Fixing Allegheny County's Property Assessment System: Part III
About Talking with One's Feet, The Last Reassessment, and
Some Ideas About How to Make Cyclical ReassessmentWork

Invited Remarks before the August 12, 2026 Public Hearing
of the Allegheny County Committee on Assessments

Community College of Allegheny Coouty
Main Campus Auditorium,
808 Ridge Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15212. .
5:30PM August 12, 2026

"To do what's right is easy. To know what's right to do is another matter."
---Lyndon Baines Johnson, 36th President of the United States

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Thank you for the opportunity to share my views with you this evening. This is my third presentation to the Committee. My educational, employment, public service credentials and selected publications on matters of state and local finance, with special reference to property assessment, are contained in the appendix to these written remarks. Included are hyper links to my web site for those interested in exploring such matters more completely.

In my earlier remarks I stated my general endorsement of the proposed cyclical legislation but observed that it was aspirational rather than operational and would benefit from amendments:

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[1]The views in this document are solely those of the author and do not represent the views of the Heinz College, Carnegie Mellon University, or its Board of Trustees.

(1) to properly fund Allegheny County's Office of Property Assessments, and by indirection the now independent Appeals part of real property assessment, and

(2) to expand the detail of the proposed ordinance to include accountability measures. In particular I suggested that the Director of Property Assessments and senior managers be privately bonded.

I also observed that, given the fact that Council does not enjoy the protection of director's insurance, that enactment of legislation that fails to accomplish its legislative objectives runs the risk of litigation and personal liability. Standing for anybody to do so can be accomplished, by, for example, simply buying a piece of real property for $100 from the City of Pittsburgh Land Bank.

This evening I would like to elaborate in the limited time available about several related matters that I hope you take seriously. Some may call these "old school"; I think a less pejorative description might be "serious" or "meaningful".

1.0 People Talk with their Feet. My first point entails what stakeholders do if they conclude that the value proposition between what they pay with their taxes, doesn't compare favorably with what they are getting in the way of services—that is, they talk with their feet. Resident population, and the growth or decline in population, are good indicators about what people do over time when facing economic incentives. It reflects both the public sector bargain we make, as well as the private sector bargain we make in terms of working and getting paid for working , as well as running a business, and earning profits.

People, families, businesses and their capital ultimately talk with their feet. Focusing on Allegheny and Butler Counties, we find that Allegheny County's population peaked at 1.6 million in 1969, and fell to its low of 1.2 million in 2019. The Census Bureau estimates that the county you represent in 2025 is 80.8% of what it was in 1950.

That's a **B-** in my world. Butler by contrast is twice the size today compared to 1950. Appendix II shows the year by year results. **That's an A+** in my world. I live in Westmoreland County by the way.

Table 1 : Summary County Population Levels in SW Pennsylvania[2]

Year	Allegheny	Beaver	Butler	Indiana	Washington	Westmoreland
1950	1,515,237	175,192	97,320	77,106	209,628	313,179
2025	1,225,035	166,032	200,169	82,878	210,802	349,324
Max Population	1,628,587	210,000	200,169	92,852	220,400	392,600
Mini Population	1,215,716	163,956	97,320	75,366	202,955	313,179
P2025/P 1950	80.8%	94.8%	205.7%	107.5%	100.6%	111.5%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, *Census of Population* (1950 and 1960 county population counts); U.S. Census Bureau, *Annual Estimates of the Population for Counties*, resident population, annual July 1 estimates, 1970–2025, as distributed by the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, FRED. Accessed August 11, 2026.

[2] For year by year results, see Appendix II of this document.

As I said in my Part II remarks July 1, 2026 to you, if the reassessment gets botched by Council and/or a judge, and/or by the Office of Property Assessments, there are going to be repercussions. If you don't think the world, let alone the voting public in Allegheny County, is paying close attention to what you wind up doing or not doing, you're engaging in something between wishful or delusional thinking. And I might add that the cowardice behavior of Allegheny County's Court of Common Pleas has already been noticed around the country. .

2.0 The Past Shift in Tax Burden as Political Prologue?

Throughout the history of the real property tax around the world, the United States, and Pennsylvania's counties + Philadelphia, there is the political narrative that he/she who is responsible for voting to reassess will suffer the wrath of property owners and renters [whose rents will go up if property taxes go up], and get thrown out of office. So what were the facts last time there was a [court-ordered] reassessment by an Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas judge [Wettich] in terms of the shift in tax burden?

You can find the answer to this question in great detail at www.propertytaxestimator.net which I constructed in 2013 with the financial backing (about $36,000) of the RKMellon and PNC foundations[3], and the hard work of some Heinz masters students. It reported the burden shift---which I do NOT think had much to do with Jim Roddey's returning against his will to private life.

My second point this evening is, that for the county imposed real property tax, the changes in residential burdens were not from an objective political perspective dangerous but actually politically advantageous.

Let's look at **Table 2** which summarizes the before and after results of the last reassessment using the actual certified assessment data files from the Office of Property Assessments.

Table 2 shows that 34% of county real estate taxpayers experienced a 1% or more ***increase*** in their county taxes, while about 64% experienced a 1% or more ***decrease*** in their county taxes. About 2% had a change of +- 1%. Results somewhat less dramatic/encouraging by school district and municipality are on the web site.

I have always argued that accomplishing improved equity through periodic reappraisal represents "virtue as its own reward." I simply ask you, what candidate for elected office would find a tax reform leading to 64% winners and 34% losers ***NOT*** worthy of support?

[3]Since external financial support for it ended in 2013, I have kept it alive via my personal subscription to pair.com which is a Pittsburgh ISP. I've heard it said that the realtors in SW Pennsylvania continue to its free use because we created a mechanism for anybody to compare any property [and its assessments] to any other by specifying things like land and living area size.

Table 2: Actual % Change in Allegheny County Residential Property Tax Burden 2013 vs 2012.

(Before and After Court-ordered Reassessment)

% Change in County Tax: 2013 vs 2012 (Residential)	Frequency	Percent	Losers/ Winners	Cumulative Frequency
Over 50% increase	56,698	11.3%	11.3%	56,698
50% to 40% increase	9,245	1.8%	13.09%	65,943
40% to 30% increase	12,347	2.5%	15.54%	78,290
30% to 20% increase	19,110	3.8%	19.33%	97,400
20% to 10% increase	30,984	6.1%	25.48%	128,384
10% to 5% increase	21,576	4.3%	29.77%	149,960
5% to 1% increase	21,373	4.2%	34.01%	171,333
± 1% change	12,205	2.4%	null	183,538
1% to 5% decrease	26,928	5.3%	5.3%	210,466
5% to 10% decrease	36,922	7.3%	12.67%	247,388
10% to 20% decrease	75,541	15.0%	27.67%	322,929
20% to 30% decrease	53,981	10.7%	38.38%	376,910
30% to 40% decrease	37,868	7.5%	45.90%	414,778
40% to 50% decrease	26,839	5.3%	51.23%	441,617
Over 50% decrease	62,189	12.3%	63.57%	503,806
Totals	503,806	100.00%		

Source: www.propertytaxestimator.net http://www.propertytaxestimator.net/change.html Table 1A

3.0 Some (but not all) Ways to Get Serious about Cyclical Assessment

As is well known, the International Association of Assessing Officers (IAAO) have well established standards for real property appraisal; they are the gold standard for public and private such undertakings. The basic design problem County Council faces entails how to prevent or forestall administrative and judicial indifference, or worse, in the administration of the property assessment system, and in effect how to insure excellence in the assessment process rather another instance of an accelerating botch job.

If the Chief Assessor and senior managers are required by statute to be privately and independently bonded, and their required compliance with IAAO standards are part of your statute, then any responsible, independent, private bonding agency is obligated to seek restitution and penalty for what would be covenant violation or covenant breach were administrative non-compliance/malfeasance be determined. To be sure, its novel and perhaps unique, but so is the recusal by the entirety of the judges in your Court of Common Pleas. Did anybody wonder why they should continue to get paid?

So what are the major elements of IAAO standards? I replicate their basics below, and comment on whether or not these ingredients are in the proposal or likely to be effective. Please remember this is a partial list of standards and related matters.

3.1. Regular Field Inspections

• Frequency: Standard mass appraisal procedures require every parcel to undergo a physical review/reappraisal at least once every 4 to 6 years.

Comment: silent regarding physical review

• Data Verification: Assessors should visually verify property data against existing property record cards, noting any alterations, new construction, or deterioration.

Comment: silent about data verification, per se

• Alternative Approaches: Between comprehensive physical inspections, jurisdictions can use high-resolution aerial photography, street-view imagery, and digital tools to supplement office reviews.

Comment: silent

3.2. Standardized Data Collection

• Objective Coding: Utilize objective check-off formats, measurements, and counts rather than subjective metrics.

Comment: the proposal obligates OPA not to exceed IAAO standards, rather than obligates OPA to meet or exceed IAAO standards, and is silent about the relationship between OPA sales coding scheme and STEB sales coding scheme. In my perfect world OPA would be required by ordinance to use the STEB sales coding scheme in the first instance.

• Continuous Updates: Data collection shouldn't stop during the cycle. Building permits, Multiple Listing Services (MLS), and property transfers should trigger rolling updates to property characteristics.

Comment: silent about updates or use of external data for updating purposes

3.3. Market Analysis & Mass Appraisal

• Cost Schedules: Construction cost models (fo commercial and industrial real estate) must be validated using recently constructed improvements of known cost and kept current using local cost manuals.

Comment: no direct reference

• Ratio Studies: Conduct annual ratio studies to evaluate the level of assessment and appraisal uniformity. The IAAO recommends the overall level of assessment remain between 90% and 110% of market value, with a Coefficient of Dispersion (COD) indicating strong uniformity.

Comment: obligates OPA not to exceed IAAO standards, rather than obligates to meet or exceed IAAO standards

3.4. Public Outreach & Transparency
• Communication Strategy: Establish strategic communication programs before, during, and after a reassessment.

Comment: silent

• Stakeholder Engagement: Actively identify stakeholder groups, provide clear avenues for answering taxpayer inquiries, and conduct public outreach regarding how property taxes are impacted by changing values.

Comment: silent

5.0 Conclusion

There's a great deal more to say, but by now my 5 minutes are up, and you may not have found the above to be entirely in your comfort zone. In academic parlance, you've got a lot of homework to do, and actually not a lot of time to get it done, which is to get the words right.

Questions?

Appendix 1.1 Educational Background

AB Economics (with Honors and Distinction), Department of Economics, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1966. (Junior Year at London School of Economics).

Phd Economics., University of Wisconsin-Madison; fields in public finance and human resources, 1970.

Appendix 1.2 Employment Background

Assistant Professor of Economics, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 1969-73
Associate Professor of Economics, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 1973-79
Professor of Economics & Public Policy, SUPA/Heinz College, Carnegie Mellon, 1979-.

Visiting Professor of Economics and Public Policy, University of Rochester, 1992-3, 1993-4;
Senior Research Associate, Rochester Center for Economic Research, 1994-.

Visiting Professor of Economics, Spring 2014; Washington University, St. Louis

Appendix 1.3 Selected Public Service

Brookings Economic Policy Fellow, Assistant to the Assistant Secretary for Economic Policy, U.S. Treasury, 1970-1971.
Assistant to the Deputy Secretary, U.S. Treasury, 1971-1972.
Economist, Joint Committee on Taxation, U.S. Congress, 1975-1978.
Director of Research, Pennsylvania Tax Commission, 1979-1981.
Voting Member, Pennsylvania Local Tax Reform Commission, 1987
Member, Advisory Committee, Pennsylvania General Assembly, Joint State Government Commission, Committee on Government Efficiency, 1991-2.

Appendix 1.4 Selected Awards

Presidential Pen, President Richard M. Nixon,1972
Presidential Pen, President Gerald R. Ford, 1976
Exceptional Service Award (Gold Medal), U.S. Treasury, 1972
Steven D. Gold Award, Association for Public Policy and Management, National Conference of State Legislatures, and the National Tax Association, November, 2005
Fellow, National Academy of Public Administration, December, 2015.

Who's Who in the World
Who's Who in America

Appendix 1.5. Selected State and Local Finance Papers

Note: all are available on

www.andrew.cmu.edu/user/rs9f
6. Online: Current Papers, Speeches, & Personal Opinion Pieces in Chronological Order

August 12, 2026,

Fixing Allegheny County's Property Assessment System: Part III
About Talking with Oneâ€™s Feet, The Last Reassessment, and
Some Ideas About How to Make Cyclical ReassessmentWork
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July 29, 2026 **Fixing Allegheny County's Property Assessment System: Part II**
Invited Remarks before the July 29, 2026 Public Hearing of Allegheny County Council's Committee on Assessments
6:00 PM July 29, 2026, Wilkinsburgh Municipal Building, Wilkinsburg, PA 15221 >br>

July 1, 2026 **Fixing Allegheny County's Property Assessment System: A Call for Lasting Reform**
Invited Remarks before the July 1 Public Hearing of Allegheny County Council's Committee on Assessments

August 26, 2021 “Property Taxes Are Going Up: What Can Homeowners do?,”
Interview, Realtors.com
https://www.realtor.com/news/trends/why-property-taxes-are-rising-and-what-homeow

June 2, 2019 “Hundreds of commercial property owners are challenging Philly’s assessments, with $63 million at stake,” Philadelphia Inquirer.
https://www.inquirer.com/news/assessment-commercial-property-lawsuit-uniformity-p

August 10, 2018, Philadelphia Inquirer, “165,000 Philly homeowners may be paying too much in property taxes. Is the city assessing property fairly?”

November 19, 2017, Philadelphia Inquirer, “Property tax likely here to stay in Pa.

Here's why"
http://www.philly.com/philly/news/pennsylvania/property-tax-pennsylvania-amendmen

Strauss, Robert P (2017) . Pennsylvania House of Representatives Select Committee on Tax Modernization and Reform, "Financing Pennsylvania's Public Sector: Past as Prologue?" Prepeared Testimony presented to a Hearing, Ryan State Office Building, Harrisburg, PA, (November 15, 2017,)
https://cmu.box.com/s/sg8afkc3rz9g76ifarje1792rwfwprfx

Strauss, Robert P and Michael J. Suley,
"Pennsylvania is in dire need of assessment reform"
Robert P. Strauss and Michael J. Suley
February 26, 2015
Philadelphia Inquirer

Strauss, Robert P and Bingbing Hou(2013). A Sales Ratio Study of the City of Philadelphia's 2013 Certified and 2014 Proposed Real Estate Assessments:
A Report to the Controller of the City of Philadelphia
https://www.andrew.cmu.edu/user/rs9f/phila_cod.pdf

Strauss, Robert P. and Elaine Wei (2013), "Predicting the Frequency and Depreciation of Real Assessment Quality in Pennsylvania," A Paper Presented at the 105th Annual Research Conference of the National Tax Association November 17, 2013
https://www.andrew.cmu.edu/user/rs9f/rps_ew_nta_2013.pdf

***"Real Estate Re-Re-Re-Re Assessment in Allegheny County: II** December 2, 2005*
Department of Civil nd Environmental Engineering, CMU
Update of November 9, 2005 ISRI Seminar
School of Computer Science
CMU

"KDKA Talk Radio Fred Hornsberger Interview: Assessments"
Pittsburgh, PA
2PM Wednesday October 5, 2005

"Real Estate Re-Re-Assessment in Allegheny County"
A Presentation to the Men's Club
(with a statistical appendix)
Northmont United Presbyterian Church
8169 Perry Highway
Pittsburgh, PA
9AM Tuesday October 4, 2005

["Talk Radio Interview on Allegheny County Assessments"]
Pittsburgh, PA
Sunday, September 17, 2005

["KDKA The Editors: Allegheny County Assessments"]
County Executive Dan Onorato and Professor Robert Straus
April 2, 2005
Requires MP4 Reader such as Apple Quicktime

["Is Assessment 2005 Going to be Reform or Allegheny County's Version of "Ground Hog Day?"]
Prepared Remarks before the Allegheny County Council
Gold Room
Allegheny County Courthouse
March 15, 2005

[Residential Real Estate Assessment Fairness in Four Urban Areas"]
with David A. Strauss,
State Tax Notes, 31, 10 (March 8, 2004), 815-820.
(Reprinted from (forthcoming) Proceedings of the National Tax Association
, 96th Annual Research Conference, Chicago, Illinois).

[Two topics need action before tax is raised Real estate-assessment reform and school board accountability will help schools get fairly funded.]
Philadelphia Enquirer, Sunday 1/12/03
Reprinted in Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, Thursday, January 16, 2003
Harrisburg Patriot-News, Friday, January 17, 2003.

["Restoring the Public Trust in Allegheny County's Real Estate Assessments"]
A Presentation to the League of Women Voters of Greater Pittsburgh
May 15, 2002
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

[Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Which Pennsylvania County has the Fairest Real Estate Assessments of them All? (Hint: Not Allegheny)]
The Voter , Newsletter of the Allegheny League of Women Voters
May, 2002

["Reassessment 2000: Do you feel lucky?"]
Opinion and Commentary, Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, May 28, 2000

["Distributional and Economic Effects of Pennsylvania's Local Property Taxes"]
Testimony before the Pennsylvania Senate Education Committee,
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania,

Room 8EB, Capitol East Wing, 1-5PM
March 22, 2000

"What's Next? CMU prof offers exacting framework for county's future,"
Opinion and Commentary, Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, November 14, 1999, J1, J

Home Rule tax reform? Think again, says CMU prof
Tribune-Review. Commentary. Friday, Sept. 17, 1999. A7.

Strauss, Robert P and Shawn Sullivan (1998),"The Political Economy of the Property Tax: Assessor Authority and Assessment Uniformity," *Proceedings*, *91st Annual Conference on Taxation,* National Tax Association-Tax Institute of America, Austin, Texas (November, 1998), 254-66. (Reprinted in *Tax Notes*, 82, 1 January 4, 1999; and in *State Tax Notes*, 16, 5 (December 21, 1998), 327-338)

https://www.andrew.cmu.edu/user/rs9f/nta982n.pdf

The Assessment of Residential Property in Allegheny County:
Report 2: : Sources of State Variation in Assessment Quality
A Report to the Allegheny Board of County Commissioners, October 15, 1995.

The Assessment of Residential Property in Allegheny County: Report 1: Sources and Quality of Data . A Report to the Allegheny Board of County Commissioners, September 28, 1995.

"The Final Report and Recommendations of the Pennsylvania Local Tax Reform Commission "
October 30, 1987

Final Report of the 1981 Pennsylvania Tax Commission

http://www.andrew.cmu.edu/user/rs9f/final_report_pa_tax_commission_March_1981.pdf

Appendix 2: US Census Bureau Population by SW Pa. County: 1950-2025

Year	Allegheny	Beaver	Butler	Indiana	Washington	Westmoreland
1950	1,515,237	175,192	97,320	77,106	209,628	313,179
1951	1,526,572	178,368	99,052	76,932	210,392	317,124
1952	1,537,907	181,543	100,784	76,758	211,157	321,069
1953	1,549,242	184,719	102,516	76,584	211,921	325,014
1954	1,560,577	187,894	104,248	76,410	212,685	328,959
1955	1,571,912	191,070	105,980	76,236	213,450	332,904
1956	1,583,247	194,246	107,711	76,062	214,214	336,849
1957	1,594,582	197,421	109,443	75,888	214,978	340,794
1958	1,605,917	200,597	111,175	75,714	215,742	344,739
1959	1,617,252	203,772	112,907	75,540	216,507	348,684
1960	1,628,587	206,948	114,639	75,366	217,271	352,629
1961	1,626,242	207,095	115,969	75,774	216,632	355,060
1962	1,623,896	207,242	117,299	76,183	215,992	357,490
1963	1,621,551	207,389	118,630	76,592	215,352	359,921
1964	1,619,205	207,536	119,960	77,000	214,713	362,351
1965	1,616,860	207,683	121,290	77,408	214,074	364,782
1966	1,614,515	207,830	122,620	77,817	213,434	367,213
1967	1,612,169	207,977	123,950	78,226	212,794	369,643
1968	1,609,824	208,124	125,281	78,634	212,155	372,074
1969	1,607,478	208,271	126,611	79,042	211,516	374,504
1970	1,605,133	208,418	127,941	79,451	210,876	376,935
1971	1,593,400	208,800	130,700	80,900	215,600	379,800
1972	1,573,400	210,000	133,200	82,700	217,200	382,100
1973	1,548,900	209,000	136,200	84,300	217,100	382,700
1974	1,525,900	206,300	136,800	84,900	217,100	381,900
1975	1,513,400	208,100	139,200	85,800	218,800	385,300
1976	1,499,400	208,300	141,900	88,800	219,700	387,400
1977	1,486,300	206,200	144,200	90,100	220,300	388,200
1978	1,473,800	205,600	145,800	90,400	220,400	389,600

1979	1,454,300	204,700	147,800	91,800	219,400	392,600
1980	1,450,195	204,441	147,912	92,281	217,074	392,184
1981	1,437,549	201,832	148,549	92,104	216,055	391,939
1982	1,429,717	201,308	148,899	92,516	216,305	390,190
1983	1,420,639	199,089	148,623	92,852	216,176	387,822
1984	1,404,696	195,760	148,588	92,097	214,479	385,483
1985	1,380,315	192,077	147,920	92,099	211,201	380,825
1986	1,366,108	188,667	148,696	92,090	208,974	376,936
1987	1,355,061	186,644	148,568	91,718	206,447	373,907
1988	1,346,483	185,406	149,090	90,837	205,161	372,158
1989	1,339,463	185,703	150,274	90,369	204,552	370,411
1990	1,336,740	186,271	152,642	89,990	204,569	370,467
1991	1,338,435	187,064	154,769	90,304	204,777	371,523
1992	1,340,919	187,917	156,620	90,757	205,562	373,857
1993	1,338,289	188,483	159,675	91,114	206,512	375,255
1994	1,331,772	187,990	161,926	91,135	206,454	375,980
1995	1,322,460	187,479	165,415	91,323	205,707	376,188
1996	1,313,445	186,663	167,704	91,301	205,101	375,656
1997	1,304,196	185,610	169,408	90,824	204,469	374,158
1998	1,295,026	184,315	171,322	90,274	203,930	373,060
1999	1,287,247	182,592	172,924	89,717	203,078	371,248
2000	1,280,060	181,128	174,528	89,516	203,038	369,662
2001	1,272,669	179,573	175,808	89,140	203,115	368,237
2002	1,265,586	178,574	177,441	88,863	202,955	366,760
2003	1,257,950	177,910	178,662	88,901	203,591	366,403
2004	1,246,305	176,829	179,318	88,419	203,656	365,244
2005	1,232,770	175,303	179,961	87,951	204,745	364,319
2006	1,223,319	173,817	181,509	87,722	205,236	363,397
2007	1,219,953	172,921	182,382	87,405	205,513	362,900
2008	1,218,453	172,281	183,542	87,532	206,483	362,330
2009	1,219,306	171,638	184,357	87,337	206,789	361,226
2010	1,223,973	170,630	184,085	88,864	207,944	365,029
2011	1,228,437	170,330	184,766	88,639	208,089	364,450
2012	1,231,129	170,091	185,016	88,243	208,350	362,825
2013	1,233,999	169,770	185,185	88,178	208,117	360,720
2014	1,233,417	169,033	185,874	87,459	208,050	358,931
2015	1,229,342	168,311	186,046	86,800	207,824	357,006
2016	1,226,893	166,926	186,427	85,243	207,469	354,763
2017	1,220,423	165,779	187,083	84,809	207,152	352,152
2018	1,217,508	164,669	188,031	84,578	207,114	350,600
2019	1,215,716	163,956	188,313	84,022	206,866	348,941
2020	1,249,585	167,857	194,026	83,158	209,413	354,270
2021	1,245,335	166,976	196,738	83,115	210,116	353,695
2022	1,233,325	165,703	197,374	82,893	209,981	351,924
2023	1,228,911	165,680	198,657	83,045	210,442	351,233
2024	1,227,174	165,769	199,300	83,257	210,635	350,473
2025	1,225,035	166,032	200,169	82,878	210,802	349,324

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