

Marketing a High-Occupancy-Vehicle Lane in a Suburban Setting: Long Island Expressway Experience

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A marketing effort was undertaken for implementation of a high-occupancy-vehicle (HOV) lane on the Long Island Expressway in Suffolk County, New York. The HOV lane was scheduled to open in spring 1994, but marketing efforts began considerably earlier in recognition of the lack of knowledge of the concept in the Long Island region. The marketing effort, like others in the nation, has had two major objectives: (a) to promote the project to key stakeholders as a workable highway improvement alternative to gain support and approval for the project; and (b) to promote the project to potential HOV lane users, so as to build a constituency and an adequate level of usage. The results of all these marketing efforts so far have been to (a) develop a constituency for HOV facilities on Long Island, (b) gain interest among employers in the HOV concept, (c) provide a coordinated marketing and informational program that can meet the needs of potential users even before implementation, and (d) add to the overall effort to meet suburban mobility needs with effective solutions that significantly address the issue of automobile occupancy.

High-occupancy-vehicle (HOV) projects have been successfully implemented and operated throughout the United States for more than 20 years. There are examples throughout the research literature of successful applications, resulting in such beneficial results as travel time savings for HOV lane users, increased people-moving capacity of highway facilities, and increased usage of transit and ridesharing options. With well over 30 projects and 300 mi in service in the nation, HOV lane options receive increasingly serious consideration as public transportation improvements throughout urban and suburban settings.

Still, HOV lanes remain difficult projects to promote. They are neither as provocative as a new rapid rail line nor as universally appealing as a new general-use highway facility. Instead, they have the appeal of being appropriate, which limits enthusiastic support. In other words, responses to these projects are as follows:

- To those who prefer more highways, the response is that financial, environmental, and community constraints no longer make it feasible to construct traditional new facilities. In addition, new highways are not a solution to the long-term congestion problem but may actually help increase congestion, because new capacity may draw new vehicular travel. Therefore, HOV lanes become the more appropriate alternative.

- To those who prefer rail lines, the response is that origins and destinations have become so diffuse that rail would serve only a fraction of the market. A major (and expensive) complementary system of feeder-distributor bus connections and park-and-ride lots would be necessary to serve most origin-destination (O-D) pairs, further implying a series of undesirable modal transfers. Therefore, HOV lanes become the more appropriate alternative.

Given that an appropriate choice is not necessarily one that wins widespread support, each new HOV lane project is an adventure in marketing. Marketing starts early—years before construction—and continues late—well past implementation. Marketing is undertaken for two main reasons: first to promote the project to key stakeholders as a workable (not simply an appropriate) alternative to gain their support and approval for the project and second to promote the project to potential HOV lane users so as to build a constituency and an acceptable level of usage. For both of these reasons, a concerted marketing effort has been undertaken since 1988 for the Long Island Expressway (LIE) HOV lane project, a project that was not planned to begin operation until the spring of 1994.

LIE HOV LANE PROJECT

History

The LIE began to take shape as a major highway link in the New York City metropolitan area in the 1940s by providing city residents with access to the Midtown Tunnel into Manhattan. By the early 1960s, it already extended beyond the city's eastern border into Nassau and Suffolk counties. It currently extends 70 mi (112 km) east from the tunnel to mid-Suffolk County. It is a six-lane, limited-access facility throughout.

The LIE serves as a major commuting route, not only linking the Manhattan central business district with much of the city and suburban areas, but also serving a considerable portion of so-called intra-island commuting trips—particularly those with both origins and destinations within Nassau and Suffolk counties. These two suburban counties have a combined population of about 2.7 million and total employment of about 1.4 million. Following a similar pattern as in most of the country, these counties grew throughout the first half of the 20th century as bedroom communities for New York City commuters. Over the past 30 years, they have become much more self-reliant. For example, 70 percent of the westbound (i.e., toward New York City) morning peak

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period commuters on the LIE in these two counties never enter New York City, having found service sector, retail, and manufacturing employment opportunities on Long Island itself.

Current Conditions

Over the years, traffic and congestion on the LIE have grown steadily: average annual daily traffic exceeds 150,000 vehicles—more than twice the design standard. Delays and slow operating speeds are prevalent during the peak commuting periods in much of Nassau and Suffolk counties. State studies and a bond referendum in the late 1980s identified the prospect of constructing additional lane capacity in each direction along a 41-mi (65.6-km) stretch of the LIE from the New York City border to Exit 64 in western Suffolk. Through legislative action, a design and environmental study was initiated on a 12-mi (19.2-km) section of the LIE, to be followed shortly by a study of the entire 41-mi proposed project area. At the time of this writing, the 12-mi (19.2-km) section was under construction and scheduled to begin operation in spring 1994. The draft design and environmental impact statement study for the 41-mi (65.6-km) corridor was still being prepared as of April 1994.

State transportation officials identified HOV as a possible appropriate alternative for the new bidirectional capacity improvement. In support of the HOV lane option, former state Department of Transportation (DOT) Commissioner Franklin E. White asserted that the state cannot build its way out of congestion. In beginning to explore the HOV lane option, however, significant resistance and doubt were voiced from three major sources: business leaders; editorials in *Newsday*, the island's largest (and one of the nation's largest) daily newspapers; and elected officials. The types of issues raised are not unlike those voiced in other parts of the country:

- Long Islanders will not carpool; they are different from the rest of the country.
- There is neither a "central city" as such in Nassau or Suffolk nor many major employers. This situation will make it very difficult to generate ridesharing or transit-related use of an HOV lane system.
- The government should not force people to carpool, but should build additional capacity for everyone.
- The state should invest in new rapid rail systems in the LIE median. (Long Island already has the 100-year-old, 10-line Long Island Rail Road, the nation's busiest commuter railroad, which carries 70 million riders annually, primarily to and from Manhattan.)

It was clear to state officials that if the HOV option was shown to be a workable alternative following the design and environmental process, a marketing effort was needed to make HOV appealing to stakeholders and the public at large. The first order of business was to provide information to key stakeholders that would be useful in helping to promote and build support for the HOV lane concept. Key objectives were to show

- That HOV lane projects have been successfully implemented throughout the United States, including in suburban settings in areas dominated by single-occupant vehicle commuting;

- That a significant number of Long Islanders would be interested in ridesharing if travel time savings would accrue to them;
- That government was acting in a responsible, not overbearing manner, in promoting the HOV lane option versus new general-use lanes on the LIE;
- That the LIE primarily served a different (i.e., non-Manhattan) market than the Long Island Rail Road, meaning that new rail options would not meet most travel needs; and
- That an HOV lane system on the LIE could be operated, enforced, and managed effectively.

The second order of business was to appeal to potential users of the HOV lanes to whom the concept was not well known. (Although Manhattan commuters from Brooklyn, Queens, and New Jersey have had the benefit of HOV lanes at tunnel approaches for many years, these have served express bus riders, but not ridesharers or Long Island commuters.) The objectives were to

- Build anticipation and positive expectations for the upcoming HOV lanes,
- Define the elements and operations of the HOV lane system, and
- Relate the HOV lane to the travel needs of Long Islanders.

To undertake this two-pronged approach and fulfill the various objectives, the state DOT developed a strategic effort, shown in Figure 1. The remainder of this paper highlights the strategies and tools presented in Figure 1 and points to new directions to adopt.

MARKETING HOV-LANE CONCEPT TO STAKEHOLDERS

Strategy

The basic strategy in this effort was threefold:

1. To provide factual material to key stakeholders about the LIE HOV lane and other HOV operations around the country,

	Marketing HOV as a <i>Concept</i>	Marketing HOV to <i>Potential Users</i>
Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Basic Information on similar findings ■ Cooperation and coordination ■ Bring together diverse interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Providing timely information ■ Working through employees ■ Tie in HOV to TDM, environmental and economic concerns
Tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Driver Survey ■ Conference/white paper ■ Site visits ■ Slide Show ■ LIE/HOV Task Force 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Outreach Options Matrix ■ Focus Groups ■ Employer Outreach Program ■ Media Strategic Plan

FIGURE 1 Marketing directions for LIE HOV lane.

2. To move the planning process out of the traditional departmental structure and into a forum of mutual cooperation and coordination with other agencies, and

3. To bring together diverse public and private interests early in the process as a way of encouraging buy-in and support for various aspects of the HOV-lane concept.

Marketing Tools

Driver Survey

In 1987–1988, a postcard survey was conducted. Over 130,000 postcards were distributed to automobile commuters on Long Island (primarily on the LIE itself). The return rate was nearly 30 percent. The survey was intended to provide O-D information. However, two questions were raised as a way of determining, in a preliminary way, the extent of an existing and potential market for HOV lanes. It was found that about 20 percent of LIE users were traveling in multiple-occupancy vehicles. Furthermore, an additional 20 percent said that they would consider ridesharing options if they could achieve travel time savings on the LIE. The primary use of this information was to show stakeholders that a sizable number of commuters were likely users of the HOV lanes, enough to create a sufficient nucleus for a successful operation.

Conference and White Paper

In November 1989 the state DOT worked with a diverse set of sponsors (including a key state legislator, business groups, other state and county agencies, and the federal government) to hold a 1-day workshop on relevant transportation issues and solutions. The title of the workshop reveals its purpose and general agenda: Innovative Ideas for Keeping Long Island Mobile—Featuring an Update on Implementation of the Long Island Expressway Fourth Lane Project. Key traffic mitigation success stories included nationwide experience with transportation management associations (TMAs), travel demand management (TDM) techniques, and HOV programs—all key aspects in managing suburban congestion problems. Additional sessions and workshops focused on diverse topics, including the LIE HOV-lane concept, but also including freight movement issues, public-private partnerships, and other Long Island traffic corridors. Speakers and workshop leaders included elected officials, transportation officials from New York and other states, business leaders, TMA personnel, and others.

In preparation for this conference the state DOT had consultants prepare an informal report entitled *Moving People Out of Congestion: Considering the High Occupancy Vehicle Option on the Long Island Expressway (1)*. The report recognized that the HOV-lane alternative was not well known to the public, even though elsewhere it was shown to be an effective method for improving highway capacity. It posed and answered such questions as Why consider the HOV-lane alternative for the LIE; Who uses HOV lanes; What is the proper setting for an HOV lane; and What are the key measures for success for an HOV lane? Its primary purpose was to show that other suburban areas had planned, implemented, and successfully operated HOV lane systems, achieving beneficial results.

Site Visits

To encourage further understanding of HOV lane operations, including key enforcement issues, the state DOT both coordinated with and sponsored on-site visits for elected officials, planning officials, and law enforcement officials to some of the nation's HOV lane systems. The first visit, to the Washington, D.C., area in 1989, was arranged by a key state elected official. Subsequent visits to southern California and Hartford, Connecticut, were arranged by the state DOT. In all cases, the emphasis was on observing successfully operating HOV systems.

Slide Show

Beginning in 1991, the state DOT developed various slide show presentations to explain the LIE HOV lane concept to stakeholders, including elected officials, business groups, and other civic and educational groups. The slide show (unpublished presentation) made the following case for HOV as the appropriate option:

Another new lane in each direction of the LIE is needed. But new lanes in and of themselves are not the most effective solution. A four lane expressway will be congested as soon as it opens. . . . The most effective approach to maintaining long-term mobility is to combine the potential that highway expansion offers with the people-moving efficiency of transit. . . . This can be accomplished by reserving a new, fourth lane for . . . so-called high occupancy vehicles.

LIE-HOV Task Force

The LIE-HOV Task Force was established in 1991 by the state DOT to provide advisory opinions on key HOV issues. The task force brings together government, the private sector, and other organizations; participants include elected officials, mass transit agencies, law enforcement agencies, environmental groups, the business community, the Automobile Club of New York; the Long Island Association (the region's largest business and civic group), and Long Island's nonprofit ridesharing group.

The task force is charged with the responsibility of charting a new course for the future travel needs of Long Islanders. Guided by the state DOT, the task force meets regularly to deal with developing recommendations for all major actions and policies needed to make HOV successful on Long Island.

The issues addressed by the task force have included (a) HOV operations such as enforcement, incident management, the HOV occupancy requirement, and HOV hours of operation; (b) park-and-ride lot planning; (c) ridesharing and transit programs; and (d) public outreach and education about the HOV concept and use of the HOV lanes. Through direct involvement in these key areas, task force participants became an integral part of the planning for LIE-HOV success and a solid, broad-based foundation supporting the implementation of HOV on the island.

The state DOT's prominence as the leader in developing this new HOV solution on Long Island was now shared with a much wider group with closer ties to communities, businesses, and the traveling public. Less than 1 year from the first meeting of the task force, major statements of support for HOV by task force participants were in the public domain.

As a result of formal task force resolutions, numerous actions and policies to support the successful operation of the first 12 mi

(19.2 km) of lanes were developed. These include, but are not limited to, the decision to operate the facility as a 2+ occupant HOV lane between 6:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. Monday through Friday, with general use at other times; a state DOT plan with Suffolk County Transit for new LIE express bus service that would utilize the HOV lanes; an enforcement plan to be implemented by the Suffolk County Police Department; and several park-and-ride improvement projects.

From its beginning the task force also maintained a keen interest in public outreach. Recognizing that a well-planned program of information and education is critical to the public's understanding and use of the HOV lanes, the task force asked the public Outreach Working Group to recommend an effective program. The process used to develop and implement that program will be taken up in the remainder of this paper.

MARKETING HOV LANES TO POTENTIAL USERS

Strategy

The strategy for marketing HOV lanes to potential users has evolved over time as the state DOT undertook preliminary data-gathering steps and began to incorporate the lessons learned in the marketing of the HOV lane as a concept. Three key objectives emerged:

1. To provide potential users with timely information at various stages of the process.
2. To focus on Long Island employees as the main target group for a marketing effort. As a result of this decision, a key direction was to reach employees directly at their job sites by promoting the LIE HOV concept to their employers.
3. To relate the LIE HOV lane to other innovative TDM methods and, in a larger way, to the overall goals of improving Long Island's environment, its economy, and its strength as a suburban residential community.

Marketing Tools

Outreach Options Matrix

In early 1991, the state DOT asked its consultant to develop a set of outreach proposals intended to (a) inform the public, and commuters in particular, about HOV lane issues; (b) promote the HOV-lane concept; (c) tie informational and promotional efforts to actual milestone dates; and (d) coordinate the outreach activities of DOT and the LIE-HOV task force. Some 17 separate activities were identified. These included general publications (e.g., progress bulletins and newsletters); focus groups and surveys; workshops, seminars and a speakers' bureau; a hotline phone number and a roving field office; outreach to special groups and briefings to public officials; slide shows and videos; and press releases, editorial board briefings, key reporter contacts, and a media campaign. All of these had wide-ranging consequences in terms of costs, timing, direction, and joint participation among DOT officials, the task force, the consultant, and others.

In the end, it was from this first-cut identification of options that the two main directions that state DOT adopted were derived.

Before they were selected, a separate activity was selected—also from this list—with the intent of quickly gathering important insights into the nature of what a marketing program should concentrate on. The activity selected was to conduct focus groups.

Focus Groups

In recent years, the focus group technique has been used as a means of identifying key issues and beginning the consensus-building process, particularly for complex projects and those requiring a strong public education and information campaign. A critical part of the successful design and implementation of the marketing effort was understanding the public's knowledge and perception of what an HOV lane is and how it works.

Three focus groups were conducted in late 1991: two with commuters and one with employers near the LIE corridor. The intent was for commuters to express their understanding of HOV lanes and related issues and concerns. Employers were encouraged to discuss efforts to encourage ridesharing and reduce vehicle trips to their work sites.

Participants were selected with the aid of the mailing list developed for the project, as well as additional lists of Long Island civic associations. For the commuter focus groups, civic association leaders were asked to suggest a member who regularly used the LIE for commuting and various other purposes. For the business focus group, representatives were invited who both were concerned with employee travel issues and had some decision-making influence in the firm.

A major finding from the commuter groups was their skepticism about the ability of the LIE HOV lanes to generate new carpools. Further probing during the sessions revealed that most people knew very little about the project, and in fact many were hearing about it in detail for the first time. Commuters and employers needed to understand how the lanes would work—particularly with respect to enforcement, incident management, and a clear understanding of entering and leaving the HOV lane—and how HOV lanes would save travel time. They all agreed that some traditional outreach methods—such as mass mailings and inserts in utility bills—would not reach the target market of commuters.

The commuter groups thought that the first point of contact should be employers. Results of the employer group showed that they were willing to help in this effort, with assistance from the state. Many of the employer group participants stated that they had tried to institute ridesharing programs on their work sites but found the process to be very slow. The employer group identified a number of high employment centers along the LIE corridor and suggested that the best way to promote ridesharing at their work sites would be to band together, either as business associations or by forming TMAs.

Everyone was in agreement that a major education process was necessary. They suggested that government could assist businesses by producing training videos for employee seminars.

Employer Outreach Program

On the basis of results of the focus groups, the state DOT decided to concentrate a significant portion of its informational activities to potential HOV users at the workplace. Working with the LIE-HOV task force (and actually under the sponsorship of that body,

rather than the DOT itself), a program was developed to provide direct outreach to a number of Long Island employers who had a significant number of LIE commuters. The intent was to meet with key managerial officials from as many of the largest employers as could be managed before the first stage of the HOV lane began operating in the spring of 1994. This turned out to be approximately 200 firms. At these meetings, the officials would be presented with various visual materials that discussed TDM and employee trip reduction (ETR) goals in general, and the LIE HOV lane specifically. Using the materials that were distributed to them, employers would be encouraged to provide information to employees and take an active role in ETR objectives.

Consultants to the state DOT prepared the following types of materials for distribution to the employers:

- **Introductory Video.** A 10-min video was prepared that places TDM, ETR, and HOV goals in the context of

- Long Island's historical development,
- Preserving Long Island's precarious economic vitality,
- Working toward an improved environment, and
- Maintaining Long Island's quality of life.

The video was intended to introduce these concepts to company executives and to their employees if the firm desired. The video takes a somewhat lighter approach than the original slide show, emphasizing a quick delivery and a strong set of visual images. For example, in the original slide show (unpublished presentation) congestion is treated as follows: "Unless something is done, congestion will continue to worsen, as traffic volumes on the LIE increase and traffic speeds decline in more areas for longer periods of time." In the video (2), the same idea is expressed: "We spend more and more time just getting there, and the trip becomes more and more stressful. Long Island is truly a community of places—but why does it have to seem that everyone is out on the road at the same time as you?" The video also used computer simulation to explain such key HOV operational issues as entry and exit, enforcement, and incident management.

- **Informational brochures.** Two brochures were prepared for distribution to employers (3).

One was entitled *Keeping Long Island on the Go! Reducing Congestion is Good Business*. It sets the tone of a growing suburban congestion problem on Long Island and then explains what the state DOT is doing to alleviate the problem. The centerpiece is what businesses themselves can do.

- The second brochure provided more specific detail about the LIE HOV lane project, highlighting its many aspects, but in particular the actions of the LIE-HOV Task Force.

- **Commuter transportation fact book.** A three-hole looseleaf notebook was prepared for use by an existing or potential employee transportation coordinator (ETC). The following eight fact sheets were prepared:

- How to create an ETC for the firm,
- HOV lanes and park and ride,
- Managing the firm's parking supply,
- Ensuring carpool and vanpool continuity,
- Guaranteed-ride-home program,

- Transportation days,
- Getting involved in a TMA, and
- Alternative work schedules.

Each fact sheet gave basic information and a list of contacts for more information. The notebook was wide enough to allow the ETC to add other related materials to it.

- **Posters and handouts.** Posters and handouts were prepared for display throughout the firm and distribution to employees.

State DOT and the LIE-HOV task force decided to use Long Island's nonprofit ridesharing promotion services organization, Long Island Transportation Management, Inc. (LITM), as the entity to reach out to employers. Their staff was given a training session and outreach efforts began in early 1993.

Initial results from the effort were not promising: for every 10 firms contacted, only one scheduled a meeting with LITM. Within 6 months, the success rate improved to one meeting scheduled for every four calls. What seemed to help was an emphasis by LITM on discussing ETR requirements in the Clean Air Act perspective, a message to which most were responsive.

As a result of these experiences, the approach was revised. The total number of expected individual meetings was lowered from 200 to 80. The additional 120 firms were to be reached through different formats, including the following:

- **Presentations to chambers of commerce and industrial associations.** Meetings of these groups usually involve representatives from 10 to 30 firms each.

- **Direct mailing of seminar material to select firms identified by LITM through their phone contacts.**

- **Additional outreach to firms not located near the LIE corridor.** Although these firms might not derive direct benefit from the initial 12-mi HOV section that was scheduled to open in spring 1994, they might benefit from subsequent stages of development of the LIE-HOV lane system. Although it would not produce initial benefits to the peak period usage of the Stage 1 HOV lanes, this approach would expand the knowledge base about HOV and supporting actions that employers can take to reduce vehicle trips by their employees.

Media Campaign

State DOT asked its consultants to prepare a media strategic plan for the HOV lane. The central message to be delivered was "moving people to their destinations, not simply moving more vehicles." Slogans, such as "Putting the Express Back Into the Expressway" were to be incorporated. The audience to be reached, in order of priority, includes the following:

- LIE commuters;
- Other highway commuters;
- Other Long Island drivers;
- Long Island employees and employers (a lower priority for the media campaign because the Employer Outreach Program is their main approach);
 - Educational facilities;
 - Local agencies, elected officials, and interest groups; and
 - General public.

Media options include the following:

- Press kits
- Briefings
- Speakers
- Direct mail
- Bus advertising
- Billboards
- Newspaper advertising
- Newspaper supplements
- Public service announcements (PSAs)
- Radio advertising
- Television advertising

The options were described and costed out and eventually grouped into the following strategic approaches:

- **Minimum strategy.** Initial and basic set of options that maximizes noncommercial sources (e.g., press kits, editorial board meetings, and speakers).

- **Low-level strategy.** Provides higher-quality information to the media for use in noncommercial formats and for reaching out to crucial radio and television (TV) markets, but in a low-cost mode. Options include a premium press kit (with brochure, videos, audiotapes, photos, and graphics), radio PSAs, and cable TV ads (taking advantage of free air time offered to state DOT by a local cable station).

- **Moderate-level strategy.** Combines previous strategies with distribution of materials to direct audiences, modest print advertising, and commercial radio advertising during drive time periods.

- **High-level strategy.** Combines all other strategies with newspaper supplements, exterior bus advertising, billboard advertising, and more extensive newspaper advertising.

The proposed scheduling and costing of these strategies through 1995 (with the anticipated opening of the first section of the HOV lane assumed to be spring 1994) has the objective of maintaining a basic level of information before and after implementation, punctuated by a moderate level of media outreach 1 month before the opening and a high level of media outreach 3 months after implementation. The reason for saving the high outreach level until shortly after implementation is to allow for a period for operational issues to work themselves out and for word of mouth and media reporting to have some effect.

As a result of this plan, the state DOT has adopted and (adapted) a media campaign that combines print, radio, and TV advertising. Although the available budget is limited, widespread outreach is anticipated through the use of

- **Print media.** A series of weekly informational advertisements in local community weeklies, beginning up to 2 months before commencement. The ads will include the following: basic operational information, a "why HOV" report, advice on starting a carpool, and statements from HOV users in other urban areas.

- **Radio advertising.** Paid drive time ads on three local commercial stations.

- **Cable TV advertising.** Four separate messages to be produced and shown on local 24-hr cable news station three times a day: 6:00 to 7:00 a.m. (prerush hour), midday, and after 9:00 p.m.

FOLLOW-UP

The state DOT will act on an important recommendation from the LIE-HOV task force that involves establishing an implementation and feedback mechanism to assemble information on actual usage of the LIE-HOV lanes, as well as gathering public comments concerning the various HOV improvements.

As part of its efforts to gather direct feedback from the public about the HOV lanes, DOT will hold additional focus groups and consider conducting commuter surveys 6 months to 1 year after opening the Stage 1 LIE-HOV lanes. The information gathered from these approaches would then be used in subsequent marketing programs to keep promoting positive messages about HOV on Long Island.

It is also expected that the media campaign will be extended for several years after the initial opening of the LIE-HOV lanes. The extended program would include key messages about LIE HOV, ridesharing and vanpooling, transit, and options other than driving alone. Also, as employers begin to implement Employee Commute Options (ECO) programs, as required by the federal Clean Air Act, the media program could be expanded to help promote the ECO programs and instill such potential messages as "Ridesharing Saves the Earth," "Rideshare to Clean the Air," and "To Pool is Cool."

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