

BENALLA
RURAL CITY



BENALLA RURAL CITY AGE FRIENDLY STRATEGY 2020





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INTRODUCTION

The Council is committed to ensuring Benalla Rural City is an age-friendly community.

The Age Friendly Steering Committee works with the Council to develop Benalla Rural City as an age-friendly community

Benalla Rural City, along with most places in the world, has an increasing proportion of people over 55 years and living longer.

An age friendly community supports older people to live safe, purposeful and healthy lives. When we support older people to live mentally and physically healthy lives, the benefits extend to the entire community. We create opportunities for enhanced diversity, inclusion and access for all community members. An age-friendly community focuses on the strengths of our older population.





PURPOSE OF THIS STRATEGY

The Age Friendly Strategy outlines how the Council makes decisions to support the development of an age-friendly community. The plans and actions in the Strategy are designed to be implemented over a ten-year period.

The Strategy also serves as a guide for all other organisations in Benalla Rural City.

We respect and value older people in our community



OUR VALUES

We respect and value our ageing residents.

Older people are vital to the prosperity of our community. They offer unique skills, experience, mentoring and wisdom. They fill critical volunteer positions across our Rural City.

When we talk about an age-friendly community, we recognise the strengths older people bring to our community.

Benalla Rural City is a great place for older people to live and retire. We recognise the importance of the planning and provision of services and facilities that support older residents.¹

Council is committed to taking a leadership role to build an Age-Friendly Benalla Rural City, working in partnership with community groups and residents, businesses, tourism, education, health and support services.

This Strategy is underpinned by the World Health Organisation Age-Friendly Cities Frameworks and human rights principles, including the right to:

- **Respect** – to be valued and respected at all stages of life
- **Inclusion** – to be supported to participate in community irrespective of age, health or ability
- **Diversity** – to be part of the community regardless of beliefs, backgrounds
- **Empowerment** – to be an active participant in decisions which affect everyday life

WHY AGE-FRIENDLY?

There are many challenges and opportunities of an ageing population. Taking an age-friendly approach allows us to:

- support older people to pursue good health and remain active in their communities
- enhance access to local businesses and facilities for the entire community
- improve the economy through improving the spending power of older customers and supporting older workers to remain in the workforce
- provide training and employment opportunities for home-based goods and services that enable people to remain independent in their homes and communities
- benefit from the unique strengths older people bring when they participate in all aspects of the community
- gain a larger proportion of the 'silver' tourism dollar as a community that welcomes the spending power of older visitors

In addition to these economic priorities, older people offer volunteer services, including emergency services, transport, sport and social services. Older people's use of rural community services keeps those services sustainable for everyone.

HOW WE DEVELOPED THE STRATEGY

The Strategy was developed in consultation with the community of Benalla Rural City. It draws on evidence from the World Health Organisation's *Global Network for Age Friendly Cities and Communities*. It is also informed by evidence from other Australian rural communities with Age Friendly strategies.



COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

We began extensive consultation in 2017 as part of the Department of Health and Human Services *Age Friendly Victoria* project.

More than 600 people engaged in the consultation process for the Age-Friendly Strategy.

They provided feedback in many ways, including:

- survey responses
- postcard questionnaires
- interviews
- listening hubs

Feedback was gathered from older people living in rural and urban areas of Benalla Rural City as well as key health and support services workers and administrators.

The data collected was presented at a community forum to provide the opportunity for further input. Approximately 100 people of varied ages attended the forum in September 2019.



EXPERIENCES OF AGING IN BENALLA RURAL CITY

People's experience of ageing in Benalla Rural City are diverse. Responses gathered during the consultation phase included positive sentiments about Benalla Rural City. Older people said they:

- were well connected to their community
- appreciated community facilities and open spaces
- had access to a diverse range of clubs and activities
- experienced a general respect toward older people
- benefited from high rates of volunteering and volunteering opportunities
- considered local support services as caring and responsive to the needs of older people

Challenges identified in the responses included:

- social isolation and loneliness
- knowledge gaps about relevant services and activities
- chronic health issues
- availability of affordable local health services
- digitisation
- limited transportation options
- accessibility in public spaces, particularly footpaths
- affordable housing and maintenance

CONSIDERATION OF DATA

Official projections estimate that by 2036, 44% of Benalla's population will be aged over 60 with 29% being over 70 years of age. This makes Benalla one of the top 10 Victorian Local Government Areas for older people with significantly greater numbers than the projected national average.²

STRATEGIC CONTEXT

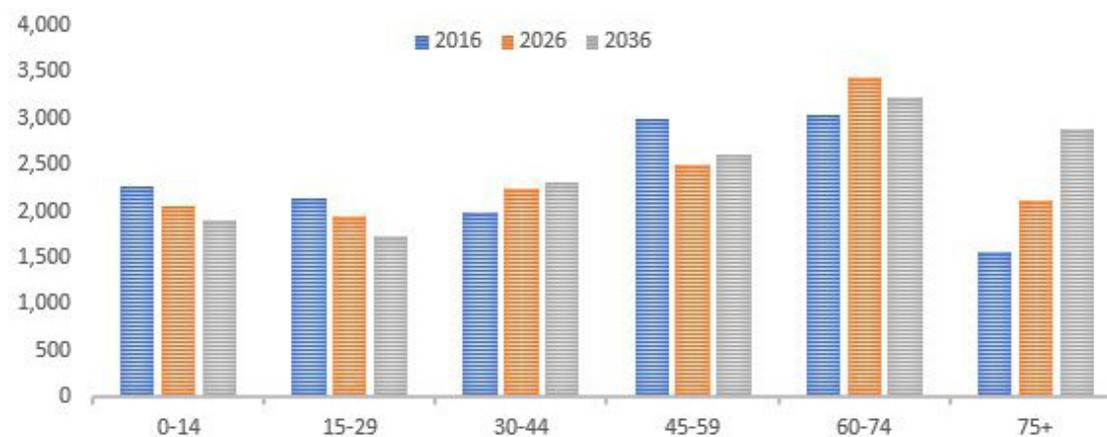
The Benalla Age-Friendly Strategy reflects international best practice.

The World Health Organization developed an age-friendly model based on eight domains. The domains assess a community's age-friendliness. They are:

- Transportation
- Outdoor spaces and building
- Housing
- Respect and social inclusion
- social participation
- communication and information
- civic participation and employment opportunities
- community support and health services

² *Victoria in Future 2019: Population and household projections to 2051*, The State of Victoria Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning.

Benalla Rural City - Population by age



AGE-FRIENDLY DECLARATION VICTORIA

In 2016, the Victorian government, in partnership with the Municipal Association of Victoria, announced the Age-Friendly Victoria initiative.

In the same year, the Commissioner for Senior Victorians released a study on social isolation and loneliness in seniors in Victoria.

These two documents reinforced the need for a greater focus on positive ageing.

OUR ROLE IN AGE-FRIENDLY COMMUNITY PLANNING

This Strategy aligns with the Benalla Rural City Council Plan 2017 -2021, including these themes:

- **Connected and Vibrant Community:** We are committed to building a healthy, active, safe and socially connected community that offers opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities to participate in community life.

- **Engaging and Accessible Places and Spaces:** We will provide community places and spaces to meet the needs of our community and focus on thoughtfully planned growth to maintain and enhance the high amenity and character of our Rural City.
- **Thriving and Progressive Economy:** We will support, promote and encourage the long-term growth, diversification and strengthening of our economy as a key contributor to a healthier and more sustainable community.

*“Local government has a pivotal role in leading and facilitating communities where people of all ages regardless of ability or life stage, can live a quality life. An age-friendly city or community is friendly for **all** ages and embraces much of what local government does.”³*

As highlighted in the Victorian government’s *Age-friendly Declaration*, the objectives are best achieved through ‘partnerships between seniors, governments, communities, businesses and support agencies.’⁴

3 Age-friendly Cities and Communities Information Kit for Local Government Councillors and Senior Management COTA Vic ; MAV 2017

4 Victorian Government and Municipal Association of Victoria Age-friendly Victoria Declaration, 2016



FOCUS AREAS

We have developed the Age-Friendly Strategy with a focus on six key areas. It is important to note that these areas have many interrelated factors. This Strategy identifies each of these focus areas and describes:

- Why is this a priority?
- What you told us
- Our objective
- Suggested actions



Our Strategy covers these key priorities:

- **Social connection**
- **Communication and information**
- **Health and community services**
- **Accessible places and spaces**
- **Age-friendly housing**

FOCUS AREA 1: SOCIAL CONNECTION

WHY IS THIS A PRIORITY?

Social connections are critical to good health and wellbeing. They also provide feelings of purpose and value, which in turn enhance general health and wellbeing.

Many older people in Benalla Rural City remain active participants in the community. This involves participating in paid work or volunteer roles and community groups. Caring for others, learning new skills and teaching or mentoring others are also common ways older people may retain social connection.

However, for a variety of reasons, many older people are no longer able to participate in these social connections.

Isolation and loneliness are serious issues with negative health consequences. As a rural community, we acknowledge that those living on farms or in rural townships with small populations are at increased risk of these issues.

Other factors that increase the likelihood of social isolation and associated feelings of loneliness include:

- Low income
- Disability
- Chronic health issues
- Carer status

Loneliness is associated with a faster rate of physical and mental decline. It is particularly common in people over the age of 75. Research indicates that loneliness poses equal or greater health risks than obesity, smoking or air pollution.⁵

5 <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/letter/articles/vh-letter-47-loneliness> Accessed Sept 3, 2019 quoting research: Advancing Social Connection As Public Health Priority in the United States. Holt-Lunstad, Julianne, Robles, Theodore F., Sbarra, David A.



WHAT YOU TOLD US

Concern to address social isolation and loneliness was a major feature of our community consultation.

I'm concerned of the amount of older people living alone who are not members of community groups and who are just sitting at home. They are not accessing what is available and don't know what is available.

It's a challenge making new friends when all my old friends are dead.

At my age and stage of health I just can't be bothered going out. It's just too hard. My eyesight's not good, I've got to juggle my wheeler and my shopping bags, and then there's the transport...

Some people want to be isolated. They are private people and are happy with that but they need help now and won't ask for it. Others simply have been alone for so long they don't have confidence to go out and meet others.

There's a lot of older blokes sitting out there on farms by themselves, fiercely independent but not up to doing things like they used to. These blokes aren't going to come to a service or an activity on their own bat. You need to go where they are. On their turf and engage with them first.

I'm very slow now and I forget people's names all the times. I don't want to be a burden.

For some of my clients, I might be the one constant visitor they have and they follow me around the whole time I'm there, talking. It's very sad.

Home Care worker

Dementia can and does exacerbate isolation.

OUR OBJECTIVE

To create more opportunities for older residents to be included in our community and to connect with others in meaningful ways. These opportunities need to be affordable, accessible, local, diverse, inclusive and well publicised.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

- Investigate an informal friendly visiting program for older people on isolated properties.
"Checking on older people that live on farms. Maybe the community getting together and making a roster to check on older people"
- Implement a volunteer phone call service
"When living on your own, a friendly phone call to see if you are okay would be lovely, especially when you have no family in Benalla."
- Improve links to existing intergenerational projects, such as reading to pre-schoolers, the L2P program and Connect 9 by the Tomorrow Today Foundation
- Investigate options for establishing local rural community hubs
"In our small community a monthly morning tea would be a way to get people together for social interaction and a sharing of produce/chatter."
- Explore affordable programs for exercise and social interaction for older people across the Rural City including its townships
- Consider the expansion of volunteer transport services to take people to activities
- Trial informal classes for people after the loss of their partner, including cooking classes and financial management classes
- Consider piloting La Trobe City Council's Welcoming and Age Friendly Group Kit
- Continue to offer Benalla Unpacked tours, targeting new residents
- Open up Community Meals program to all residents over 65
- Continue to support a range of activities across Benalla Rural City during Seniors Festival each October.

Social connections are critical to good health and wellbeing.



FOCUS AREA 2 COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION

WHY IS THIS A PRIORITY?

Communication is a fundamental human right. However, people tend to experience more communication challenges as they age. Health issues, including hearing loss, create commonly understood communication issues.

However, important information is more frequently being communicated online. When we communicate online, we may be incorrectly assuming a person's ability to receive this information.

Older people in Benalla Rural City have varied digital skills and resources. Participants concerned about the digital age suggested they may:

- not have the skills or resources to access and navigate accurate information
- fear targeted scams
- have health issues, such as vision impairment, dementia or arthritis, that may affect their ability to use devices

In rural areas, the reliance on digital communication is worsened by unreliable internet access.

Being armed with the most up-to-date information is critical to maintaining independence. It is everyone's responsibility to ensure *everyone* can access the right information.



WHAT YOU TOLD US

"I'm old but I'm not stupid."

The biggest challenge is knowing what is available and how to access things whether it be social activities or health services

I've been four years with this phone and I couldn't text. I was too embarrassed to ask for help.

I feel discriminated against by employers and utility companies for not having a smart phone or computer.

"We need more information sessions and not just in Benalla Township. (We need information) ... about ageing and illness like dementia, and what support we can get to stay at home and how to understand the My Aged Care system."

Younger family members often over 55 themselves have to navigate service systems for their older parents and have little or no understanding. They often don't seek information until crisis stage. This is very stressful.

My child has given me this mobile phone and they said it's really great because I can stay connected to them but I don't know how to use it.

I'm scared being online might lead to something I couldn't get out of or get me into trouble.

Technology: I'm allergic to it.

OUR OBJECTIVE

We want to:

- Provide accessible information about services and age-related activities
- Improve confidence and competence for older people in using digital media

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

- Work with the Council's Communications team to ensure older people are considered in key local government information campaigns
- Work with the Council's Communications team to improve accessibility across all Council's departments
- Explore whether the business development function of Council can help other organisations to understand the basics of developing accessible content
- Advocate for a mobile health and information van to visit outlying communities
- Review and improve local communication channels about services and activities in the community
- Equip workers and volunteers who support older people with current information about activities/services
- Continue to provide and promote IT training, particularly informal basic help sessions such as Café Connect model
- Provide opportunities for older people's voices to contribute to decisions and planning about relevant services and infrastructure
- Encourage more intergenerational projects like skill exchanges where young people help older people with technology
- Consider developing a multimedia strategy to promote and celebrate older residents
- Offer a variety of workshops and training sessions to improve the health and wellbeing of older people.

FOCUS AREA 3 HEALTH AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

WHY IS THIS A PRIORITY?

*'Australians living in rural and remote areas tend to have shorter lives, have higher levels of disease and injury and poorer access to and use of health services compared to people living in metropolitan areas.'*⁶

The community consultations indicated that the adequacy of Benalla Rural City's health services was a key concern.

Benalla Rural City, along with many other rural localities, has a growing ageing population with greater needs. Yet, there are fewer accessible and affordable services than in metropolitan areas.

6

Survey of Health Care: selected findings for rural and remote Australians April 2018 AIHW

Similarly, the rate of bulk-billing is lower in rural areas than in metropolitan areas.⁷ This challenge is compounded by a high proportion of low-income earners.

Older people may also struggle to access services where geographical distances need to be covered. In Benalla Rural City, activities and services are centred in Benalla. People living in rural townships may not be able to travel to access facilities.

7

<https://www1.racgp.org.au/ajgp/2019/january%E2%80%93february/the-mosaic-of-general-practice-bulk-billing-in-reg>



WHAT YOU TOLD US

The thing that frequently comes up in my regular discussion with older people is about men who are left alone. And they won't ask for help. And they clearly have depression mental health issues.

We need more permanent long-term resident doctors.

There's just not enough care workers to help us elderly.

It's just very hard to cope with reduced energy, strength, sight and hearing. It all seems to come at once.

People want activities in their own rural community, rather than having to travel into Benalla township for everything.

I just can't get around like I used to so it's easy to stay put and do not much.

A lot of family members can't cope with dementia and they tend to stay away and not visit.

I've lost friends because my wife has dementia and they don't know how to deal with it. It's easier to just not go out. It's so much harder to get the two of us organised anyway.

We need more very low cost or free activities for us pensioners to stay active.

We need more very low cost or free activities for us pensioners to stay active.

I need transport to the doctor and dentist.

OUR OBJECTIVE

- Improved health outcomes for older people so they remain independent for as long as possible
- Increase the number of older people accessing affordable community activities that improve mental and physical health
- Develop an understanding and inclusive community for people with disabilities, including people with dementia, and their carers
- Improve access to support services in rural townships and in isolated properties

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

- Sustained advocacy for more affordable age-friendly medical services available locally. More bulk-billing. More GPs.
- Advocate for and partner with more outreach mental health services
- Improve community awareness of dementia including training businesses in dementia-friendly strategies
- Investigate the feasibility of establishing an informal friendly visiting program
- Investigate funding to run health-focused group activities, such as strength training, tai chi and exercise classes, for older people in small communities
- Develop a campaign to encourage Benalla businesses and organisations to employ older people to enhance activity, engagement and economic independence.
- Maintain funding for Rural Outreach Worker and consider expanding the role to include a greater emphasis on group education sessions focusing on mental health and looking after yourself.

FOCUS AREA 4 ACCESSIBLE PLACES & SPACES

WHY IS THIS A PRIORITY?

It is vital that facilities and outdoor spaces are accessible. This is identified in the Council Plan 2017-2021 and in the Council's Community Access and Inclusion Plan.

The state of footpaths, gutters, roads and tracks have a direct impact on accessibility, providing mobility and affecting quality of life.

Facilities need to be accessible. There is an increasing number of residents with mobility issues and a greater dependency on wheeler walkers and mobility scooters. Adequate lighting, signage and parking spaces need to be considered when discussing the accessibility of facilities.

Outdoor spaces require adequate seating for rests and well-designed infrastructure creates confidence for older people to travel.



WHAT YOU TOLD US

Using a wheelchair or wheeler around town is very difficult. Potholes, poor footpaths, deep steep gutters are dangerous

More street lighting would make us feel safer

We need an area around the lake where carers and family could take people with dementia or in wheelchairs to fish, draw, read, walk that is safe and secure

“Bus shelters in the vicinity of the three supermarkets would be greatly appreciated with rain in the winter

We need more seating (rest areas) for those of us who like to walk but need the occasional rest.

We need more public toilets with disability access – particularly in the small townships

We definitely need more disabled parking spaces.

OUR OBJECTIVE

- Outdoor spaces and buildings which are accessible and safe so that people are confident to go where they want to go

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

- Work with the Council’s operations team to create opportunities for further input into the foot and cycle path network
- Consider dementia-friendly design principles when developing new infrastructure or upgrading existing facilities
- Advocate for improved lighting in streets and public spaces
- Consider the requirement of safety measures for older pedestrians, including more pedestrian crossings and longer times at traffic lights and work with road authorities to advocate for these.
- Partner with bus companies to examine number and accessibility of bus stops
- Consider using larger print on future signs across the municipality
- Work with the Accessibility Reference Group to improve car parking for older people
- Work with taxi companies to evaluate the accessibility of taxi ranks and drop off points in the CBD
- Audit maintenance requirements, accessibility and insurance coverage of public facilities, community halls and defibrillators across the municipality
- Advocate for the maintenance of community halls in rural townships to enhance opportunities for social activities, venues and information sessions.

FOCUS AREA 5 HOUSING

WHY IS THIS A PRIORITY?

Age-friendly housing is having enough housing options for older people that allows safe freedom of movement within the home.

The Australian Government established six core design elements in their Liveable Housing Design Guidelines⁸ for new dwellings. These guidelines provide more liveable homes for everyone, not just for older people.

“Liveable design recommends the inclusion of key easy living features that aim to make homes easier and safer to use for all occupants including: people with disability, ageing Australians, people with temporary injuries, and families with young children.”⁹

This section incorporates issues such as home and garden maintenance. This impacts how people live in their home as they age and their ability to maintain independence.

Affordability and housing supply are key issues in our community and affect older people’s ability to access age-friendly housing.

Our consultation demonstrated that housing was one of the key challenges for older people in our community. Housing is critical to maintaining independence as we age.

8

Liveable Housing Guidelines Second edition, LHA 2012

9

Ibid p. 8



WHAT YOU TOLD US

Why can't we have more things offered in people's own community? Let's not get so bogged down in process that nothing gets done. Volunteers in communities could help one another with cleaning gutters and lawn mowing and odd jobs

I want to downsize but I can't find a suitable place that is manageable for me.

Finding tradies for small maintenance and repairs is very hard

Some Aged Care facilities prohibit residents from having their pets live with them and this really stops people from agreeing to go into care when perhaps that's the best option.

We can get help with nursing, meals and cleaning. But there is a real need for a handyman to change light globes, assist with high cleaning, changing smoke detectors.

I need help to get rid of big items that can't go in the bins as we have no roadside pickups anymore.

I just can't maintain my rural property anymore without a bit of help but I can't afford it.

There are older tradespeople and underemployed people with skills to do odd jobs/home maintenance, but it's the bureaucracy that is the problem. They haven't got the level of insurance, ABNs etc required

My biggest challenge is just keeping up with the daily requirements of living in my home like the cleaning, the fixing, the mowing.

We need more affordable private rentals. Real estate agents don't realise many older people only get casual or part time work or are on the pension.

OUR OBJECTIVE

- A community with an adequate supply of affordable and accessible housing options for purchase or rent.
- Older people are safe and comfortable to maintain independence as they age in their home
- A range of voluntary, low cost services for helping older people maintain their home and garden

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

- Explore the possibility of a volunteer community home maintenance and gardening program in partnership with local community groups.
- Highlight the benefits of multigenerational housing options in a community promotional campaign
- Consider working with community groups to provide age-friendly housing workshops, such as decreasing energy bills and accessible home modifications
- Advocate for age-friendly planning, design and approval processes
- Advocate for inclusion of a higher number of one and two bedroom homes as part of the Benalla West Revitalisation project
- Work with the Communications team to consider how to provide information to older people about future proofing their homes
- Consider staging open days which display suitable age-friendly housing design features.

FOCUS AREA 6 MOBILITY AND TRANSPORT

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Being able to get around is critical to maintaining independence.

Mobility and transport concerns threaten healthy ageing. These concerns affect access to services, social connections and community participation. Inadequate access to transport is a major reason for social isolation.

Older people living in rural areas are particularly affected by mobility and transport issues as public transport does not service all areas.

Many older people expressed a fear of losing their driver licence. Other key mobility and transport considerations were the ability to walk, cycle, use a wheeler, scooter or wheelchair and confidently access public transport options.



WHAT YOU TOLD US

Public transport needs to reach more areas of town.

Many resist giving up driving because they don't want to lose their independence. It's hard to rely on others for getting somewhere.

A community bus for older people to pick them up from home and take them to the doctors or shopping would be good.

For some I know, it takes too much bother and time if you are reliant on a wheelie walker and you have to juggle that and bags on a bus or getting into a taxi. In the end, many find it easier not to go out and their social circle just gets smaller and smaller."

We need community transport for those of us in rural villages who want to stay living here.

Top priority for me would be to have much better access to the town bus service. The bus stops are way too far apart and because of my health problems I cannot walk to the nearest stop.

You can access a Council service to take you out for home shopping, but there is limited funding and you must have had an Aged Care Assessment.

No weekend transport in town makes it difficult to go out.

OUR OBJECTIVE

- Affordable transport options across Benalla Rural City, including its rural townships
- Adequate transport options that cater to a range of abilities

SUGGESTED ACTIONS

- Consider adopting a community volunteer transport program based on the successful TOAST (Tolmie Offers A Seat to Town) model
- Advocate for an improved public transport network to rural townships
- Advocate for the extension of existing bus routes and improved train services
- Explore the option in particular, small buses to rural townships, extension of existing bus routes and bus stops and improved train services
- Work with the Council's operations team to create opportunities for further input into the foot and cycle path network
- Look at the feasibility of setting up a refresher driving course for older people based on L2P model
- Expand the social support activities model, which already provides transport to and from activities each week for eligible older people.

HOW WE WILL IMPLEMENT THE AGE-FRIENDLY STRATEGY

This is a ten-year Strategy that is designed to harness the power of the whole community. It expresses how the Council and the Age-Friendly Steering Committee plan and implement actions to contribute to the development of Benalla Rural City as an age-friendly community.

The Age-Friendly Steering Committee will develop an action plan for each of the six focus areas. These action plans will identify:

- Specific actions
- Partners in delivery
- Timelines
- Measures of progress

The Committee will also develop governance arrangements to oversee the implementation of the Strategy.



RESOURCES & REFERENCES

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