



CONSERVE CONNECT CREATE TOGETHER

Openlands Annual Report 2025



Blazing Star
Liatris aspera



Open lands are not
empty lands,
but precious grounds
whose careful cultivation
and imaginative design
enables our fractious,
fractured culture to reach
its highest creative and
social potential.

Blair Kamin, 2025 Openlands Gerald W. Adelman
Conservation Leadership Award Recipient



DEAR FRIENDS,

This year, Openlands entered a period of organizational change with the launch of our new strategic plan—an evolution shaped by the urgency of this moment. We are building on decades of resilience and partnership at a time when federal support for conservation is under strain, and the threats facing our landscapes are intensifying. The need for our work has never been clearer.

For every acre of land we protect, more than two are lost to development, and less than eight percent of our region's landscapes remain permanently protected for future generations. In response, we are focused and deliberate in how we **conserve, connect, and create—together**. We conserve the landscapes that sustain us, connect people and communities to nature, and create the partnerships and systems that allow conservation to endure. This annual report reflects how we are moving that work forward with a shared purpose.

Our region is one of a kind. Few metropolitan areas in the country contain this range of globally rare ecosystems in such close proximity. Here, tallgrass prairie, oak savanna, freshwater dune systems, and extensive wetlands converge—forming a mosaic found almost nowhere else on Earth. These landscapes are both our shared legacy and our responsibility.

Our region is also a hub of volunteer energy, conservation leadership, and civic commitment unlike anywhere else in the country—and in this moment, that leadership is essential. As federal support becomes less reliable, the center of gravity is shifting. Local and regional action, innovation, and partnership are where progress is being made—and where Openlands is focused.

At the local level, through Space to Grow, we are transforming Chicago Public Schools into resilient community spaces that manage stormwater and reconnect students to nature. Regionally, we closed the books on the O'Hare Wetlands Mitigation Project—one of the largest restoration efforts in our history—in partnership with the Forest Preserves of Cook County, Will County, and the U.S. Forest Service. And even as federal headwinds persist, we continue advancing work at Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge and Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie—because these landscapes, and the communities they serve, cannot wait.

None of this work happens alone. Our staff, board, volunteers, partners, and supporters show up every day with purpose and a deep commitment to the landscapes that make this region unlike any other. At a time of growing urgency, your leadership and generosity make this work possible. Together, we will meet this moment—conserving what is rare and irreplaceable, connecting communities to nature, and strengthening the partnerships that will carry this work forward.

With gratitude and determination,



Michael S. Davidson
President & CEO, Openlands

DEAR FRIENDS,

Openlands was founded on a belief that still guides our work today: the well-being of people and nature are inseparable, and they thrive together. In 1963, it began as a project of the Welfare Council of Metropolitan Chicago—which would later become the United Way of Metropolitan Chicago—rooted in the social reform tradition of Jane Addams and other Chicago leaders. From the start, Openlands has built solutions from the ground up, bringing people together to care for the land that sustains us all.

This founding spirit of collaboration and civic leadership has never mattered more.

Across the country, support for conservation is increasingly uncertain, even as pressure on land grows. In moments like this, local and regional leadership becomes essential. Openlands stands out for its ability to convene public agencies, private landowners, civic leaders, and communities—protecting landscapes, advancing stewardship, and ensuring nature is prioritized and accessible to everyone.

In 2025, we embraced this responsibility with the launch of a new strategic plan focused on land and partnership. At its heart is togetherness: conservation succeeds in community. It is how partnerships are built, how volunteers and supporters sustain the work, and how these efforts endure across generations.

Openlands continues to evolve as a nimble, results-driven organization, equipped with the tools, partnerships, and knowledge to take on the hardest challenges in land conservation. Land is the foundation of a healthy, livable region, and protecting it requires all of us.

As a board, we are proud to steward an organization with a powerful legacy, clear vision, and enduring leadership. Thank you for being part of this work—together, we will continue ensuring that nature thrives and is accessible to all.

In partnership,



Alan M. Bell

Chair, Openlands Board of Directors



TREES

1,103

new trees

planted across 11.03 acres of land

123

new TreeKeepers

trained in English and Spanish



10,000+

trees

cared for across the region

\$680,500

**invested in communities through
urban forestry**



18

**new community
conservation efforts**

funded through the
ComEd Green Region Grant

five

new CPS schoolyards
transformed through Space To Grow

COMMUNITY

161

acres

transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge

LAND

1,300+

acres

under active restoration at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie



88

acres

acquired in Will County, adjacent to the 854-acre Hadley Valley Forest Preserve

12,756

volunteer hours



2,453+

messages

sent to policymakers by engaged advocates to advance conservation policy initiatives

POLICY



WHERE WE WORK

< 80%

of our region's
landscapes remain
permanently
protected
for future generations.

Check out our media coverage! Scan the QR codes on the inside back cover to catch up on Openlands in the news.

To make the forest preserves **amazing places**
action. And we know that the forest preserves
here celebrating a **monumental project** that

Toni Preckwinkle, President of the
Cook County Board of Commissioners.

Deer Grove Forest Preserve,
Cook County



where nature thrives, conservation **takes can't do it alone.** That's why I'm grateful to be brought together **partners from every level.**

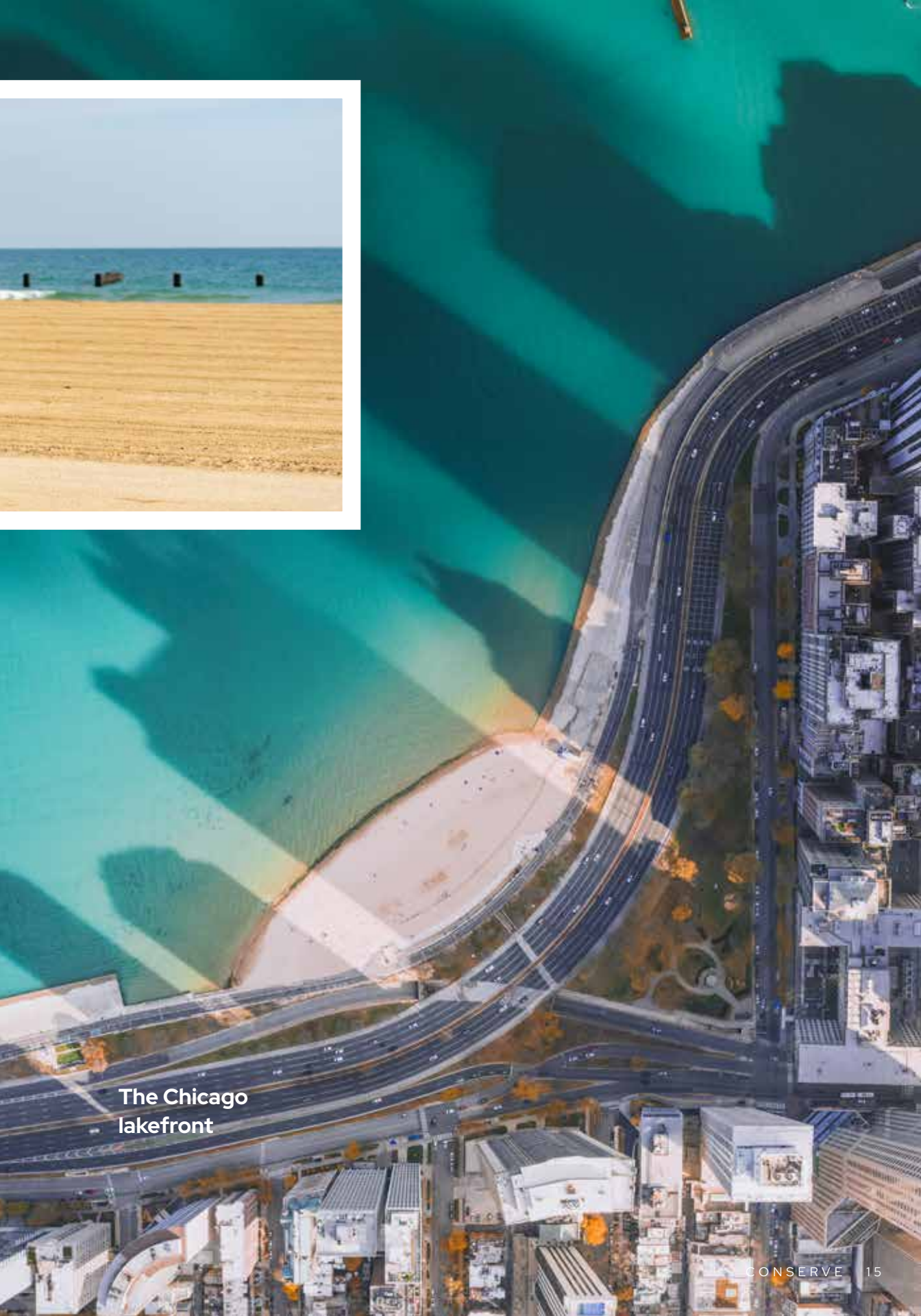


EVER
CONSERVE

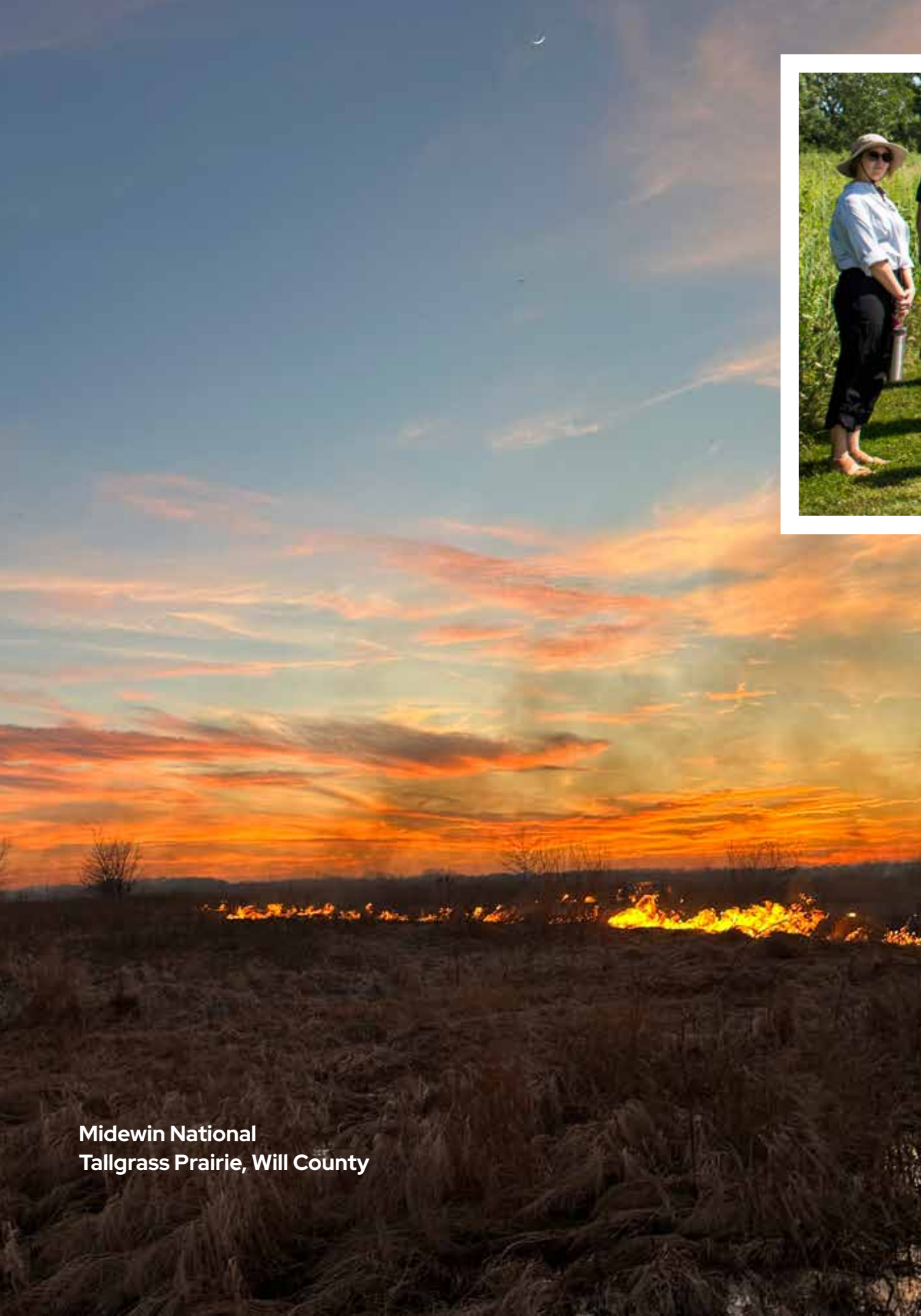


Conservation means bringing civic leaders together to meet modern challenges. In 2025, Openlands released *The Chicago Lakefront: Protected, Yet Precarious*, a timely report that spotlights legal and procedural gaps that put the City’s most prized civic asset at risk. The report calls for an update to the Lakefront Protection Ordinance, a municipal law that Openlands helped champion in the early 1970s in response to development pressures at the time. Following the report’s positive reception, Openlands began working with the Metropolitan Planning Council and City officials to reform the ordinance, strengthening protection from intrusive development and reinforcing a clear framework for the lakefront moving forward.

Conservation in our region often depends on private land, which presents a vital opportunity to advance ecological protection. This year, Openlands partnered with **Advocate Good Shepherd Hospital** in Barrington as part of a broader 30,000-trees-by-2030 initiative. A comprehensive inventory of more than 1,600 trees revealed rare remnant oak savannas and mature bur oaks—ecosystems of high ecological significance. Through planting efforts with Advocate staff, Openlands guided the selection and planting of 75 native trees at the Good Shepherd campus and 25 additional trees at Advocate Sherman Hospital in Elgin. This work demonstrates that thoughtful conservation on private property is essential to protecting ecologically significant landscapes across the region—and without it, broader conservation goals cannot be achieved.



The Chicago
lakefront



**Midewin National
Tallgrass Prairie, Will County**



Conservation reflects decades of commitment. Openlands closed the books on the **O’Hare Modernization Wetlands Mitigation Project**—one of the largest restoration efforts in the region’s history. Twenty years ago, the City of Chicago entrusted Openlands with a \$26 million to restore 280.14 acres of wetlands lost due to the expansion of O’Hare International Airport. Through careful management of this funding, strong project execution, and close collaboration with partners, Openlands delivered 530 acres of wetlands and protected over 1,600 acres of natural areas across five sites in the Des Plaines River watershed, including Deer Grove Forest Preserve and Bobolink Meadow Land and Water Reserve in Cook County, as well as Hadley Valley Preserve, Messenger Woods Nature Preserve, and the Drummond Floodplain within Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie in Will County. These landscapes demonstrate the power of long-term partnerships to restore ecological function while strengthening the health and resilience of surrounding communities. While this milestone marks the completion of a major chapter, stewardship continues through land agency partners. Openlands is supporting ongoing research and site monitoring to inform adaptive management, ensuring these landscapes remain healthy and resilient.

Conservation heals the land through large-scale restoration. Openlands, in partnership with The Wetlands Initiative and the U.S. Forest Service, is leading the restoration of more than 1,300 acres within the Grant Creek watershed at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie—**now the largest active restoration effort of its kind in the region.** This initial phase focuses on removing invasive species and preparing the landscape for the return of natural hydrology, including the remeandering of Grant Creek. Midewin is home to one of the region’s largest concentrations of grassland birds, many of which rely on expansive, open habitats to survive. In addition to rebuilding critical ecosystems, the first phase of work supports ongoing research to better understand shifts in grassland bird populations. Insights gained will help guide future restoration phases and strengthen conservation strategies for threatened and endangered species.

The dream of protecting Tamarack Farms has to **rare natural communities, unusual glacial abundant native plants.**

Dick Durbin, U.S. Senator of Illinois.

Tamarack Farms,
Richmond, Illinois



now become a **reality**. Hackmatack is home
landforms, high-quality waters, and



CONNECT





Connection is building a mosaic of protected lands.

In 2024, Openlands, The Conservation Fund, and Illinois Audubon Society, acquired **Tamarack Farms**, a 985-acre property for the **Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge**. The acquisition represents nearly 10 percent of the Refuge's total footprint, creating the third-largest conservation area in the region. This year, Openlands celebrated a major milestone with the transfer of 161 acres of Tamarack Farms to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for permanent federal protection. Senator Dick Durbin returned to visit the Refuge following the transfer, highlighting more than a decade of leadership and collaboration to expand the region's first National Wildlife Refuge serving 12 million residents across Chicago, Rockford, and Milwaukee metropolitan areas. Even with federal rollbacks, Tamarack Farms stands as a powerful example of how strong local partnerships can still advance **large landscape** conservation.



Connections are made through shared storytelling. Openlands co-hosted the Chicago premiere of the documentary, *From Rails to Trails*, with WTTW. This film brings together stories from communities across the country to reflect on how former rail corridors have been transformed into public trails that now connect people to nature. The film highlights the national impact of the rails-to-trails movement. Openlands was an early leader in rail-to-trail conversions through its work on the Illinois Prairie Path, beginning in 1964, helping set a model for trail development across the country. As longtime stewards of land in the region, Openlands continues to build on this legacy by expanding recreation opportunities through alternative land use and planning.



Connection is expanding existing protected landscapes.

This year, Openlands acquired the **Brandt Property**, an 88-acre parcel in Will County just east of Hadley Valley Forest Preserve—one of the five O’Hare restoration sites created when airport expansion removed wetlands. The property was at immediate risk of development, and a \$226,000 grant from the Prairie State Conservation Coalition, along with support from the Negaunee Foundation Opportunity Fund, made this timely acquisition possible. The site contains critical wildlife habitat along Spring Creek and helps improve local water quality. Once permanently protected, the site will join the Spring Creek Greenway, expanding residents’ access to nature in a rapidly developing area.

Let our school be an **embodiment of joy** where
Let our school be a place where we build leaders

Armani West, a student at
Myra Bradwell School of Excellence.

Spencer Technology Academy,
Austin, Chicago



we can laugh, cry, share, and **create memories.**
with **bright minds, bold and unbreaking.**



CREW



Creating is building healthier spaces for students. This year, the **Space To Grow** program celebrated its 11-year anniversary, marking a decade of transforming hard, concrete schoolyards into greener, healthier spaces for students and surrounding communities. Openlands and Healthy Schools Campaign, together with capital partners, including Chicago Public Schools, the Chicago Department of Water Management, the Chicago Department of Environment, and the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago, celebrated the opening of five new green schoolyards in Chicago—bringing the total to 41 schools across the city. Collectively, these schoolyards have engaged more than 10,000 students, and added over 650,000 square feet of permeable surfaces, capturing 8.7 million gallons of water per rain event. Across Chicago’s North, South, Southwest, and West Side neighborhoods, once-paved schoolyards are becoming flood-resilient community hubs where children can learn, play, and connect with nature.



Creating is developing on-ramps for green careers. In 2025, Openlands launched a new **pre-apprenticeship program** to complement our Arborist Registered Apprenticeship (ARA)—one of just a few such programs in the country. Developed in partnership with the Student Conservation Association, the program introduces participants to careers in arboriculture before committing to a longer-term apprenticeship. Running from June to November, participants receive hands-on fieldwork experience stewarding and planting trees, and obtain training and certifications, including the Openlands TreeKeepers and the Illinois Arborist Association’s Intro to Climbing courses. All participants in the inaugural cohort applied to the Arborist Registered Apprenticeship and were accepted—advancing their path into the region’s growing conservation workforce.

Creating together means empowering communities to lead grassroots conservation. Openlands partnered with ComEd to award \$150,000 in Green Region Grants to 18 communities across northern Illinois. These grants support locally driven projects that restore green spaces, expand pollinator habitat, strengthen climate resilience, and create environmental education opportunities. **The Green Region Grant Program** has invested more than \$2.45 million in nearly 300 conservation projects since 2013—restoring over 1,800 acres of land, planting nearly 39,000 trees, and constructing 85,000 feet of ADA-accessible trails across northern Illinois.





Some towns may look at being surrounded by
able to expand. We are looking at it as a **great**
fully. Richmond is ready to be a **nature-based**

Toni Wardanian,
Village of Richmond President.

**Volunteer workday at Walking
Stick Woods Natural Area,
Cook County**



conservation as being boxed in and not being **big hug** and we are ready to **embrace that hug community.**



TOGETHER



Together, we can create nature-based communities. In 2025, Openlands acquired a 2.5-acre parcel along Route 12 in Richmond, Illinois—small in size but critical in connectivity. This parcel is poised to become a gateway between the Village of Richmond and the growing landscape of **Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge**. Openlands acquired the parcel to ensure that Richmond residents and visitors alike have permanent access to Hackmatack, and greater connectivity to other communities along Prairie Trail, which abutts the parcel. By improving access to the Refuge, this property opens the door to new conservation opportunities that will strengthen Richmond’s growing recreation-based economy.

Together, strong programs can grow beyond a single organization. This year, Openlands began the transition of **Birds In My Neighborhood to Windy City Lab** under the leadership of J’orge Garcia—a former coordinator of the program at Openlands. Since 2013, the program has connected more than 16,000 students to the birds and biodiversity in their own neighborhoods, helping young people see nature as part of everyday life. This transition reflects Openlands’ long-standing role as an incubator of conservation innovation, including launching organizations such as Friends of the Chicago River and Alliance for the Great Lakes. The next chapter builds on a strong foundation while expanding opportunities for education, volunteer engagement, and pathways into conservation. As Windy City Bird Lab carries the program forward, Openlands continues to advance bird conservation through land protection, policy advocacy, and habitat restoration across Illinois.

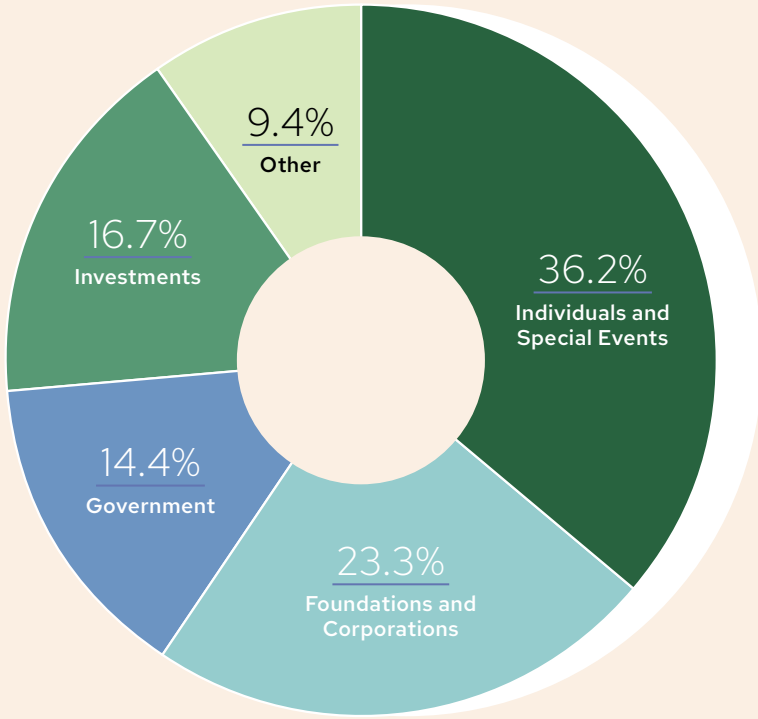
Together, neighbors care for nature close to home. Openlands partnered with **Green Latinos** and **Latinos Progresando** to host a Spanish-language TreeKeeper course, expanding opportunities for Spanish-speaking residents to gain hands-on training in tree care and stewardship. The course welcomed 19 participants, bringing the total number of TreeKeepers caring for our region's trees to more than 2,337. Through this partnership and others, Openlands is committed to offering the TreeKeeper course in Spanish for three years, training up to 75 new TreeKeepers and providing stipends for community members to serve as instructors, coordinate planting projects in their neighborhoods and steward trees planted by Openlands.

Together, conservation grows community pride. In the Calumet region, conservation is not a single project—it is long-term placemaking with deep partnerships. Openlands has taken a holistic approach—co-coordinating ecological restoration, capital infrastructure, education, and cultural storytelling to ensure the area becomes both healthy and accessible for the community. The community's youth are key players. Through the **Beaubien Woods Youth Outdoor Ambassadors Program**, Openlands, Friends of the Forest Preserves, and the Forest Preserves of Cook County engaged high school students in hands-on ecological restoration and historical interpretation. Working alongside curriculum developers, they are contributing to educational materials and bilingual resources that will further activate public events and paddling programs beginning in 2026.

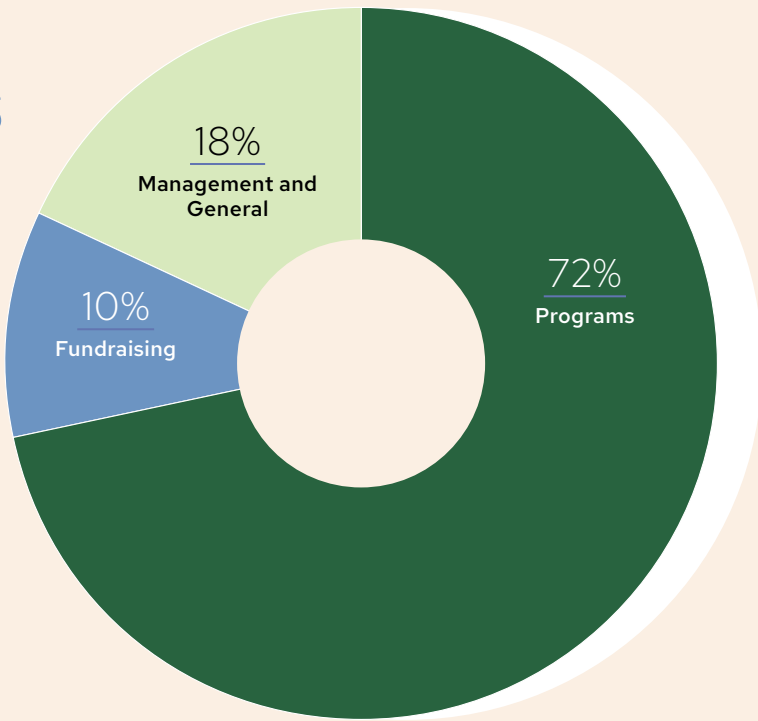




REVENUE



EXPENSES



FINANCIALS

FY2025 FINANCIAL REPORT

REVENUE

Individuals and Special Events	\$ 4,731,261
Foundations and Corporations	3,043,092
Government	1,880,093
Investments	2,180,020
Other	1,238,943
	<hr/>
	\$ 13,073,409

EXPENSE

Programs	\$ 5,658,754
Fundraising	807,503
Management and General	1,410,949
	<hr/>
	\$ 7,877,206

Increase in Net Assets	\$ 5,196,203
Net Assets without donor restriction 10.1.2024	\$ 5,819,282
Net Assets without donor restriction 9.30.2025	\$ 8,990,885
Net Assets with donor restriction 10.1.2024	\$ 30,028,720
Net Assets with donor restriction 9.30.2025	\$ 32,053,320
Total Net Assets 10.1.2024	\$ 35,848,002
Total Net Assets 9.30.2025	\$ 41,044,205



Tamarack West, Richmond, Illinois

REMEMBERING NANCY CORWITH HAMILL WINTER

Openlands honors the life and legacy of Nancy Corwith Hamill Winter, one of our greatest champions for conservation. Her leadership helped shape conservation across Illinois and beyond, from Nachusa Grasslands and Emiquon to decades of stewardship in Jo Daviess County. She advanced a vision grounded in ecology, cultural heritage, and a deep respect for Indigenous stewardship and the enduring relationship between people and land.

Our relationship with Nancy was rooted in a multigenerational commitment to nature. Her father, Corwith “Corky” Hamill, was a founding member of Openlands, and her parents helped to realize the Illinois Prairie Path. Nancy began her own conservation career as Openlands’ first intern, contributing to the organizing that led to the Illinois and Michigan Canal State Trail.

In the years that followed, Nancy, alongside her siblings Jon Hamill and Betsy Bramsen and through the Hamill Family Foundation, helped catalyze transformative projects. These include early support for Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, pioneering investment in Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge, and the Openlands Lakeshore Preserve, to name a few. Her generosity and leadership made bold ideas possible.

We extend our heartfelt condolences to her children, Ethan and Sylvia, and to her family. Her legacy endures in the lands she helped protect.

THANK YOU

OPENLANDS is deeply grateful to our funding partners, supporters, and volunteers who helped fulfill the mission of Openlands over the past fiscal year, October 1, 2024 to September 30, 2025.

CORPORATIONS, FOUNDATIONS, GOVERNMENTS, AND ORGANIZATIONS

\$100,000 to \$500,000

Amazon
Anonymous
ComEd, an Exelon Company
Crown Family Philanthropies
Hunter Family Foundation
Nancy H. Hamill Charitable
Lead Unitrust
The Grainger Foundation

\$50,000 to \$99,999

Anonymous
Bobolink Foundation
CBRE
Healthy Schools Campaign
McDougal Family Foundation
Rivian Foundation
Robert Hendricksen Co.
Willow Springs Foundation

\$25,000 to \$49,999

Arbor Day Foundation
The Bowman C. Lingle Trust
Central Indiana Community
Foundation
Forest Preserves of
Cook County
Full Circle Foundation
Lake County Stormwater
Management Commission
Lumina Foundation
Peoples Gas
Pepper Family Foundation
Polk Bros. Foundation
Preservation Foundation of the
Lake County Forest Preserves
Prince Charitable Trusts
The Richard H. Driehaus
Foundation
Solberg Manufacturing, Inc.
U.S. EPA

\$10,000 to \$24,999

BNSF Railway Foundation
The Buchanan Family
Foundation
EA Foundation
G. Carl Ball Family Foundation
Land Trust Alliance
Morningstar, Inc.
Harold M. and Adeline S.
Morrison Family Foundation
Dr. Scholl Foundation
Stantec Consulting
Services Inc.
The Lumpkin Family
Foundation
The Mammel Family
Foundation
Margot and Thomas Pritzker
Family Foundation
The Siragusa Family
Foundation
U.S. Bank
University of Illinois
Urbana-Champaign

\$5,000 to \$9,999

25 E Washington
Aldridge Gives Foundation
City of Blue Island
Builders Vision
Charities Aid Foundation
of America
Ecosia
The Field Foundation of Illinois
Good Heart Work Smart
Foundation
Heitman, LLC
JoDavie's Conservation
Foundation
Lake County Forest
Preserve District
McGraw Foundation
McMaster-Carr Supply
Company
Melcher & Tucker Consultants

Scott Byron & Co., Inc.
The South Church
Ventas
Winkler Tree & Lawn Care

\$2,500 to \$4,999

Bartlett Tree Experts
Chicago Architecture
Center
Christopher B. Burke
Engineering, Ltd.
Christy Webber Landscapes
Cornell Lab of Ornithology
Cox Enterprises
Cozen O'Connor Public
Strategies
Davey Resource Group, Inc.
First Congregational Church
of Western Springs
Forest Preserve District of
Will County
Kittleman & Associates
M.R. Bauer Foundation
McHenry County
Conservation District
Midwest Groundcovers, LLC
R&R Winters Family Foundation
Gene & Rosemary Schuller
Foundation
S&E Bramsen Foundation
Skidmore, Owings & Merrill
The Morton Arboretum
Village & Wilderness
Vivo Foundation
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Wintrust

\$1,000 to \$2,499

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Urban Forestry Organization

\$500 to \$999

Francis Beidler III and Prudence
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Park Ridge Wilderness
Scouts and Princesses
Sirius Fund
York Construction &
Management Services, LLC

\$250 to \$499

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The Trade Desk

INDIVIDUALS

Leadership Circle

*Openlands gratefully
acknowledges the
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of \$1,000 or more.*

\$1,000,000+

Anonymous

\$100,000 to \$500,000

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\$2,500 to \$4,999

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 Dale Shields
 Bill & Dee Spence
 Raymond Stainback
 Keith Struve
 Joseph C. Szabo
 Julie & Dan Wheeler
 Chris & Jodi Wine
 Rosemary Winters
 Lisa Woolford
 Ed Zimkus



I would like to leave
this land as a peaceful place
for reflection, access, and
happiness, and I entrust
it to Openlands to protect
for the future.

David Merz

Openlands is deeply grateful to the Merz family for their generous gift of nearly 18 acres in Hazel Crest, Illinois—now under permanent protection. On this cherished landscape, 12 children grew up surrounded by nature and created lasting memories filled with joy and connection.

Green Legacy Society Members

Thank you to the individuals who have included Openlands in their estate plans, helping to protect nature across the Chicago region for generations to come.

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If you are interested in joining our Green Legacy program and leaving a lasting impact, we welcome you to contact us at development@openlands.org

TreeKeepers Volunteers Faculty

Thank you to the following industry experts who volunteer their time to teach the Openlands TreeKeepers course. TreeKeepers learn how to help keep trees green and growing, volunteering in a variety of situations, including street tree care, tree planting, and advocacy.

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Thank you to the following experts who dedicated their time to support the professional development of educators in the Birds in My Neighborhood Program.

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*For a full list of our 2025 Annual Luncheon sponsors and supporters, please visit:
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The Office of Development makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of this listing. Please contact us at development@openlands.org if your name was omitted or if there was an error in your listing. Thank you.

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Openlands staff have made this organization
You keep the city and suburbs moving forward
and **preserving open spaces** that bring us

Blair Kamin

Openlands 2025
Annual Luncheon



one of **Chicago's nonprofit north stars.**
on the eminently worthy goal of enhancing
closer to nature and to each other.



GATHER





penlands celebrated its 2025 Annual Luncheon on October 17, 2025.

Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic and former *Chicago Tribune* columnist **Blair Kamin** received the **Gerald W. Adelman Conservation Leadership Award**, recognizing his enduring impact on advancing conservation, equity, and public access to nature. Attendees also heard from visionary architect **Carol Ross Barney**, whose keynote reimagined Chicago as a “green, resilient sponge city” designed to work with nature rather than against it.

The event brought together more than 700 civic leaders, friends, conservationists, corporate partners and passionate community advocates. The event marked the debut of Openlands’ strategic plan, setting a roadmap for the next generation of conservation leadership in the region.

Together, the event served as both a celebration and a call to action to act boldly to protect land and invest in conservation at the scale this moment demands.

OPENLANDS 2026 ANNUAL LUNCHEON

Save the date for the Openlands 2026 Annual Luncheon.
Honoring Jean M. Franczyk with the Gerald W. Adelman
Conservation Leadership Award

Wednesday, October 21, 2026
Hilton Chicago
720 S. Michigan Ave
Chicago, IL 60605

Learn more at Openlands.org/AL2026
For information on sponsorship opportunities,
please contact Laura Mueller at lmuller@openlands.org.



SAVE THE DATE

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