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Official Publication of the New Jersey State League of Municipalities



“Local officials are where the rubber meets the road. We know the problems, the priorities and how to get things done. The ability to make a difference in an important and immediate way exists more here than at any other level of government.”

**Paul H.
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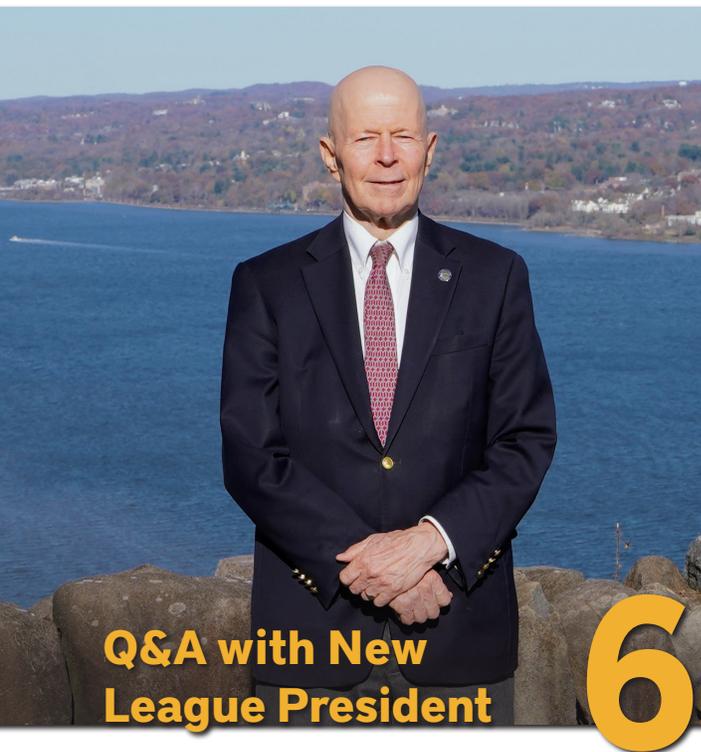
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Start the year off right by attending the League's annual Orientation seminars.



New Starts, Fresh Opportunities

Happy New Year to all! We are looking forward to working together this year toward new and ongoing goals. This leadership issue reflects on thoughts shared by our new President, Mayor Paul Tomasko from Alpine, as well as state leaders including Governor Phil Murphy, NJ Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Shawn LaTourette, and NJ Department of Community Affairs Commissioner Jacquelyn Suárez.

President Tomasko has observed that local governments can make a difference in an important and immediate way for residents (See Q&A page 6). This year his aims include pushing for a more sensible approach to the creation of affordable housing with realistic numbers, the elimination or further reduction of OPRA use by commercial data mining interests, the full refund of Energy Tax Receipts, reduction of State Health Benefits Plan increases to the rate of inflation, and the maintenance of Title 59 protections for municipalities. Working together, local governments can achieve important goals.

The Governor (see article page 16) noted his administration's commitment to fiscal responsibility and efforts to strengthen New Jersey's economic competitiveness by updating the State Plan for the first time since 2001. We hope to work together collaboratively with the State Planning Commission to ensure that the plan recognizes the ongoing needs of local governments.

Commissioner Suárez from the Department of Community Affairs reflected on the department's participation in many sessions at the Annual Conference and noted the continued commitment on the League and DCA's parts to promote the job pipeline through the Pathways to Public Service: A Career Connection Fair and other events to come (see article page 20). She also lauded open communications with local governments regarding affordable housing numbers and shared services.

NJ Department of Environmental Protection Commissioner Shawn LaTourette looked to the tightrope of building resilience as the state promotes growth. As towns all over the state face the impacts of weather events and the real-world impacts of climate change, it's critical to address the issues that can be managed. LaTourette mentioned the Resilient Environments and Landscapes (REAL) rules and updated flood standards to make existing assets and infrastructure more resilient to the increasing risks fueled by our changing climate (see article page 24).

Start the year off right by attending the League's annual Orientation seminars. Municipal officials who are newly elected, reelected, or experienced can benefit from the fast-paced event designed to quickly bring officials up-to-date on important municipal issues. These seminars will be held in Mt. Laurel on January 25 and on February 1 in East Rutherford. Visit www.njlm.org/seminars for more information. 

Michael Cerra

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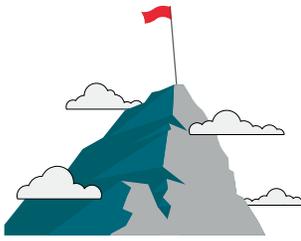
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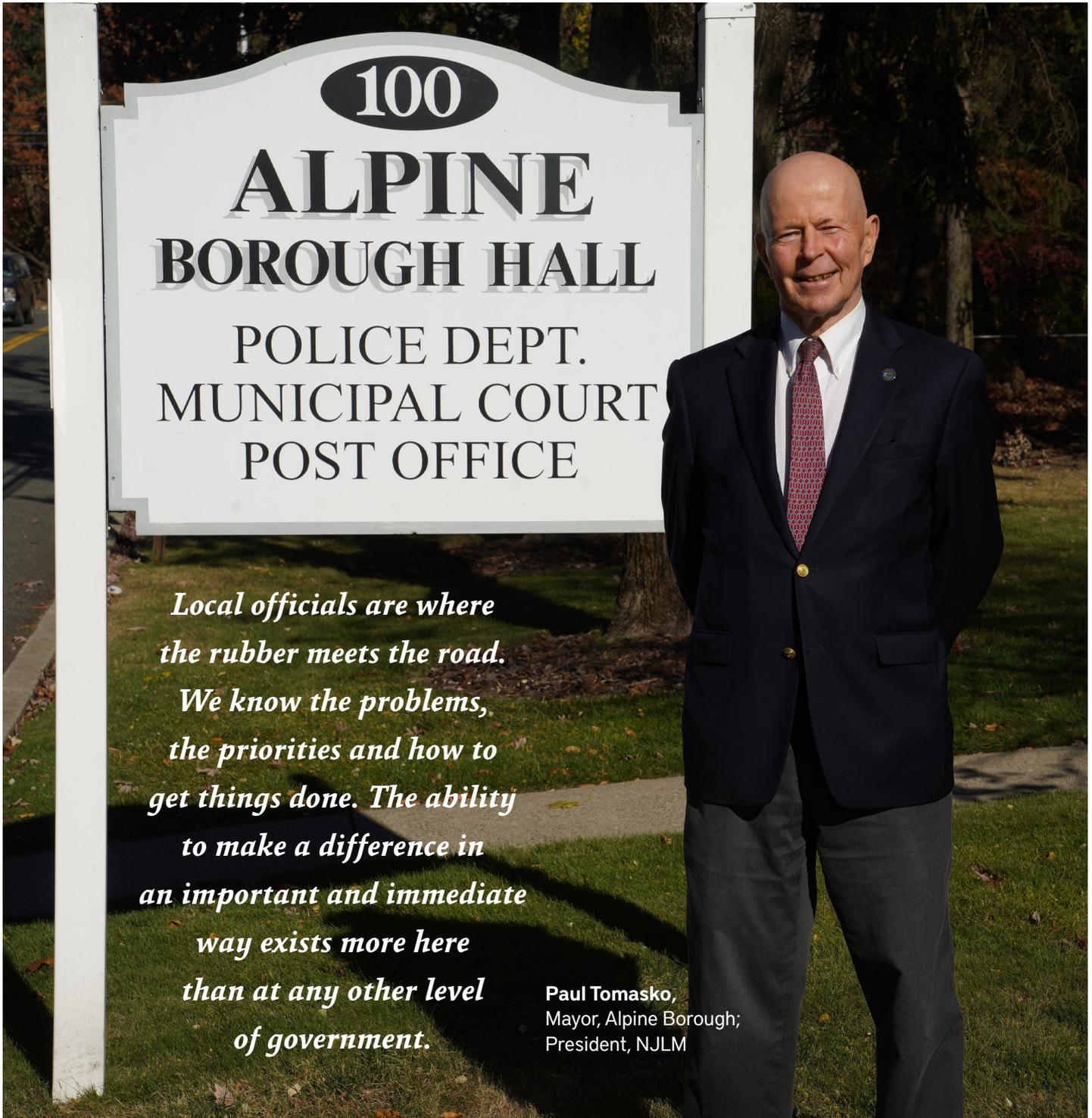
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Making a Difference in Important & Immediate Ways



Local officials are where the rubber meets the road. We know the problems, the priorities and how to get things done. The ability to make a difference in an important and immediate way exists more here than at any other level of government.

Paul Tomasko,
Mayor, Alpine Borough;
President, NJLM



Q *What led you to get involved in local government?*

A desire to give back to my town and to be a part of something larger than myself. When asked, that brought me to my town's Environmental Commission. I ran for Council for the same reason, was elected, learned how the system worked, and developed a desire to make things better. Specifically, I thought taxes and development needed to be better controlled in part by addressing rather than stonewalling our state's affordable housing rules such as they existed in the 90s, which is why I ran for and was elected Mayor in November 1998.

Q *What are the greatest strengths of local government in New Jersey?*

Local officials are where the rubber meets the road. We know the problems, the priorities and how to get things done. We also get to know personally a high percentage of our town's residents and in most instances are the only elected officials with whom residents interface. The ability to make a difference in an important and immediate way exists more here than at any other level of government.



Q *What do citizens expect from their municipal officials and how has that changed over the years?*

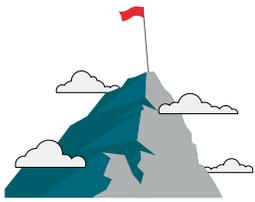
Access, responsiveness, a good faith effort to address their needs, solve their problems, attend to their security, keep costs down, defend the zoning, and represent their needs to other levels of government including the utility companies.

The digital world in which we've come to live has amped up expectations for information, transparency, and results. It has also introduced privacy and cybersecurity concerns.

Q *What are your goals as League President?*

The League is essentially an information sharing and advocacy organization to help towns do a better job of self-government and to represent their interests to state legislators. The Annual Conference in Atlantic City and the League Legislative Committee are major aspects of the League, and I strongly encourage everyone who reads this to participate in both.

There are several specific objectives/challenges worthy of intense League focus, the first and foremost of which is a more sensible approach to the creation of Affordable Housing.



Over reliance on the Builders Remedy as the main driver of affordable housing has created far more sprawl than affordable housing units and reduced the quality of life for all in many parts of this state. Fourth Round numbers need to be realistic (as proposed by the Institute for Local Government Attorneys) rather than stratospheric. Also, the disproportionate influence over the Affordable Housing (AH) process by an unelected outside advocacy group needs to be addressed.

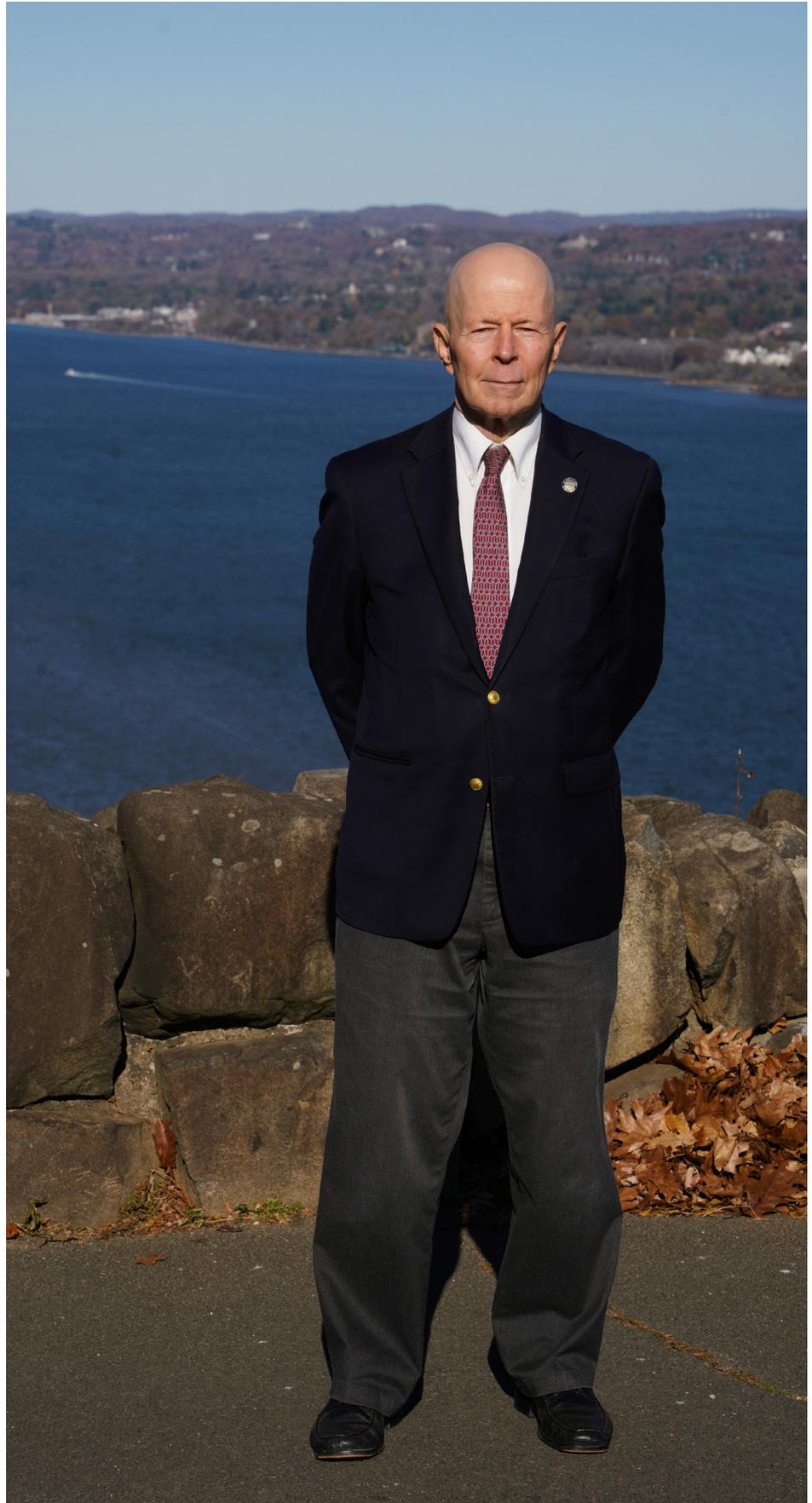
OPRA use by commercial and data mining interests needs to be eliminated or at least further reduced.

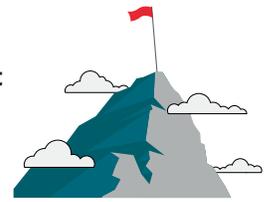
Energy Tax Receipts need to be fully refunded. State Health Benefits Plan increases need to be brought down to the rate of inflation. Title 59 protections for municipalities need to be maintained rather than continually eroded.

Q *What advice would you give to someone just elected to local office for the first time?*

First and most obvious, attend the League's Newly Elected Officials seminar given in January/February both in the north and south of the state.

Before then, thank the electorate for trusting you with their votes and committing to being there for everyone. Remind residents how to reach you and that you're happy to hear from them. Listen attentively, especially to residents, but also to your colleagues on the governing body and to the borough's employees





and professionals. Be humble and grateful. Keep your mouth shut and head down for the first year, or at least until you learn how the system (i.e., the public sector) functions. It's fine to say I'll check it out and get back to you.

Q *How would you describe your leadership style?*

Proactive, collaborative, pragmatic, respectful, and grateful. Giving rather than taking credit and accepting responsibility when something goes wrong builds an organization and makes for long-term success.

Q *What motivates you as a leader?*

Getting things done efficiently, keeping people working together, resting assured that my town is in the hands of people who are ethical and who are there for what they can give rather than take.

Q *How can local governments build better resilience in their operations and community?*

Mutual Aid Agreements are one way, cultivating good relations with County, State, and utility officials is another. Keeping up with and awareness of your town's Emergency

Management Plan is also important, as is taking the periodic reviews of your Master Plan seriously. Not indulging in short-term budget fixes which deplete the surplus at the

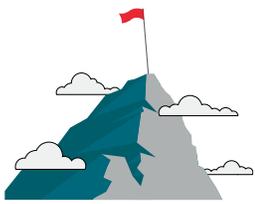
expense of future years is also important, as are hires, promotions, and appointments based on the merits rather than on connections, favoritism or politics.



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Mayor Tomasko sworn in by Senator Gordon M. Johnson.

Acceptance Remarks

The following are the remarks made by Mayor Paul Tomasko upon his election to League President at the November 21 League Business Meeting in Atlantic City.

Good afternoon and it's a pleasure to stand before you as the next President of the New Jersey League of Municipalities. I'd like to thank, in particular, the people who have hung back or come here, as was the case of Senator Johnson to be a part of this. Our Borough clerk Stephanie Wehmann, the best borough clerk we've ever had, our CFO Judith Curran, and my other friends here who came or stayed in for this purpose.

For those of you that don't know me, this is my 26th year as mayor of Alpine, prior to which I was on the Alpine Council for six years. I'm also on the planning board and have been on the environmental commission in my town.

Beyond Alpine, I'm a commissioner of the Palisades Interstate Park, Chairman of the MEL-JIF Board, which is the Municipal Excess Liabilities Joint Insurance Fund. They are the ones that handle the big claims statewide.

And for 10 years I have served on the League's Executive Board and on the League's Legislative Committee, which I believe, by the way, is a prerequisite for getting considered to join the Executive Board. It's great to be starting my term as League President at the conclusion of a conference where we exceeded all previous parameters. From attendees and exhibitors to programming, both educational as well as new sessions for collaboration.

I'll take a moment to acknowledge the new programs at this year's conference.

A municipal job fair where we partnered with colleges and universities throughout New Jersey, the DCA, and our affiliate groups so college students can learn from experts to see what career pathways in local government look like and how rewarding they can be.

Roundtables so Mayors and local elected officials can collaborate and discuss best practices about the issues facing our communities.

Free digital headshots—hope you all took advantage of this one for our elected officials and some others as well.

And lastly, because the next year is an important year for us, we heard from many of the declared candidates for governor. It was just this morning that we heard from six of the so-far 10 candidates. Of course, that's on top of the dozens of sessions over three days at the convention center and throughout Atlantic City.

This success would not be possible without the tireless work of League staff, Bill (Mayor Chegwidgen) has already acknowledged their efforts. I would like to do it again for emphasis. It's an unbelievable staff that pulls off this fantastic conference. From Mike and Lori to the conference team, the legislative team, bookkeeping, and everyone else, we are awed and thank you for this incredible effort. We are and you should be proud.

Bill, my buddy, mayor, and past president now, I thank you for your leadership and friendship. Let's recognize the outstanding job you've done during your term as president. The new conference programming I just referenced. OPRA reform-talk about accomplishing something major. We've been pressing for many years in this regard, and finally got some movement. Representing us multiple times in DC, Bill traveled there on his own time to do that. And modifications to the new affordable housing law. While we didn't achieve what we wanted with that legislation, the fourth round could have been much, much worse without Bill's constant engagement and coordination with Mayors in this room and around the state. Thank you, Bill.

As municipal officials, we continue to grapple with seemingly endless effects of ideas from Trenton that affect local communities. We need to continue to make our collective voices a strong force for better policies in Trenton and Washington. To convey our priorities to our state legislators, the governor, our members of Congress, and the federal administration, I will seek your advice counsel and suggestions. And I need you involved with us to make that happen. It's truly an honor to serve as the president of this wonderful organization.

And to the members of the League's Executive Committee, thank you for giving so freely of your limited time to participate in this organization, many of you are here today.

Working together, we are stronger, and the state is better for it. On to 2025, which by the way, is this organization's 110th anniversary year. Thank you! 🦄

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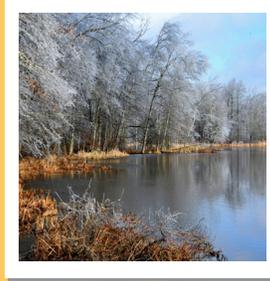
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