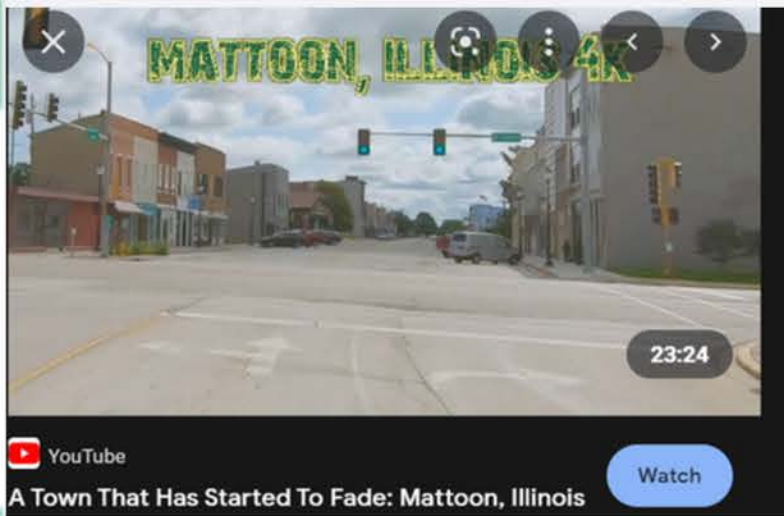
That said...

**All Recruitment Should Be Part
Of A Broader Community
Strategy Our City Should Adopt
to Remain Competitive**

Resident Recruitment and Welcoming Strategy

Understand

How will you learn about the experience of becoming a newcomer in your community?



Manage Leaving

How will your community connect with people that leave?

Market

How will you get the message that your community has opportunities out there?

Belonging

How will your community cultivate a sense of belonging for residents?

Recruit

How will you help potential residents choose your community?

Engage

How will your community engage newcomers?

Talking: Neil Linscheid

Welcome

How will your community welcome newcomers?

Remote Worker Recruitment is Not a Cure-All for Economic Decline

“Communities across the country should [...] focus on the kind of basic block-and-tackling that will lead to more robust growth overall and a higher quality of life for residents. This includes the harder work of building authentic growth sectors; developing a skilled and diverse digital workforce; deploying robust transportation infrastructure for local residents; and enacting policies that support workers and their families, such as investment in education, accessible child care, and universal paid sick and family leave. New and better place-based and place-conscious federal policies would also help, such as the creation of sizable regional tech hubs in new places.”

– Mark Muro
Senior Fellow & Policy Director
Brookings Institute

**But when we do these things, it
then makes our community more
attractive to others.**

**So by working to attract remote workers, and
simultaneously working to make life better for your current
residents, you're likely to attract more remote workers and
their salaries to your community.**

One Year Results



**FAMILIES
MOVED TO
MATTOON!**

Wait..... Earlier in this presentation you said your goal was for five families to move to Mattoon within a year!

.....Doesn't that mean your pilot failed?

Yup!

And that's a good thing. We learned.

While we didn't meet our initial goal of five remote working families moving to Mattoon, we learned so much about the needs of our community, and what types of people are interested in moving to Mattoon, where most of them come from (Washington State for some reason), and what their immediate needs are that potentially inhibited their move to our community.

So, what were our challenges?



Main Challenges Moving Forward

Quantity of Incentive / Staffing

While it is great that we have received such a robust community response to the Move to Mattoon program, that also means that we have a ton of incentives to collect from varying businesses. This takes time to collect!

Everyone involved with the supporting of this program has a full time position unrelated to this initiative, which can make things challenging when scheduling tours of the community (or when someone says 'Hey! I'm here for the tour' without communicating they would be visiting).

Main Challenges Moving Forward

Diversity

I was asked an excellent question the last time I gave this talk which led to the creation of this slide.

"How did Move to Mattoon account for members of diverse populations who applied to this program?"

Because the only identifying information we were able to access during the selection was income, we were blinded (purposefully) to demographics such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or creed. This practice aimed to curb any bias that may exist in the room, but cannot curb the bias of society. The ways in which a person's demographics outside of income influence their income levels are complex to say the least. There was a definite skewing of types of applicants interviewed due to that, which we absolutely acknowledge, but may not have a means to alter (though if you utilized your own system for recruitment, you likely could).

That said, our accepted applicants did come from a variety of different backgrounds. 4 of our 5 MOU signers are women, one is a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and two MOU signers were Black. Remote work itself is slightly diverse, though again it does skew a bit depending upon where the workers are from.

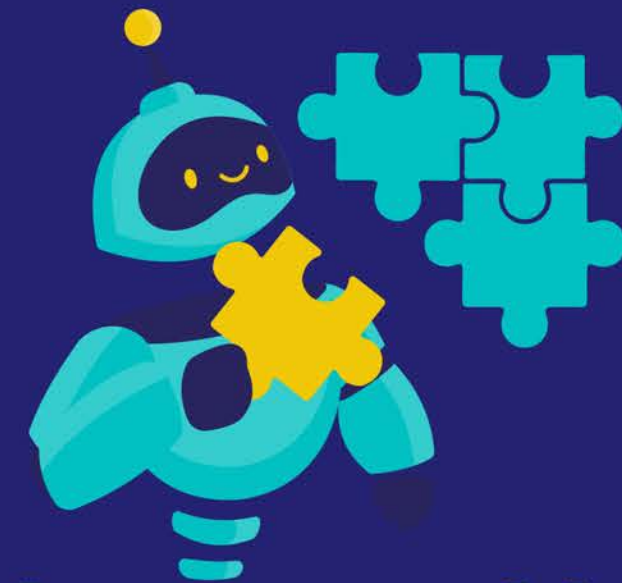
The only answer I truly have to the above question is that we need to be better, but determining exactly HOW to be better and designing what kind of framework to deliver equitable solutions is challenging when your program is constantly changing, voluntarily funded, with volunteer staff fluctuating year to year. There is no simple or straightforward answer to that question.

Main Challenges Moving Forward

HOUSING



**Lack of Quality
Housing In
Community**



**On a positive note, this process
caused more discussion about
housing in our community and we are
now working towards solutions**

*We've had four potential MOU signers decline or wait to sign because of lack of quality housing

Main Challenges Moving Forward

Housing related issues identified from the Move to Mattoon program directly led to us trying to understand what our current housing stock situation is.

Mattoon, IL Housing Facts

*US Census Data and American Community Survey 5-Year Data

31.6%

Built Before 1939

1.5%

Built since 2010

3+
YEARS

Non-Home-Rule Municipality Waiting Times to Acquire Problem Properties

Data Label	Estimate	Percent
Total Housing Units	8,896	n/a
Occupied Housing Units	8,012	90.1%
Vacant Housing Units	884	9.9%
Owner Occupied Housing Unit Rate	4,441	55.4%
Renter-Occupied Housing Unit Rate	3,571	44.6%

Main Challenges Moving Forward

COMMUNITY HOUSING SURVEY



SCAN ME



The City of Mattoon and the Illinois Housing Development Authority (IHDA) are undertaking a planning effort to complete a Housing Needs Assessment as a part of an overall Community Revitalization Strategy.

As part of this process, we invite all permanent residents to complete this Community Needs Assessment Survey to provide valuable information about their experiences living in the City of Mattoon.

The survey (link below) is completely anonymous; you should be able to complete it in under 10 minutes.

<https://arcg.is/1eeuiP0>

This directly led to the City of Mattoon and Mattoon in Motion (a local 501c3) partnering with IHDA and their Community Revitalization programming.



Reach out to them!!

They are awesome!!!!

Main Challenges Moving Forward

We have also identified two new opportunities for subdivision development, are actively working on infill development opportunities, and are hopefully soon to join a land bank and begin housing rehabilitation programs as a result of the housing need that was highlighted by Move to Mattoon.

Main Challenges Moving Forward

GHOSTING



Sometimes we would have the best conversations with families, invite them to move to our community, have them accept, and then.....

And that's okay. It's part of the process.

Where We Could Improve



Research

Understanding larger trends (ex: remote working) and getting ahead of them.

This will allow us to adapt as we continue to shift away from prior work/industry norms.

We could be wrong about this! But we don't think we are based upon current literature.



Marketing

Producing a few marketing videos for the town can drastically improve our digital footprint.

Nobody is going to read a wall of text about Mattoon and be excited.

They need to SEE what makes Mattoon great.



Recruitment

After they see what makes Mattoon great, what gives someone the extra push they need to move here?



Welcoming

What happens when someone moves to Mattoon?

Who welcomes them to the community?

How do they become involved?

Where We've Been Successful

Worth the publicity even if anyone didn't move here!

National Media

FORTUNE

**THE
WALL STREET
JOURNAL.**

GOVERNING
THE FUTURE OF STATES AND LOCALITIES

MOU Commitments

5 of 5

**Have Already
Signed MOUs**

4 of 5

**Have Already
Moved to Mattoon!**

*creating positive digital content
about the town really helped

Community Support

Again, this program and all of the national attention for Mattoon, IL that we have received would not have been possible without the support of Mattoon's incredible business community.

Their forward thinking and generous contributions are the reason why Mattoon, IL has had such great success and will continue to do so.

Thank you!

Conclusion

Did we succeed?

Absolutely. Just not how we thought we would.

Again, recruiting remote workers is not going to cure all of your economic woes, or spur drastic changes in your development patterns. There are things (like Housing and Quality of Life) that **MUST** be addressed before programs like this can scale up; but these remote recruitment programs are still worthwhile in their smaller forms too, because they create motion / energy around your community.

While we didn't meet our initial goal, I truly believe we still ran a successful program that had a local, regional, and national impact.

This is How We Truly Put...



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**MY COMMUNITY COULD NEVER OFFER
SOMETHING LIKE THIS!**

MOMMY MITT BUNNY EVIL OF

I'm going to help you see that this IS possible!

Breakout Workshop

Task:

- In your group pick an imaginary town name and then create a incentive package unique to your community of at least **\$5,000** per-family. Target 5 families initially, meaning you will need to raise **\$25,000** in value.
- Assume that incentives you ask for will be provided within reason.
- The resources your imaginary town has are the combined resources the actual towns represented in your group possess.

Hint:

Memberships to organizations (ex: YMCA) tend to add up. Look up the costs of monthly / annual memberships!

Questions About Remote Worker Recruitment?

Reach out!!!!



MATTOON

MATTOON, ILLINOIS: *Working Together to Build the Future*

ALEXANDER BENISHEK

**COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT &
PLANNING DIRECTOR**

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