SPUR

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November 2016 Voter Guide

SPUR's ballot analysis and recommendations

Twenty-four city propositions and one regional measure appear on the San Francisco ballot on November 8, 2016. SPUR provides in-depth analysis and recommendations on each one.

San Francisco (SF)



Bay Area (BA)



SF Prop A

School Bond

SCHOOL BOND

School Facilities Bond

Authorizes the San Francisco Board of Education to issue $744 million in general obligation bonds for facilities upgrades and other improvements to public schools.

Vote YES

SPUR's Recommendation

This bond measure would improve many San Francisco public schools that need upgrading in order to ensure student health and safety, as well as meet program standards for modern education environments. Having well-maintained public school facilities is vital to serving San Francisco's growing population, keeping families with children in the city and engaging families to participate in and support the public school system.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop B

City College Parcel Tax

ORDINANCE

City College Parcel Tax

Raises the current parcel tax dedicated for City College from $79 per parcel to $99 per parcel and extends it for 15 years.

Vote YES

SPUR's Recommendation

City College is a tremendous asset to San Francisco. The college provides affordable degrees, life skills and career and technical education opportunities to 60,000 students per year. It is a key part of the city's workforce-training network and is a major resource for economic mobility for low- and middleincome families in the Bay Area.

This measure, if passed, wouldn't solve City College's financial challenges. But it would help maintain core classes and support students while the college continues to work toward stabilizing itself in a new operating environment. There are reasons for optimism: The college has passed a critical hurdle in reforming its finances, is set to solidify its accreditation status in the coming year and has new leadership that's developing a viable vision for the future. Putting this measure to the voters now could allow City College to focus on its enrollment goals while giving faculty and staff a long overdue raise.

Though City College is in a stronger position now, it must continue to prove to students and the public that it is on the path to long-term stability. Prop. B presents an important opportunity to pledge local dollars to City College at a critical time and support the vital role the college plays by offering affordable pathways to economic mobility for all San Franciscans.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop C

Housing Loan Program

BOND

Loans to Finance Acquisition and Rehabilitation of Affordable Housing

Authorizes putting unused bond capacity from a previous earthquake retrofit program toward the acquisition of housing units for rehabilitation and conversion to permanently affordable housing.

Vote YES

SPUR's Recommendation

One of the most urgent problems facing San Francisco is the high cost of housing. This bond measure would make use of a pre-existing voter commitment to providing bond-funded loans for a public purpose and could help preserve and create much-needed affordable housing. While only a part of the solution, it would enable nonprofits to purchase buildings and make them permanently affordable for the people living there, thus stabilizing housing costs for many low-income households.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop D

Vacancy Appointments

CHARTER AMENDMENT

Vacancy Appointments

Requires that vacancies occurring in elected offices be filled by a mayoral appointment within 28 days and mandates that when a vacancy occurs on the Board of Supervisors, a special election be held within 180 days; the interim supervisor appointed by the mayor would be ineligible to run.

Vote NO

SPUR's Recommendation

One portion of Prop. D makes a benign change to city practice, requiring that replacement appointments to vacated elected office be made within a specified time frame. But Prop. D bundles in a change to supervisor appointments that would undo charter reforms instituted by the voters and undermine democratic representation.

Prop. D would abridge the mayor's vacancy appointment power and create a lame duck supervisor position with unclear accountability. It's no secret that some elected officials don't like the current mayor. But political grudges are the worst reason to permanently alter the City Charter to reduce the power of all future mayors. The city's system of democracy has important roles for the Board of Supervisors and the mayor. The voters have upheld this balance of power over many years of charter reform measures.

Futhermore, if San Francisco's goal is to allow more of its residents' voices to be heard in elections, it should not be sanctioning new, oddly timed special elections in which low turnout would privilege the votes of fewer and more conservative voters. On this count, Prop. D would do a disservice to the true representation of the public interest.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop E

Street Trees

CHARTER AMENDMENT

City Responsibility for Maintaining Street Trees

Makes it the city's responsibility to maintain all street trees, repair sidewalks damaged by trees and assume liability for damages caused by neglect of trees; dedicates funding from the General Fund to pay for these responsibilities.

Vote YES

SPUR's Recommendation

San Francisco currently has a very poor street tree policy. It is unfair and confusing for property owners and has resulted in a diminished urban forest. Prop. E provides a policy solution: transferring the responsibility for tree maintenance back to the city and dedicating funding to sustain trees and maintain sidewalks. Prop. E funds tree maintenance through the General Fund, with the benefits to be broadly shared by everyone in the city. The process of developing the measure, which has unfolded over several years, considered many ways to remedy the current situation, with numerous studies recommending this approach.

Although SPUR does not consider set-asides a best practice, the amount dedicated by Prop. E is small and the issue meets our criteria that ballot setasides should support causes that do not compete well in the normal budget process.1 Trees have fared very poorly as a result of the current system and consistent underfunding, and this measure is the best chance to rectify that situation in the near future.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop F

Local Voting Age

ORDINANCE

Youth Voting in Local Elections

Authorizes 16- and 17-year-old citizens to vote in local elections.

Vote YES

SPUR's Recommendation

SPUR has worked for decades to increase participation in the civic decisionmaking process. We believe responsive, effective government requires a high level of involvement by the city's residents. This measure would open participation in public decisions to between 6,000 and 15,000 more citizens who, we believe, could make conscientious voting decisions. Additionally, engaging youth in municipal elections could improve the health of our democracy overall by heightening interest in local civic issues and contributing to better youth turnout and lifetime voter engagement.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop G

Police Oversight

CHARTER AMENDMENT

Department of Police Accountability

Changes the name of the Office of Citizen Complaints to the Department of Police Accountability, separates the department's budget from the budget of the police department and requires regular audits of police officer misconduct and use of force.

Vote YES

SPUR's Recommendation

A civilian oversight body with the proper resources, independence and disciplinary power is a key part of a community strategy to end police violence and restore trust in law enforcement and government. Removing the oversight body from the budgetary control of the department it investigates is a common-sense good government policy and a good use of the ballot. Endowing the OCC with more budgetary autonomy could allow the department to better manage its resources and priorities and increase its effectiveness.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop H

Public Advocate

CHARTER AMENDMENT

Establishing a Public Advocate

Creates a new citywide elected office, public advocate, to be elected to four-year terms; provided with a staff, budget and offices within City Hall; and given a range of powers to review city programs and performance, investigate complaints against government, hold hearings and introduce legislation.

Vote NO

SPUR's Recommendation

A major change to the way San Francisco is governed demands a compelling case for why it is necessary: Would it make the city better? Would the positive impacts outweigh any negative impacts? Would the change reflect principles of good government? Is it on the ballot for the right reasons? Would it make it easier or harder to make future governance and management decisions in the city?

The public advocate proposal fails every test. It reproduces, confuses and politicizes existing government services, in addition to dramatically growing their costs. San Francisco has advocates for the public in the Office of the Mayor and Board of Supervisors, as well as in the city's dozens of public commissioners and numerous programs for government transparency, accountability and responsiveness to public complaints. If passed, this measure would be highly likely to contribute to dysfunction in San Francisco governance by creating unnecessary and expensive bureaucracy and inappropriately politicizing sensitive functions of government. It's on the ballot for political reasons and could serve as a vehicle for trouble that would only make San Francisco less well-governed.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop I

Dignity Fund

CHARTER AMENDMENT

Funding for Seniors and Adults With Disabilities

Establishes a special $38 million fund to support services for seniors and adults with disabilities; mandates an annual increase to the amount through 2026–27, after which the amount would fluctuate with the city's discretionary budget.

Vote NO

SPUR's Recommendation

Prop I seeks to fund a real need — important services for seniors and adults with disabilities — but there is no reason that funding this need cannot go through the regular legislative budgeting process, which considers all citizens' needs together. Wherever possible, elected officials should be allowed to allocate resources according to the greatest needs year by year, balancing out the competing demands on the finite amount of money available in the General Fund budget. Asking voters to establish a preset amount for a particular service does not give the full picture; voters cannot know which other needs may receive less funding as a result. And locking this funding in ignores the fact that changes occur in demographics, service needs and delivery methods.

SPUR believes set-asides should only be deployed as a funding tool for certain rare circumstances —for example, when particular purposes are chronically underfunded and/or don't have a voice in the normal budget process. Thanks to excellent advocates like the coalition that has backed this measure, the needs of seniors and adults with disabilities have been well represented and adequately funded to date.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop J

Dedicating the Prop. K Sales Tax

CHARTER AMENDMENT

Funding for Homelessness and Transportation

Dedicates funding from the Prop. K sales tax to fund homeless services and transportation system improvements.

Vote YES

SPUR's Recommendation

San Francisco's health and quality of life depend on a well-functioning transportation system that prioritizes transit, bicycle and pedestrian travel. This measure would establish a clear expenditure plan, ensuring that sales tax money would be spent on projects that make a difference in achieving San Francisco's transportation policy goals.

Similarly, health and quality of life for all residents demand that the city invest in solutions to homelessness. This measure would provide a substantial increase in support for the city's best programs for moving its street population into shelters with services and, eventually, into permanent supportive housing. Historically, SPUR has been skeptical of budget set-asides because they lock in future spending and limit legislators' ability to allocate money differently as the city's priorities and needs change over time. But we have also supported setaside initiatives when the substance of the measure outweighs our concerns with the mechanism and when the structure of the proposal meets our criteria for evaluating set-asides.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop K

Sales Tax for Transportation and Homelessness

TAX ORDINANCE

General Sales Tax

Increases the effective sales tax in San Francisco by 0.75 percent to 9.25 percent in order to fund the homelessness and transportation programs in Prop. J.

Vote YES

SPUR's Recommendation

This sales tax would raise local money for the city's most important priorities. While Prop. K is a general tax and therefore does not have a dedicated expenditure plan, it does have a companion measure — Prop. J — that sets aside this revenue increase for much-needed investment in transportation and homelessness services.

There is legitimate concern about the cumulative impact of tax and revenue measures on this ballot, and there are a confusing number of measures related to homelessness this year. This measure would make the biggest contribution to funding these needs, and it has been developed and structured fairly to have the biggest payoff for the city, with the least costs. It deserves support.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop L

MTA Board and Budget

CHARTER AMENDMENT

Appointments to MTA Board of Directors and Budget Process

Alters how appointments are made to the SFMTA Board of Directors by creating split appointments between the Board of Supervisors and mayor and allows the Board of Supervisors to reject the SFMTA's budget by a simple majority vote.

Vote NO

SPUR's Recommendation

Governance reforms of the past decade are beginning to result in an improved transportation system, with Muni performance and rider satisfaction getting better, the bike network expanding, pedestrian safety investments increasing and parking management improving. This measure threatens to undo those gains by politicizing the management of the SFMTA.

There is inherent conflict in managing a transportation system that serves the collective good. Changes that improve service for many can inconvenience some individuals. For example, putting bus stops on every block makes Muni slow for everyone riding that route. Removing a bus stop, however, can inconvenience the people who use that stop. Only an agency with independence from politics can successfully balance these needs. For this reason and others, the independent agency model is the one used by virtually every successful urban transit system in the country.

If San Francisco's goal is an efficient, effective, well-loved, well-used transportation system, the city must continue to depoliticize, rationalize and effectively fund the management of its transportation system.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop M

Housing and Development Commission

CHARTER AMENDMENT

Housing and Development Commission

Creates a new Housing and Development Commission to oversee the city's Housing and Community Development and Economic and Workforce Development agencies.

Vote NO

SPUR's Recommendation

Prop. M could delay the work of two of San Francisco's most vital city agencies, those responsible for creating affordable housing and leading economic development initiatives. The nature of this work — which requires complex coordination across many city agencies — requires the directors of these departments to be close to and speak for the chief executive of the city. By removing the direct link with the mayor and adding an ill-fitting layer of bureaucracy, Prop. M would make it more difficult for the city to execute the major plans that create affordable housing, provide jobs and revitalize neighborhoods.

While public commission meetings would increase the formal opportunities for public input on the city's housing and economic development efforts, there is no evidence that existing opportunities for public input are insufficient. And a strategic plan could have been undertaken without creating a new commission. This measure is unnecessary and potentially very damaging to the city's ability to do planning, support economic development and build affordable housing.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop N

Noncitizen Voting

CHARTER AMENDMENT

Noncitizen Voting in School Board Elections

Allows noncitizens with children ages 18 and younger to vote in school board elections.

Vote YES

SPUR's Recommendation

San Francisco has a significant noncitizen immigrant population, and close to one-third of San Francisco's 60,000 public school children have a parent who is an immigrant, most of whom are not citizens. San Francisco offers a public education to children regardless of their citizenship status. Expanding the opportunity for their parents and guardians to have a voice in who governs that education makes sense.

Citizenship has not always been a barrier to voting in local elections in the United States. Several other communities throughout the country have already removed the citizenship barrier for voting in school board elections, and San Francisco would have those models in determining how to implement the measure. Though there are potential legal issues to be resolved, we feel this measure represents an important opportunity for San Francisco to better represent the concerns of its residents.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop O

Bayview Office Development

ORDINANCE

Office Development in Candlestick Point and Hunters Point

Exempts office development in Candlestick Point and Hunters Point from San Francisco's annual cap on office space construction.

Vote YES

SPUR's Recommendation

The Prop. M office cap limits the ability to add to the supply of office space during economic booms, resulting in rapidly rising rents that squeeze nonprofit groups, small businesses and any other low-margin office tenant. SPUR has long been concerned about the negative effects of the current citywide office cap and remains unequivocally in favor of modifying it,9 including this measure's proposed exemption for Hunters Point Shipyard and Candlestick Point.

While SPUR is generally opposed to making changes to the Planning Code at the ballot, in this case they're necessary. Because Prop. M was passed at the ballot box, any changes must also come back to the voters.

Prop. O builds on the voters' support of the 2008 Bayview Jobs, Parks and Housing Initiative by allowing those plans to go forward without the constraints of Prop. M. The downtown office cap was intended to control and meter the growth of high-rise office construction in downtown San Francisco, not to slow or limit job growth in other parts of the city.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop P

Competitive Bidding

ORDINANCE

Competitive Bidding for Affordable Housing Projects on City-Owned Property

Requires a competitive bidding process for selecting developers of affordable housing funded by the City and County of San Francisco on sites owned by the city.

Vote NO

SPUR's Recommendation

Prop. P does not clearly solve a problem. MOHCD already has a process in place to ensure competitive bidding on projects funded with public dollars that are built on city-owned land. Setting administrative rules like this at the ballot could complicate the department's ability to make future changes as conditions change, and the requirement of three bids could impede the city's ability to get important projects built.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop Q

Tent Encampments

ORDINANCE

Prohibiting Tents on Public Sidewalks

Amends the Police Code to prohibit tents on public sidewalks and provides parameters for removing tent encampments within 24 hours, provided occupants can be offered housing, shelter or homeless services.

No Recommendation

SPUR's Recommendation

It feels deeply wrong that a city with such wealth and pride in social progressivism should fail to address a persistent human tragedy in its streets, year after year. This measure responds to widespread frustration and attempts to create a framework for addressing one of the most visible manifestations of homelessness: tent encampments on public sidewalks. There is little disagreement that tent encampments are hazardous for both their occupants and the residents and businesses nearby, and it must be a priority for the city to help people transition out of these situations.

But this measure does not offer a lasting solution. The city already uses existing law to move people off of public sidewalks when they are creating a health or safety hazard. This measure could actually impinge on the city's ability to remove an encampment because it requires that housing or shelter be provided (and such shelter is often not available). The measure's wording does not specify the quality of shelter that must be provided or whether people need to be accommodated for any length of time. Enforcement of Prop. Q could create a circus wheel where people are in shelter for a night, then back out on the street in a new location.

The city has already made providing significantly more housing, shelter and services the priority of its enhanced homelessness policy. And other measures on the ballot this fall could provide additional funding for Navigation Centers and for permanently affordable housing. This measure doesn't add any new services or funding and could confine the approach of San Francisco's newly created Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing.

The SPUR Board is not in favor of allowing sidewalk encampments to persist, but many board members did not believe this measure would provide a real solution. We were not able to reach enough votes to recommend either a "yes" vote or a "no" vote on this measure.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop R

Neighborhood Crime Unit

ORDINANCE

Neighborhood Crime Ordinance

Mandates that the San Francisco Police Department establish a Neighborhood Crime Unit and staff it with a minimum of 3 percent of all sworn personnel.

Vote NO

SPUR's Recommendation

SPUR supports the idea of a Neighborhood Crime Unit within the SFPD. We recognize that certain neighborhood crimes, such as vandalism and bicycle thefts, degrade the city's quality of life and can get overlooked in a police department focused on more serious or violent crimes.

But we oppose using the ballot as a tool to allocate departmental staffing. How a department carries out its functions and how departments coordinate should be decided between the mayor and the department heads (sometimes with discussion and input from supervisors or the city controller). This measure is even more troubling given that the mayor and police chief already support the idea of a Neighborhood Crime Unit, and implementing such a unit does not need legislation to be enacted. Despite some merits, this measure has no place on the ballot.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop S

Allocating the Hotel Tax

ORDINANCE

Allocation of Hotel Tax Funds

Allocates a portion of hotel tax revenue to programs related to the arts and ending family homelessness.

No Recommendation

SPUR's Recommendation

Arts, culture and services for families experiencing homelessness are priorities of the city and worthy of public investment. The hotel tax has historically been a major source of funding for these causes, and the amounts proposed for a restored set-aside in the measure are reasonable when compared to their historic allocations. However, creating new setasides restricts the flexibility of distributing monies from the General Fund. Due to the way it is structured and its significant size, this set-aside is expected to impact other key services the city provides. SPUR's board was divided on these points and was not able to reach enough votes to recommend either a "yes" vote or a "no" vote on this measure.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop T

Lobbyist Gifts and Reporting

ORDINANCE

Restricting Lobbyist Gifts and Campaign Contributions

Imposes new regulations on lobbyist reporting, restricts lobbyist gifts to city officials and limits lobbyist campaign contributions.

Vote NO

SPUR's Recommendation

SPUR recognizes the concern Prop. T raises about the effect of money in San Francisco politics. We are generally supportive of a ban on bundling campaign contributions and appreciate the proponents' work to develop a proposal for San Francisco.

But regarding the strict gift ban, we have not heard a convincing policy argument that this measure would actually prevent corruption. This measure may only address a perception of influence, and its methods might have unanticipated impacts. One is that Prop. T could make it harder for city officials and legitimate representatives of public interests to work together. There is a balance to strike between preventing corruption and seeing the potential for corruption in any contact between a city official and an advocate for a cause.

This measure makes an important contribution to the conversation about money in politics, but it should have been considered legislatively, where trade-offs could have been weighed and where it would have been possible to amend with a simple Board of Supervisors majority, like nearly all other laws.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop U

Affordable Housing Eligibility

ORDINANCE

Affordable Housing Requirements for Market-Rate Development Projects

Increases the income eligibility limit for below-market-rate rental units offered through the city's inclusionary housing program.

Vote NO

SPUR's Recommendation

Middle-income families are important to San Francisco's diversity and economy, and this segment of the population is shrinking. The city needs to provide more housing for these households, but this measure is not the right way to accomplish it. Given the complexity of inclusionary housing policy, a legislative process informed by technical studies is a better way to make decisions about how much inclusionary housing the city needs and who should be eligible to live in it. The ballot box is no place for this kind of decision-making.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

It's also important to note that Prop. U does not add more housing to the pool of inclusionary units available at below-market rents. This means that it would reduce the opportunities for certain low-income households by putting them into competition with a greater number of households for the same number of inclusionary units. While we recognize its good intentions, we can't put our support behind this measure.

SF Prop V

Soda Tax

ORDINANCE

Tax on Distributing Sugar-Sweetened Beverages

Levies a tax of 1 cent per ounce on sugar-sweetened drinks distributed in San Francisco.

Vote YES

SPUR's Recommendation

While many other factors influence public health, there is convincing evidence that liquid sugar is especially pernicious and merits policy intervention. The proposed tax is a reasonable and targeted policy tool that could help reverse the trend of rising rates of obesity and diabetes and the related increases in public health costs.

Though the measure is a regressive tax, it taxes something that is not essential to daily life. Sugary drinks can be easily avoided. A tax of this nature would be better implemented at the state level, but after a decade of failed attempts to pass such legislation in Sacramento, we cannot continue waiting for a state-level tax. Given the severity of diet-related public health problems, this measure merits support.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop W

Transfer Tax

TAX ORDINANCE

Real Estate Transfer Tax on Properties Over $5 Million

Increases the city's transfer tax rate on properties valued at $5 million or more.

Vote NO

SPUR's Recommendation

SPUR has been supportive of transfer tax rate increases in the past. We believe that when thoughtfully crafted, transfer taxes can be a prudent way to generate revenue and recoup city investment without providing a direct incentive against economic activity and job growth. And SPUR supports two of the programs that proponents of this measure hope to fund: making City College tuition-free for San Francisco residents and maintaining street trees.

However, this measure does not address whether City College or street trees would be funded, and if they were, this tax would likely not be the best revenue source. Because transfer taxes are so volatile, their revenue is better dedicated to one-time uses or to create a reserve, rather than to support programs that rely on steady income. City leaders can, and should, look for other ways to fund San Francisco's ongoing priorities.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

SF Prop X
Manufacturing and Arts Space

INITIATIVE ORDINANCE

Space for Neighborhood Arts, Small Businesses and Community Services

Requires development projects in the Mission or South of Market to get a conditional use authorization if the project would demolish or convert space used by production, distribution, repair, arts activities or nonprofit groups and requires the development to replace the demolished space.

Vote NO

SPUR's Recommendation

More attention can and should be paid to retaining space for industry, the arts and nonprofit organizations in San Francisco. But this goal can be achieved legislatively and in consultation with groups that will be affected by these changes. While we appreciate that the proponents of this measure included a provision that would allow changes by a super-majority of the Board of Supervisors, we still believe that going through the normal legislative process is the best way to make such complex and substantial zoning changes, particularly ones that have not been evaluated for feasibility and may need to be adjusted in the future.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

BA Measure RR
BART Bond

BOND

Keep BART Safe and Reliable 2016

Authorizes BART to issue $3.5 billion in bonds to fund system renewal projects backed by a tax on property within the three-county BART District (San Francisco, Alameda and Contra Costa counties).

Vote YES

SPUR's Recommendation

The need to fix the BART system is urgent. Hundreds of thousands of Bay Area residents rely on BART to get to jobs, schools and events and to otherwise conduct their lives. Meanwhile the system is deteriorating daily. BART is central to the mobility, economic health and sustainability of the entire region, and ensuring that it performs well into the future, as our region grows, should be a top priority. The BART system benefits everyone who lives in the Bay Area — not just those who ride it — and therefore a general obligation bond financed by property tax increases is a reasonable approach to financing system improvements. A larger bond that paid for more of the system's needs would have been our preference, but this bond is a step forward and focuses on the right priorities.

Read our complete analysis at spurvoterguide.org

Acknowledgments

The goal of the SPUR Voter Guide is to offer objective analysis and advise voters on which measures will deliver real solutions. Our Ballot Analysis Committee heard arguments from both sides of the issues, debated the measures' merits and provided recommendations to our San Francisco Board of Directors. The board then voted, with a 60 percent vote required for SPUR to make a recommendation.

SPUR's San Francisco Board of Directors reviewed, debated and adopted this analysis as official policy on July 13, August 17 and August 22, 2016.

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