



Strategic Plan

2026-2030



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Letter from The CEO

Dear Friends,

Daniel Burnham's words, "make no little plans," are etched into our regional identity. But it is the next line that carries the true challenge of our time: "Make big plans. Aim high in hope and work." At Openlands, we believe that planning is an act of hope and that tomorrow begins with the work we do today.

This strategic plan embodies that spirit. While it charts a five-year course, it also looks ahead to 2050 and beyond. It reflects the thoughtful work of our staff, board, and partners to envision what next-generation conservation must become.

Next-generation conservation means protecting land at the pace and scale that climate and biodiversity imperatives demand. It means treating land as a public good and ensuring all communities share in its abundance. Federal protections and resources are increasingly under strain, with agencies either being asked to do more with less or disappearing altogether. As a regional conservation organization, we must sharpen our focus and act boldly to create systemic change from the bottom up, at the local level where our power has always been strongest. This is how we move beyond defending what remains and begin expanding what is possible.

At the same time, this work is deeply personal. Today, so many people feel anxious, distracted, and disconnected; we need spaces that are both restored and restorative. From tree-lined city streets to a vast prairie landscape, to miles of connected fresh water, the land itself is essential infrastructure. The land is not just a backdrop. When we gather to care for our land, we strengthen our region's vitality and resilience. We strengthen ourselves.

To meet this moment, we are putting forward our land-centered strategic plan built on five mutually reinforcing priorities:

- Land-Centered Leadership
- Resilient & Connected Landscapes
- People & Places
- Conservation Innovation
- Organizational Excellence

These priorities are our blueprint for action and our invitation to you. By 2050, our region will face challenges and opportunities we can scarcely imagine today. Burnham himself said that future generations would do things that would stagger us. We are that future—and the time is now to rise to the moment. Our responsibility is also to pay it forward: to set the stage for those who will follow, and to aim high together, as an organization and as a region.

Join us as we conserve, connect, and create — together.

With gratitude,

Michael S. Davidson
President & CEO, Openlands



Letter from the Board Chair & Strategic Planning Committee Chair

Dear Friends,

Our region is where a global city meets one of the planet's most vital sources of fresh water, bountiful agricultural soils, and some of its rarest and most important ecosystems. Here, beneath the intensity of metropolitan life, people remain deeply connected to nature. Our cities shape the land and water, and in turn, the health of our natural environment shapes the well-being of our communities.

Openlands was founded on this understanding. As one of the oldest metropolitan conservation organizations in the country, we have always focused on creating a region where everyone can live well — with clean water, fresh air, and nearby access to nature. In a region like ours, where the built and natural environments sit side by side, people and nature must be considered together. People often serve as the voices for the land, reminding us all of the value and vitality of a natural landscape.

Over the past six decades, Openlands has been a steady force through changing times and shifting priorities at every level of government. Our strength comes from adaptability and collaboration — working alongside civic leaders, communities, and peer organizations to solve complex challenges. This drive to innovate has led to many national firsts. We helped establish the nation's first National Heritage Area: the Illinois & Michigan Canal National Heritage Corridor. This groundbreaking model has since inspired 62 similar areas across the country. We also incubated impactful organizations like Alliance for the Great Lakes and Friends of the Chicago River. Openlands championed the first municipal protections for Chicago's iconic lakefront and led the formal protection of the country's first National Tallgrass Prairie. What begins at Openlands often sparks ripple effects that influence conservation across the region and the nation.

A strategy is only as strong as the people who bring it to life. At Openlands, we are fortunate to have a committed board, staff, and network of partners ready to act with creativity, determination, and persistence. We will keep thinking boldly and advancing this work, and we invite you to join us in protecting and connecting the places that make our region thrive.

In partnership,

Alan M. Bell
Board Chair, Openlands

Lynn Buhl
Board Strategic Planning Committee Chair, Openlands



Mission, Vision & Values

Mission

Openlands protects the natural and open spaces of northeastern Illinois and the surrounding region to ensure cleaner air and water, protect natural habitats and wildlife, and help balance and enrich our lives.

Vision

Openlands' vision for the region is a landscape that includes a vast network of land and water trails, tree-lined streets, and intimate public gardens within easy reach of everyone. It also includes parks and preserves big enough to provide natural habitat and to give visitors a sense of the vast prairies, woodlands, and wetlands that were here before the cities. In sum, Openlands believes that protected open space is critical for the quality of life in our region.

About Our 2026– Strategy

For more than 60 years, our mission and vision have guided Openlands. While our purpose remains constant, the coming years will bring rapid change at every level of government and in the landscapes we share. These shifts will test our region's resilience and call for bold, local leadership and collaboration.

Our 2026–2030 strategy doubles down on where Openlands leads best: our unwavering focus on land. Over the next five years, we will ground our work in land as the foundation of a connected and resilient region for people and wildlife.



Values

How we work is just as important as what we work on. Our new values capture the principles that guide how we honor one another, approach our work, and advance our mission together. They will serve as the foundation for—and guide us through—our new five-year strategy.

Integrity

We do what's right, even when it's difficult or when no one is watching. We hold ourselves to the highest standards of excellence, as individuals and as an organization. We show up with purpose, honesty, courage, and compassion.

Respect

We listen and act with care. We value the contributions of our coworkers, partners, and communities, recognizing that diverse perspectives make our work stronger and our impact greater.

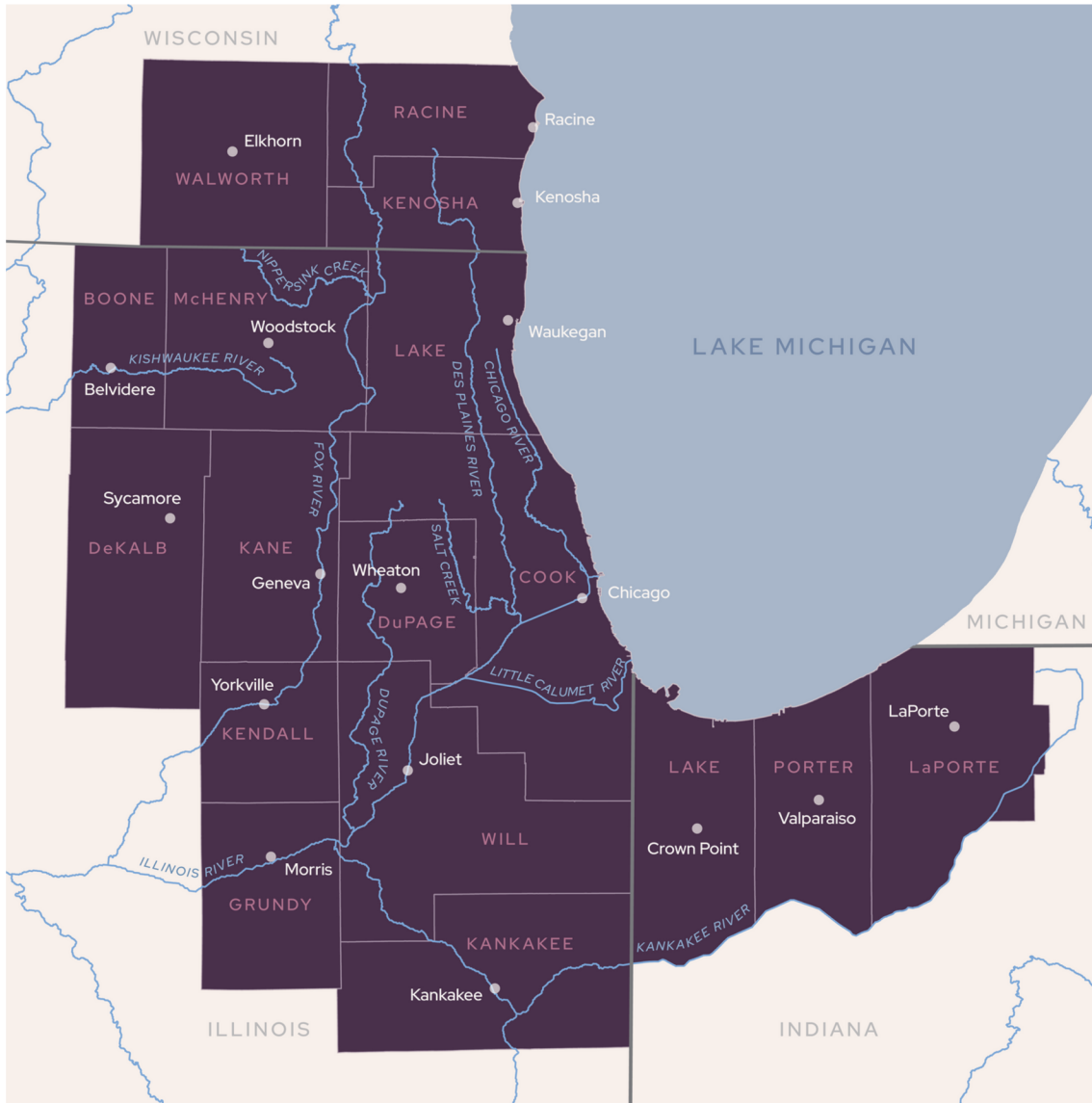
Accountability

We get things done. We own our actions and learn from our mistakes. By creating transparency in our processes and decision-making, we foster collective trust and move forward together.

Strategic

We focus on the long term while making informed decisions today. We use data, expertise, and experience to tackle systemic challenges intentionally, leveraging all available resources to maximize our impact.

Where We Work



10 Million
people

5.6 Million
acres of land

169 Miles
of Lake Michigan shoreline

9 Major
river systems



The Openlands service area spans 17 counties across three states—one of the most complex jurisdictional landscapes in the nation. Over the past 60 years, Openlands has built the relationships needed to work across these boundaries, supporting a region of 340,000 businesses and 484 communities that depend on resilient natural systems. At the center is Chicago, home to nearly a quarter of the population, where even in the region’s densest urban core, 155 miles of riverfront and 30 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline reveal how nature and city are inseparably intertwined—connecting neighborhoods while supporting recreation, wildlife, and industry.

A Region of Global Importance

The greater Chicago metropolitan area is home to a remarkable mix of ecosystems: prairies, wetlands, rivers, woodlands, savannas, dunes, and more.

These natural areas are local treasures and vital on a national and global scale. From the tree-lined street in Chicago to Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, this land provides critical habitat for threatened and endangered species found nowhere else. The land protects globally significant freshwater resources and serves as a critical refuge for wildlife, especially millions of migratory birds each fall and spring. Protecting these landscapes preserves biodiversity and makes our region beautiful and resilient.

A Hub for Conservation

This region is one of the most active conservation hubs in the country. Landscapes such as the Indiana Dunes and Volo Bog helped establish ecology as a distinct and critical field of study. It is home to the nation’s first and largest forest preserve and a network of local and global institutions that shape conservation. Thousands of volunteers give time and talent year-round to restore these lands, and Openlands contributes by bringing expertise, resources, and advocacy to strengthen and expand these efforts.



Where We Focus

Openlands focuses our work where we can have the greatest impact. We consider three key factors when defining our service area:

- Ecosystems and species most in need of protection
- Places where millions of residents can easily access nature close to home
- Areas where strong partnerships can take root and accelerate conservation efforts, with a focus on marginalized and historically disinvested communities

Our Get Outside and Paddle Northeastern Illinois maps help people find parks, preserves, rivers, beaches, and trails close to home. We believe nature belongs in daily life, and everyone—of all abilities—should have easy access to it.

Linking Land and Policy

Nature does not recognize political or jurisdictional boundaries, yet our decision-making systems do. Openlands works closely with multiple levels of government to shape conservation policies and investment, which is why we define our service area using county boundaries. At the same time, these boundaries are guided by the natural features that matter most—watersheds, headwaters, and ecosystems.

Land is at the center of this work. Resilient landscapes—whether forests, prairies, farms, or wetlands—support clean water, strong communities, and a thriving economy. Protecting and managing these lands improves water quality, reduces flooding, and strengthens habitat across the region.

This protection takes many forms, from large natural areas that safeguard wildlife and water supplies, to restored wetlands and native plantings that filter rainfall, to green infrastructure in urban neighborhoods. Together, these efforts link land and water, creating resilient places for both people and nature.



Blueprint for Impact

The Challenge

Our region is losing land far faster than we are protecting it. Today, less than 8% is safeguarded for future generations—and for every acre preserved, more than two acres are lost to development. This pace of land loss outstrips both population and economic growth, pushing our communities and natural systems toward an unsustainable future.

Why it Matters

Land is one of our most precious natural assets. Resilient land sustains biodiversity and the ecosystems that support human health, while providing clean air and water, safeguarding public health, and enhancing quality of life for all. In the years ahead, new generations may seek refuge from a changing climate and political instability, drawn to our region for its freshwater resources and livable climate. This growth brings both opportunity and responsibility. We must ensure that our landscapes' natural assets are protected and sustained as a public good.

Collaboration At Every Level

Protecting this region is far bigger than any one organization. Openlands builds partnerships at every level to amplify impact because conservation succeeds only when it is shared. Many of our collaborators are not conservation groups by name, yet they recognize the essential role of healthy land and water in sustaining strong communities and a thriving economy.

At the heart of this work are our closest conservation partners who carry the mission with us:

- Neighborhoods, through grassroots leaders and groups like TreeKeepers and Friends of Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge
- Regionally, through alliances such as Chicago Wilderness Alliance and the Chicago Region Trees Initiative
- Statewide, through networks like Illinois Environmental Council and Prairie State Conservation Coalition
- Nationally, as a member of the Land Trust Alliance and the Alliance for Community Trees

Together, these partnerships allow us to operate at the scale this region demands—linking local action to regional, statewide, and national strategies that protect and connect the places that sustain us all.

Our Priorities

To protect the landscapes that sustain our region, Openlands must act with focus and urgency. This strategic plan outlines five priorities where Openlands will invest our resources over the next five years. Each is distinct, yet together they form a unified approach.



Ultimate Impact

Our work over the next five years will lay the groundwork for 2050 and beyond, ensuring land is resilient, sustains biodiversity, supports every community, and thrives for future generations.



STRATEGIC PRIORITY

Land-Centered Leadership

We will use influence to position land conservation as a key driver of environmental health and local and regional vitality.

Target

By 2030, we will unlock \$150M in new state and local investment for land and water conservation.

Goals & Tactics

- Work with government and civic leaders to uphold and shape policies and decisions that prioritize land conservation
 - Mobilize constituencies to drive action and secure lasting conservation outcomes
 - Increase public awareness of how land conservation helps solve societal challenges
 - Pursue novel research and thought leadership opportunities to advance land conservation
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Measuring Success

We will measure our success by the policy and funding initiatives adopted, and the public awareness built about land conservation's role in solving societal challenges.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY

Resilient & Connected Landscapes

We will build a cohesive network of conserved lands and waterways.

Target

By 2030, Openlands will conserve an additional 10,000 acres of land through protection and restoration initiatives.

Goals & Tactics

- Protect critical habitats and expand parks, preserves, and natural spaces
 - Reestablish natural connectivity by creating resilient land and water corridors
 - Increase land conservation practices on privately owned lands
 - Restore land to ecological health
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**Measuring
Success**

We will measure our success by the increase in contiguous conserved land across the region, as well as improved ecological indicators, including biodiversity, tree canopy coverage, and soil and water quality.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY

People & Places

We will center land conservation in community life and identity.

Target

By 2030, Openlands will increase physical access to nature for at least 1 million residents through policy initiatives and community programs.

Goals & Tactics

- Build community capacity for land ownership and conservation leadership
 - Support community-led initiatives that use land conservation to enhance quality of life
 - Advance community efforts in adaptive land stewardship
 - Strengthen the conservation economy in ways that contribute to the management and preservation of land
-

**Measuring
Success**

We will measure our success by the accessibility of new land to local residents and by the number of people caring for those lands in our region.



STRATEGIC PRIORITY

Conservation Innovation

We will strengthen the field of land conservation through novel solutions and collaborations.

Target

By 2030, Openlands will pioneer five innovative conservation solutions that address critical gaps in the region's land and water systems and can be scaled or replicated elsewhere.

Goals & Tactics

- Identify and test program innovations that can accelerate the pace and scale of land conservation
 - Incubate conservation-focused ventures that address gaps in the market and have the potential to scale independently
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Measuring Success

We will measure success by the growth and impact of our innovation pathway, tracking new ideas, pilots, partnerships, and, over five years, the replication and sustainable scaling of our models.



STRATEGIC PRIORITY

Organizational Excellence

We will achieve a high level of performance across all aspects of the organization.

Target	By 2030, Openlands will grow our combined strategic operating reserve and general endowment by 30%.
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Goals & Tactics

- Embed Openlands' values into recruitment, operations, and organizational culture
 - Ensure long-term financial sustainability
 - Align staff, systems, and practices
 - Strengthen board engagement and governance practices
 - Adopt a discipline of measurement and evaluation
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Measuring Success	We will measure success by growth in the combined operating reserve and endowment, with steady gains achieved through diversified investments and board-approved policies that ensure sustainability and accessibility.
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Strategy Snapshot

Openlands 2026-2030 Strategic Plan

Openlands is a leading regional conservation nonprofit and a nationally accredited land trust. We use land conservation to safeguard the environment and strengthen our communities. Protected land is a public good, and everyone deserves access to nature and its benefits. Our work includes land preservation, policy and planning, civic leadership, and community programs.

For more than 60 years, we've helped protect places you know and love—from the Chicago lakefront and Indiana Dunes, to North Park Village, Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, Openlands Lakeshore Preserve, and Hackmatack National Wildlife Refuge.

Strategy Snapshot

The Challenge

For every acre of land we protect, more than two are lost to development—putting the future of our communities and natural systems at risk.

Why it Matters

Resilient land provides clean air, safe water, and a high quality of life. As our region grows, we must act now to protect it as a public good.

By the Numbers

10 million people
5.6 million acres of land
17 counties

Our 2026-2030 Strategic Priorities

As we enter a period of rapid change—across government, communities, and the landscape—our land-focused strategy rises to meet the moment. Over the next five years, we will anchor our work in land as the foundation of a connected and resilient region for both people and wildlife.

This plan is organized around five mutually reinforcing priorities, each with a clear target for 2030:

PRIORITY	2030 TARGET
Land-Centered Leadership	Unlock \$150M in new state and local investment for land and water conservation
Resilient & Connected Landscapes	Conserve an additional 10,000 acres of land through protection and restoration initiatives
People & Places	Increase physical access to nature for at least 1 million residents, through policy initiatives and community programs
Conservation Innovation	Pioneer five innovative conservation solutions that address critical gaps in the region's land and water systems and can be scaled or replicated elsewhere
Organizational Excellence	Grow our combined strategic operating reserve and general endowment by 30%



Protecting the land we love is up to all of us.
Explore, volunteer, or give at Openlands.org.



openlands
conserving nature for life