



**Department of Community Resource Development**

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**Citizen Participation Methods for Long Range Planning:**

**A Case Study from Burnett County**

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# **Citizen Participation Methods for Long Range Planning: A Case Study from Burnett County**

## **I. Background**

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the public input gathering methods used as part of the Burnett County planning process and to assess their effectiveness. Two models are used to analyze citizen input and education – Moyer and Tiffany's, *Criteria for Selecting Appropriate Input Gathering Techniques* and Heberlein's *Forms and Functions of Public Contact*. The author also developed a framework for analyzing input methods with citizens as leaders of the planning process.

This paper will briefly review Burnett County's situation, discuss citizen input in community planning, the main methods used in Burnett County's case, analyze the Burnett County process with the two approaches, consider the role of citizens as input gathers, and offer final conclusions.

Burnett County is located in rural northwestern Wisconsin, approximately 80 miles from the Twin Cities of Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota and 60 miles to Superior, Wisconsin. The County population for 1997 is estimated at 13,857 up 800 from the 1990 census or six percent. Burnett County's economy is diverse and growing. Tourism and second homeowner expansion helps explain the strong economy, along with a good manufacturing base.

The negative side or impact of the growing and diversified economy and the increasing recreational housing base has been growth management concerns and increasing conflicts. Because of these concerns, the Burnett County Board of Supervisors decided to complete a long-range land use plan. The Burnett County planning process began in March 1966. The stated goal of the plan was "to guide growth, not prevent it."

The University of Wisconsin-Extension Community Resource Development Agent was charged with organizing the public outreach and educational efforts of the land use planning process. In designing the process this agent consulted planning documents, State Extension Land Use Specialists and other agents. In spite of their valuable assistance, it seemed that no clear or recommended information existed "how to organize, analyze and use" public input in a long range planning process. A work plan for public input and education was submitted, reviewed, changed and finally approved by the Burnett County Long Range Planning Commission (BCLRPC). Appendix I shows a copy of the work plan calendar. The plan did change some over the two years, but represents the basic approach.

## Public Input Gathering

### *Why Have Public Input*

Burnett County's public input and communication efforts during the planning process has cost the County. The overall budget for outreach education and final products represents 13 percent of the project budget or approximately \$34,000. Is it worth it? Does spending significant funds and effort on the public outreach and communication process help planning projects reach successful or better conclusions? According to Thomas Heberlein, Professor in Rural Sociology from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, they do:

*Time and dollar expenditures for public involvement should be viewed as an investment which will yield substantial returns...Actions taken with adequate public involvement will be more comprehensive and will be less likely to be capriciously reversed or modified. In the long run, this should save time and money for an agency (Heberlein, p.3).*

“Citizen participation,” as restated by Silveira et al in the UWEX Staff Paper 93.1, “carries some apple pie and flag connotations and can even be considered a way to redistribute power,” (Silveira p.1). A more modest approach, taken by Heberlein is that citizen involvement will make decisions better (Heberlein, p.3).

Harriet Moyer and Jackson Tiffany, University of Wisconsin Extension Professors in their 1980 brochure/slide program, A Summary Asking, Listening and Telling, described the function of citizen participation as 1) information giving and receiving, 2) providing interaction among all types of people and levels of government, and 3) providing for the maintenance of the political system (Moyer and Tiffany, p.2).

Public involvement can be carried out poorly and lead to frustration. Even properly designed input gathering is open to complaint. Heberlein lists the most common complaints made by the public about input processes (p.5):

- Those organized get more attention;
- Organized groups' opinions are given greater weight than the unorganized and average citizens;
- Citizens normally have to initiate the inquiring about plans;
- The process is normally too formal;
- The public is involved only for reaction after decisions have been reached;
- The procedures only allow for reaction to formal positions taken by the planning committee;
- There is little feedback on suggestions that have been made by the public; and
- Erratic citizen participation leaves gaps in their knowledge of steps taken during the planning.

### *Principal Input Methods Used*

While the BCLRPC was not fully aware of these concerns related to public input, they did know they wanted a lot of involvement. The eight methods utilized as part of the Burnett County planning process are outlined here.

1. Focus Groups: Focus groups were used early in the process. Their main purpose was to elicit public input in a general way on the concerns and interests people had on growth related issues in the county. Two specific questions asked were: 1) What are the top concerns facing your community for the future; and 2) What are some steps that citizens, communities and local government could take to ensure the future of Burnett County.
2. Community Survey: A survey focusing on land use, growth management, recreational conflict and a performance/satisfaction of services tool was conducted. Dr. Don Hinman, Community Development Specialist from the University of Wisconsin Superior/Extension provided design assistance, conducted the survey, coded the results and provided analysis. The staff recommended a random sampling method to reach five to ten percent of the approximately 11,000 seasonal or year round households in the County. The Committee did not want to do this, but instead opted for a census approach – that is, the 11,022 seasonal and year round households received the survey through just one mailing. Local publicity was the only additional method used to alert the community to the survey. A 22 percent response rate was achieved. This was acceptable, but probably a bit slanted to those with a higher degree of interest.
3. Ad Hoc and Advisory Committees: Approximately nine ad hoc or advisory committees were used to delve more deeply into policy options and to provide recommendations to the planning committee. The committees always included long range planning committee members and at times included citizens or professionals not directly involved in the planning process. Five broad goal statements for the plan formed the basis for five ad hoc committees.
4. Summer Sessions: Three summer session open houses were held in August 1997. Issue stations based on the five broad goal statements were used to inform the public on the plan's progress and to solicit input on how to achieve each goal. Professional staff and committee members staffed each station over a two hour period at two different sites in the County for drop in visitors, although brief introductory remarks were provided by the Community Resource Development Agent on the community survey results.
5. Presentations: The staff and committee members made a number of presentations on the planning process and solicited input during the planning process. Groups targeted for the presentations included the full County Board, the County Towns Unit Association, Village Boards, Chambers of Commerce, the Burnett County Lakes and Rivers Association, Rotary Clubs and some out of county groups.
6. Public Meetings: Regular monthly public meetings were held by the Committee over the two year planning period. Presentations, working discussions, budget

details and visitor comments were accepted at these meetings. While clearly necessary and forming the bulk of the Committee members' time in the planning process, these meetings are not easily accessible to citizens.

7. Newspaper Articles and Newsletter: These two clearly provide for one way communication, but are critical to getting clear messages to the community. The press covered many of the monthly meetings and attended and covered many of the public input sessions. Over the two years, 53 news articles have appeared in the local papers. One of the local papers also served as the publisher for the Newsletter. Three newsletters were printed and distributed to the 11, 022 seasonal and year round households.
8. Web Site: The County web site has a set of pages dedicated to the long range planning process ([www.mwd.com/burnett](http://www.mwd.com/burnett)). The pages basically repeat the information being collected and sent to the media. The reports and input sessions are all included on the site. A feedback section is a valuable part of the site. The overall county web site receives 1, 500 hits per month and the planning pages are some of the most heavily used according to the Website Administrator.

## **II. Program Development**

The UWEX Center for Community Economic Development Staff paper 93.1, A Summary of Citizen Participation Methods for the Waterfront Development Project in Oconto, Wisconsin, provided this agent the best source of information on the variety of public input or citizen participation techniques available. The “how to” part of carrying out public input was especially useful. However, the information provided was brief. The authors point out, “Care has to be taken in choosing the appropriate method,” (Silveira et al, p. 10). Some methods may produce needless conflict, not provide useful information, but be costly or inefficient. Because of these possibilities and the complaints noted by Heberlein, it is important to use a framework for deciding which methods to use.

Three methods are used here to analyze Burnett County's land use planning public input methods. The first two models are based on work done by University of Wisconsin/Extension researchers and specialists while the third was developed by the author.

### 1) *Criteria for Selecting Appropriate Input Gathering Techniques* – Moyer and Tiffany

In their 1980 publication Moyer and Tiffany briefly list up to 50 different input methods. Deciding which method to use is daunting. Four criterion are suggested to analyze participation methods and to decide upon their appropriateness in a specific setting.

**Criterion One:** How well does the technique fit with the step of the decision making process on which you are working? For example, a public meeting might be inappropriate as an initial step and a survey at the end of a planning process could be out of order.

**Criterion Two:** How well does the technique serve the functions of citizen participation? Moyer and Tiffany described the functions as information giving and receiving, providing interaction and providing for the maintenance of the political system. At the summer sessions, one goal was to share the community survey results – the committee had information to give. On the other hand, they wanted to receive feedback on the goal statements and on how to achieve them.

**Criterion Three:** How representative of the general public will the results be when the technique is used? While some aspects of each component may help fulfill the need to interact, they may not result in a representative statement from the community on an issue.

**Criterion Four:** What are the costs in dollars and time? Staff time to complete some of the major public input sessions was quite high. The high quality maps used, for example, at the Burnett County Summer Sessions were quite time consuming to produce. They were very useful to the public in getting a visual sense of Burnett County, but staff time was high.

## 2) *Forms and Functions of Public Contact* – Huberlein

Heberlein points out that before a manager (or Community Resource Development Agent) begins a public involvement process, “it is important to specify why the public is being involved and what is desired from such involvement,” (Heberlein, p.15). Going to the public with an inappropriate method can be very counterproductive and undesirable. He points to four general functions of public involvement:

- 1. Giving and Getting Information:** These are two separate functions. Decide which it is you need and plan your process accordingly.
- 2. Interaction with the Public:** This provides the public and the planning group a chance to work on the project or process together. Both groups ask questions and respond to each other. While there may be information exchange, the primary goal is working together.
- 3. Assuring the Public:** Here the primary goal is to make sure a group knows that its views have been heard and that it is not being ignored in the planning process. In fact, the agency may be able to fairly accurately summarize the group’s opinions beforehand, but assuring them is equally important. At the Burnett County regular monthly meetings, for example, time was always spent reading letters that were received and asking guests if they had comments.
- 4. Ritualism:** This is like Moyer and Tiffany’s system maintenance comments. Legal requirements and social norms may require “official” public meetings, even though their value in decision making and discussion are not usually high.

The relationship between form and function is very important. “A good public involvement process will utilize a mix of techniques which assure that all of the functions are fulfilled with a representative cross-section of the affect publics,” (Ibid, p.18).

Table 1 summarizes 14 different input methods along with the role they play in fulfilling the four functions outlined by Heberlein.

<b>Table 1 – Forms and Functions of Public Contact</b>						
Form of Public Involvement	Function of Public Involvement					Representativeness
	Informational		Interactive Assurance Ritualistic			
	To Give	To Get				
Open Public Meetings	Good	Poor	Poor	Fair	Yes	Poor
Workshops (Small)	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Yes	Potentially Good
Presentations to Groups	Good	Fair	Fair	Fair	Yes	No clear Assurance
Ad Hoc Committees	Good	Good	Excellent	Excellent	Yes	Potentially Good
Advisory Groups	Good	Good	Excellent	Excellent	Yes	Potentially Good
Key Contacts	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	No	Potentially Good
Analysis of Incoming Mail	Poor	Good	Poor	Poor	Yes	Poor
Direct Mail from Agency to Public	Excellent	Poor	Fair	Good	No	Potentially Good
Questionnaires And Surveys	Poor	Excellent	Poor	Fair	Yes	Potentially Good
Behavioral Observation	Poor	Excellent	Poor	Poor	No	Potentially Good
Reports from Key Staff	Poor	Good	Poor	Poor	No	No Clear Assurance
News Releases and Mass Media	Good	Poor	Poor	Poor	Yes	Poor
Analysis of Mass Media	Poor	Fair	Poor	Poor	Yes	Poor
Day-to-Day Public Contacts	Good	Good	Excellent	Fair	No	Poor

### 3) *Considerations of Citizen Involvement*

One important way that both the Moyer and Tiffany model and the Heberlein model are lacking is their exclusion of the role of the citizen as a leader or director in the public involvement process. Neither model speaks directly to long range planning by a municipality or a county. Rather, it is assumed that the managers of the citizen involvement process are professionals engaged in planning processes.

In Burnett County's case, and this author suspects in others, the citizen – politician is directing the planning process. This is mostly true for small cities and communities. There are benefits in having citizens involved, along with professionals, particularly in land use planning. In Burnett County's case, there was a constant battle to make the plan the creature or product of the Long Range Planning Committee and not of the Northwest Regional Planning Commission or County staff.

In this framework, the principal planning methods are judged for their ability to work well within a model of citizen leadership in the land use planning process. Specifically, the eight input methods were analyzed or the ease in which citizen leaders can engage in the process and the benefit gained from citizen involvement.

### **III. Results and Findings**

Results are presented from the analysis of the three models outlined in Section II. Table 2 evaluates Burnett County's eight principal public input methods against the four criteria suggested by Moyer and Tiffany. Table 3 presents the findings from an analysis of Heberlein's Forms and Functions of Public Contact. Finally, Table 4 presents the results of the analysis of the eight principal input methods with respect to citizens as leaders of the planning process.

#### *Moyer and Tiffany Model*

Using Moyer and Tiffany's model, four criteria highlight the strengths and weaknesses of each method. With the Focus Groups, one concern was that "self-selection" probably occurred. Consequently, certain types attended, while less interested people's opinions were not heard. It was highly interactive, though. At the other end of the spectrum, every single property owner and renter in the County had the opportunity to respond to the community survey. While the overall results were in line with the concerns raised at the focus groups there was considerably more divergence of opinions expressed through the surveys. The census approach used in the surveys was also quite costly per response. Survey costs for reaching the list of 11,022 households were approximately \$11,000. Since 22 percent or 2,500 households equates to \$4.40 per completed survey.

**Table 2 – CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION METHODS**  
(Moyer and Tiffany Model)

BURNETT COUNTY INPUT METHODS	CRITERION I Fit and Timing In Process	CRITERION II Citizen Participation Function	CRITERION III Representative Of General Public	CRITERION IV Costs in Dollars And Time
1. Focus Groups	Used early, when most appropriate	Valuable in receiving and interacting, but not at providing information	Not very representative in Burnett County case due to self selection	Some staff and committee time needed. Inexpensive way to get information
2. Community Survey	Used early, when needed	Only valuable for getting information, but it did raise questions	In theory, the most representative. Census approach may have slanted results	Census approach and even random sample approach costly
3. Ad hoc and Advisory Committee	At times done too early in the planning process when not enough information was available	Interaction good, but limited. System maintenance helped some	More Citizen participation would have helped	Inexpensive
4. Summer Sessions	Conducted at time when some information available and feedback needed	Valuable for giving, receiving, interacting and system maintenance	A bit self selected, but the ease of the format brought more people out	Costly in terms of staff and committee time and “props”
5. Presentations	Conducted throughout, as needed	Most valuable for giving information and some interaction in small groups	Good members, but not selected groups	Inexpensive way to provide information
6. Public Meetings	Conducted throughout as needed	Most valuable as system maintenance and somewhat for giving information	Only representative for public members and small number of guests	Not very costly
7. Newspapers and Newsletters	Utilized throughout the process	Most valuable for giving information and somewhat for system maintenance	All receive it but, is it read or understood?	Costly in terms of newsletters
8. Website	Utilized throughout the process	Valuable for giving, receiving and system maintenance	A narrow niche of community is on line	Not very costly

Use of committees was helpful in fulfilling the system maintenance aspect of the citizen participation function. Not only were the meetings public, but most initiatives that ended up in the final plan emerged at these meetings. Because of the high amount of commitment needed, however, the third criterion, representative of general public, was lacking. It was an inexpensive process, and good quality information and concepts were developed.

The summer session open houses met the goals of all four criterion quite well. The timing was right, because there was information to share. The framework also allowed interaction between committee members, professional staff and citizens. One downside was the cost as measured in staff hours and “props.” Group presentations also met the test for all four criterion. The timing was right and they were conducted throughout. The meeting formats generally allowed time and space for a lot of input. One potential concern was that the participants came from organizations. So, for those that do not belong to a local organization, this method was not a viable outlet.

Public meetings were held throughout the planning process. These met three of the four criterion – they were timely, provided good “system maintenance,” and were not very costly. However, it was a weak method to get average citizens’ concerns heard. Newspapers and newsletters were perhaps the best in meeting the criteria of providing accurate information and system maintenance under Criterion Two, but there was no representation, it was one way communication.

Finally, the web site was valuable in giving and receiving information and a relatively inexpensive method. However, it probably did not meet the test of Criterion Three because a narrow niche of the community accesses to the internet.

### *Heberlein Model*

Heberlein’s model is valuable for two reasons. First, it points out that each form of contact is valuable in different ways. For example, focus groups were excellent in getting information, whereas public meetings were good at giving information. Second, it provides a checklist or matrix to determine if the most critical functions of public contact are being met through the planned methods. This author would recommend using this matrix when designing a public input process.

Focus groups were quite valuable in meeting the need to get information and by being interactive. But, it was not the best way to deliver information or to assure people their input would be acted upon. Nor was it representative. Community surveys met the functional test of getting information and does fulfill the ritualistic function because, in today’s society, most people expect to be formally asked through a land use type survey to express their opinion.

Committees are the best suited for the interactive and assurance functions. The summer sessions were also excellent vehicles to gather information and for providing interactive opportunities. Heberlein’s model points out the value of presentations overall, but this author judges them not to be the best. Once again, official public meetings meet one important test, like in Moyer and Tiffany’s model – they are ritualistic.

**Table 3 – Forms and Functions of Public Contact**

*(Heberlein’s Model)*

BURNETT COUNTY INPUT METHODS	Function of Public Involvement					Representatives
	Informational		Interactive Assurance Ritualistic			
	To Give	To Get				
1. Focus Groups	No	Yes	Valuable	Not really	Not really	Not really
2. Community Surveys	Poor	Excellent	Poor	Somewhat in the case	Yes	Potentially ok. In this case, a bit slanted
3. Ad hoc and Advisory Committees	Good	Good	Excellent	Excellent	Not exactly	Potentially, but in this case could have been better
4. Summer Sessions	Some what	Excellent	Excellent	Good	Not really	Not great
5. Presentations	Good	Good	Fair	Fair	Yes	Within groups, yes
6. Public Meetings	Good	Poor	Poor	Fair	Yes	Not clear, but legally it does
7. Newspapers and Newsletters	Excellent	Poor	Poor	Excellent	Somewhat	Poor
8. Website	Excellent	Acceptable	Good	Excellent	Not really	Poor, but good for specific group

Newspapers and newsletters are excellent at meeting the giving of information function, but are obviously quite weak at receiving information. Nor are newsletters or newspapers strong at reaching a broad representation of the community. In spite of the mass mailing techniques, many who receive the information will not use it. Finally, the website is excellent at fulfilling the giving of information and assurance functions for public involvement, but it is not very representative.

Each public input method has its strengths and weaknesses. By gauging its form of contact against the functions, a complete public input design process can be prepared. This is the strength of Heberlein’s Model.

**Table 4-CITIZEN AS LEADER MODEL**

*(Preissing's Model)*

BURNETTCOUNTY INPUT METHODS	Analysis of Citizen in Process as Leader	
	Ease In Involving Citizen/Leaders	Benefit of Citizen Involvement
1. Focus Groups	Moderately, with training	Fairly high
2. Community Surveys	Moderately easy	At beginning with questions
3. Ad hoc and Advisory Committees	Easy	High, but most work with knowledge gaps
4. Summer Sessions	Required training	High degree of benefit
5. Presentations	Requires coaching, substantive role problematic	Fairly high, if used
6. Public Meetings	Running meeting is public official's responsibility	A requirement
7. Newspapers and Newsletters	Difficult, if themes are complex	Key members are needed and loose cannons are not
8. Website	Very difficult	Not much except for keeping in touch

*Citizen as Leader Model*

The final method of analysis offered in this paper is input models and roles of citizens. This gap in the other two models is an important one that needs to be filled according to this author. Considerable amount of training and information was needed by most of the citizen members of the Burnett County Long Range Planning Committee. This can add costs to the process and may make it difficult to assure an even-handed approach with other citizens at the session.

For example, the focus groups were difficult at first, because members of the newly formed long range planning committee wanted to engage and defend aspects of the planning process when their job was to facilitate or record. Also, just as the citizens had complaints or concerns, the committee members did too. When a member left for a

month to winter in the south, it was difficult to re-engage him – participation was erratic for him, thus producing gaps in knowledge within the committee.

Two areas where it was difficult to involve committee members were in the newspapers and newsletters and with the website. When planning themes were complex it was often difficult for a committee member to explain the concept briefly to the press. A couple of times a committee member spoke as a “loose cannon.” The website’s technical nature made it quite difficult to engage the committee members fully.

Perhaps the roles that were of greatest benefit to the planning process were the ones that required the greatest amount of preparation. The summer sessions and presentations were beneficial to the planning process, in terms of receiving information and validating the public input process.

#### **IV. Implications to CES/UWEX**

Throughout the state agents are playing educational and facilitation roles for county and municipal planning efforts. A reference for tools and their applicability can be useful for these planning roles. Based on the analysis of Burnett County’s methods used for citizen input, a number of recommendations can be made:

- It is very valuable to involve citizens in the process as directors or supervisors of the planning process;
- An adequate budget should be made available to carry out the citizenship involvement components of the plan;
- A website is a valuable way to reach new citizens, but it comes slanted with the demographics of computer users;
- Interactive sessions are the best – focus groups and the summer sessions could work well elsewhere;
- Extension Agents, planners, and local officials have a valuable role to play as educators and facilitators in the planning process;
- The main input methods should be planned in advance and be available to the public for their information;
- Summary reports are better than full reports; and
- There is undoubtedly a follow up educational role to play once the plan has been approved.

Burnett County utilized a number of citizen input methods in the development of their long range planning process. Using models like Moyer and Tiffany’s or Heberlein’s can be a useful way for planners and local officials to decide on their recommended methods for citizen involvement. These models can also point the way toward the designing of different participation methods.

When the author initiated the planning process with the Burnett County Board there appeared to be a dearth in materials on step-by-step approaches to planning processes and evaluations of public input methods. This paper attempts to contribute to filling this gap. More input from agents’ experiences to state planning specialists will add to this contribution and hopefully provide future planning efforts with more tools.

BURNETT COUNTY PROJECT SCHEDULE	Apr May Jun	Jul Aug Sept	Oct Nov Dec	Jan Feb Mar	Apr May Jun	Jul Aug Sep	Oct Nov Dec	Jan Feb Mar
	1 <sup>st</sup> Quarter	2nd Quarter	3rd Quarter	4th Quarter	5th Quarter	6th Quarter	7th Quarter	8th Quarter
	PHASE 1. ORIENTATION	■						
Task 1.1 Initial Meeting with Staff and Committee								
PHASE 2. BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS								
Task 2.1 Base Mapping	■	■	■	■				
Task 2.2 Land Use Inventory and Analysis								
Task 2.3 Population/Housing Analysis		■	■	■				
Task 2.4 Lakes Classification			■	■				
Task 2.5 Natural Resource Analysis			■	■				
Task 2.6 Transportation Facilities Analysis			■	■				
Task 2.7 Community Facilities Analysis			■	■				
Task 2.8 Historic/Cultural Resources Analysis			■	■				
Task 2.9 Composite Background Report				■				
PHASE 3. ISSUE DEVELOPMENT								
Task 3.1 Issue Statement	■	■	■	■				
Task 3.2 Consensus Development	■	■	■	■				
Task 3.3 Draft Goal Statements		■	■	■				
Task 3.4 Local Meetings				■				
PHASE 4. TRENDS ANALYSIS								
Task 4.1 Continuing Trends Scenario			■	■	■			
Task 4.2 Accelerated Trends Scenario			■	■	■			
Task 4.3 Constrained Trends Scenario			■	■	■			
Task 4.4 Preferred Scenario					■			
Task 4.5 Existing Ordinance Review				■	■			
Task 4.6 Goals, Objectives and Policies for Preferred Scenario					■	■		
Task 4.7 Local Meetings						■		
PHASE 5. PLAN DEVELOPMENT								
Task 5.1 Draft Comprehensive Plan					■	■	■	
Task 5.2 Draft Executive Summary						■	■	
Task 5.3 Draft Implementation Strategy						■	■	
Task 5.4 Information Meetings							■	■
Task 5.5 Public Hearings								■
Task 5.6 Refine Comprehensive Plan								■
Task 5.7 Draft Ordinance changes							■	■
Task 5.8 Draft Other Implements							■	■
Task 5.9 County Board Presentation/s								■

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