

OPENLANDS

2018

2022

strategic plan



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 every city dweller. 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 of our region.





Dear Friends,

Since 1963, Openlands has been at the forefront of the Chicago region's conservation movement. To succeed in this work, we select projects that transform our communities, enrich the way we teach our children, expand how we understand and interact with nature, and reconnect and heal the ecology of our landscapes and waterways.

To guide our work until 2023, Openlands has adopted this strategic plan. During the next five years, we will lead the Chicago-region conservation community toward systemic change that:

- ***Builds toward an interconnected, protected, and healthy system of land and water in priority landscapes***
- ***Develops a broad and deep coalition of individuals, organizations, and agencies***
- ***Responds to the challenges of climate change***
- ***Commits to the human and financial resources needed to advance this work***

With this plan, we affirm our commitment to projects that shape the region and ensure that Openlands has the capacity and resources to realize these goals.

We invite you to share in our excitement and commitment as we begin this inspiring next phase of work at Openlands.

Sincerely,

Carrie C. McNally
CARRIE C. MCNALLY
CHAIR, BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Gary Adelman
GERALD W. ADELMANN
PRESIDENT AND CEO

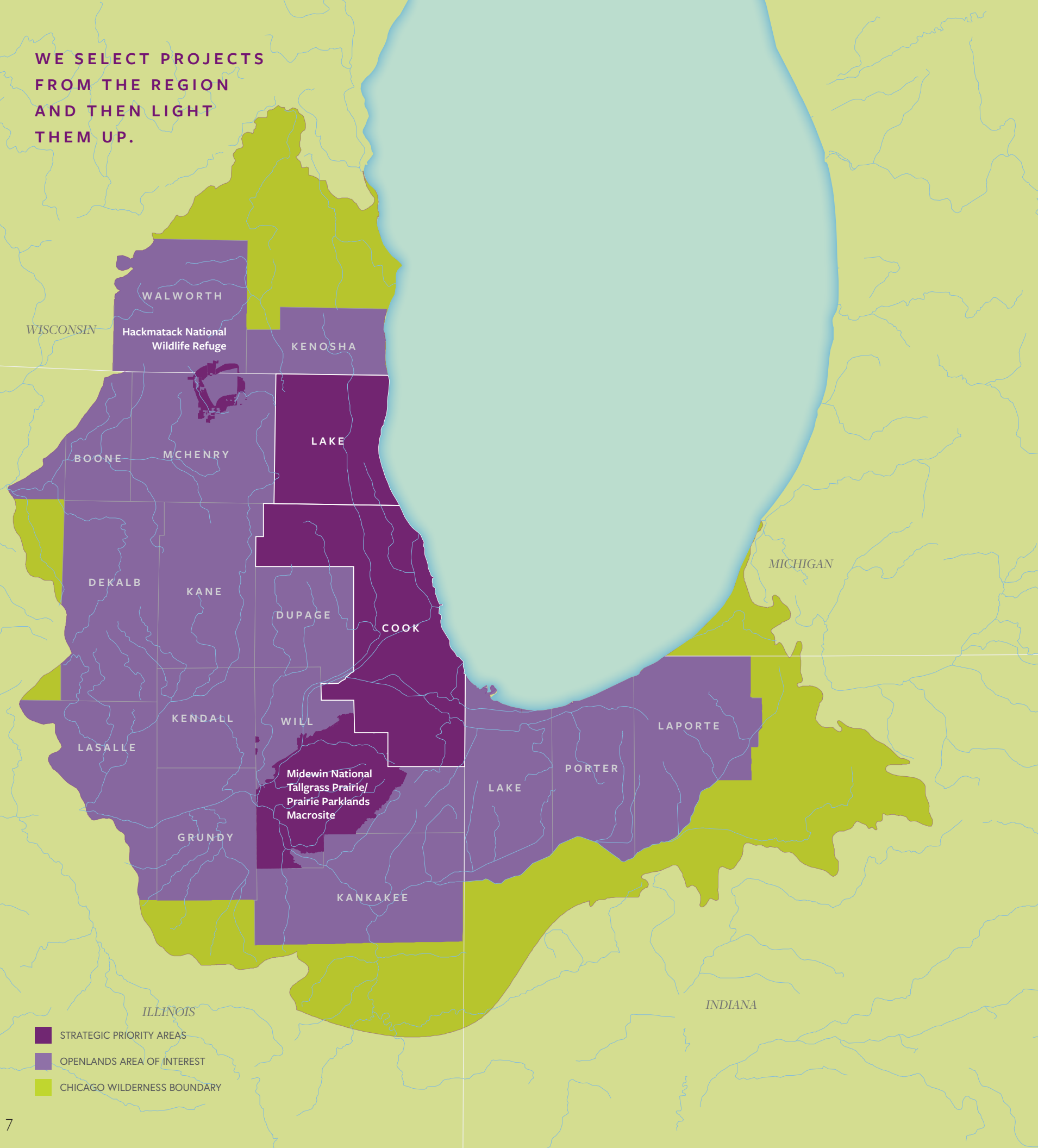
WHAT MAKES OPENLANDS SPECIAL?

The Chicago region has one of the most complicated geo-political landscapes in the nation covering three states. Northeastern Illinois has more units of local government than any other metropolitan region in the nation. Land use decisions are made daily within these constrained municipal boundaries, often in isolation, and with a limited view of the broader geographical consequences to the region's health, resilience, and biodiversity. By contrast, rivers, streams, trails, habitat, and landscape-scale projects do not respect these political boundaries. They need a champion with a region-wide perspective.

Since Openlands' founding, we have played a critical role as the only conservation organization looking systematically across the region at the relationship between a thriving natural environment, urban growth, and comprehensive land-use planning.



WE SELECT PROJECTS
FROM THE REGION
AND THEN LIGHT
THEM UP.



- STRATEGIC PRIORITY AREAS
- OPENLANDS AREA OF INTEREST
- CHICAGO WILDERNESS BOUNDARY

OUR PROJECTS, IN TURN, LIGHT UP THE REGION.

We confidently take on initiatives that light up our whole region, such as advocating for stronger water quality standards, removing barriers to conservation farming practices and local food production, and creating the region’s first headwater streams plan. We are an incubator for innovative pilots like Space to Grow and the restoration of Deer Grove Forest Preserve, which demonstrate how revitalizing community places can serve as inspiration for regional, even global, change. These projects transform our communities, enrich the way we teach our children, expand how we understand and interact with nature, and reconnect and heal the ecology of our waterways.

We are an important organizational partner and trusted convener. We do not hesitate to join the fight against major transportation and infrastructure projects that would impact critical natural and agricultural resources. We build coalitions, provide leadership, and litigate when prudent.

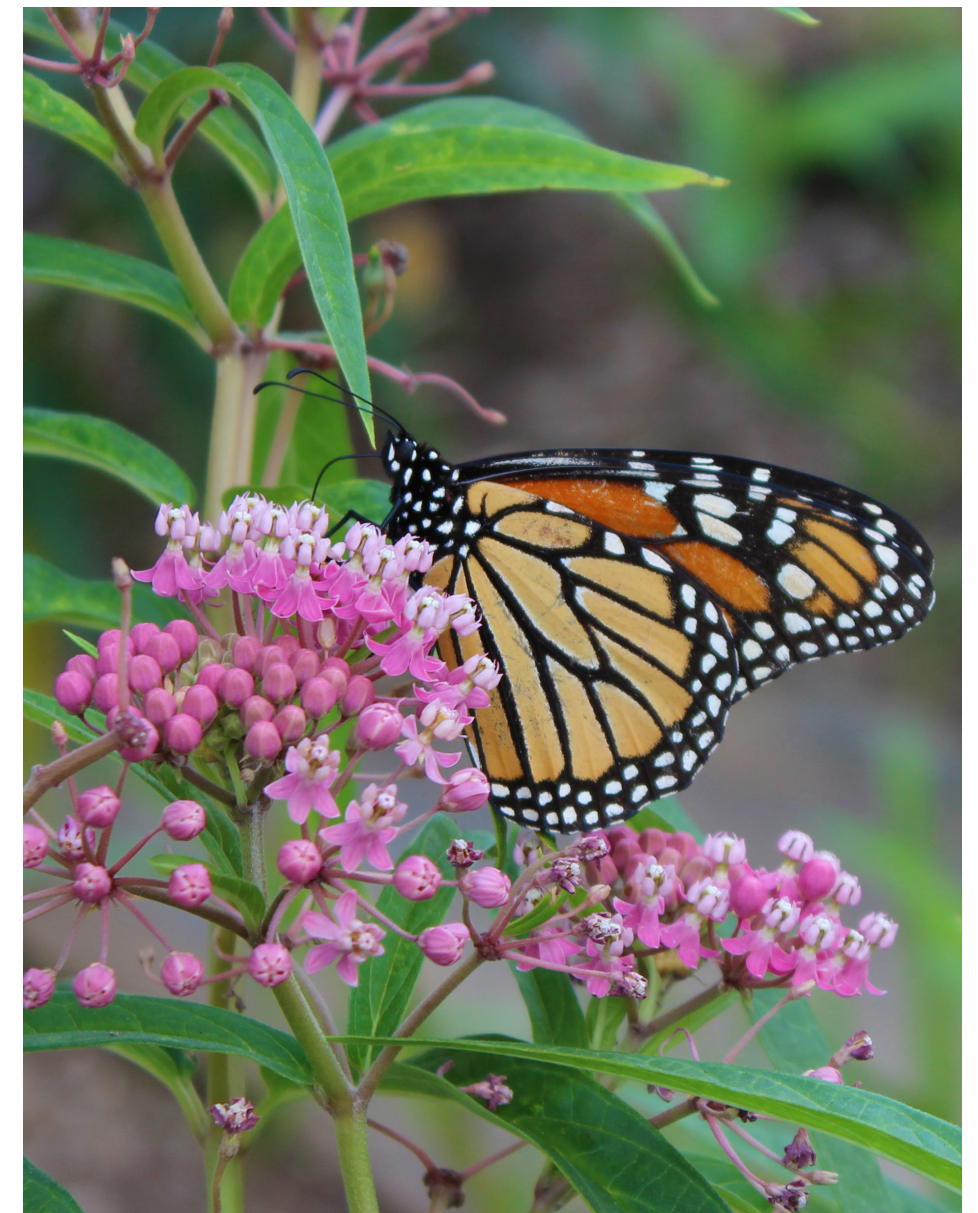




WE PERSIST AND ENDURE.

Our initiatives have led to the creation of the nation's first comprehensive metropolitan greenways and waterways trail plans. These frameworks have been implemented over time, resulting in dramatic open space and recreational outcomes affecting our entire region.

We reaffirm our commitment to projects that shape our region.



OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

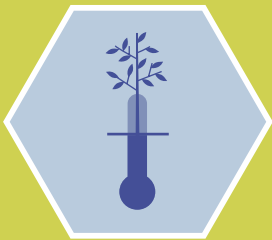
Openlands' 2018 – 2022
Strategic Plan includes four
main priorities to guide our
next phase of work:



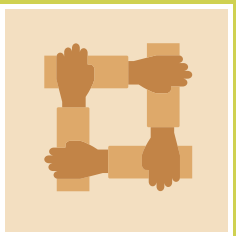
PROTECT PRIORITY
LANDSCAPES



BUILD ADVOCATES
FOR NATURE



ADVANCE NATURE-BASED
SOLUTIONS TO COMBAT
CLIMATE CHANGE



STRENGTHEN THE HUMAN
AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES
OF OUR ORGANIZATION



1

PROTECT PRIORITY LANDSCAPES



Protected open space is critical for not just the health of our land and water, but for the quality of life of our region.

Openlands will continue to work with our partners and friends across the many special landscapes in our region, and we will focus in particular on four of these landscapes over the course of this plan. What we learn by going “all in” here will inform our work far into the future.

COOK COUNTY

Cook County's 1,635 square miles include densely populated urban areas, swathes of open land, and a sizable corner of beautiful Lake Michigan.

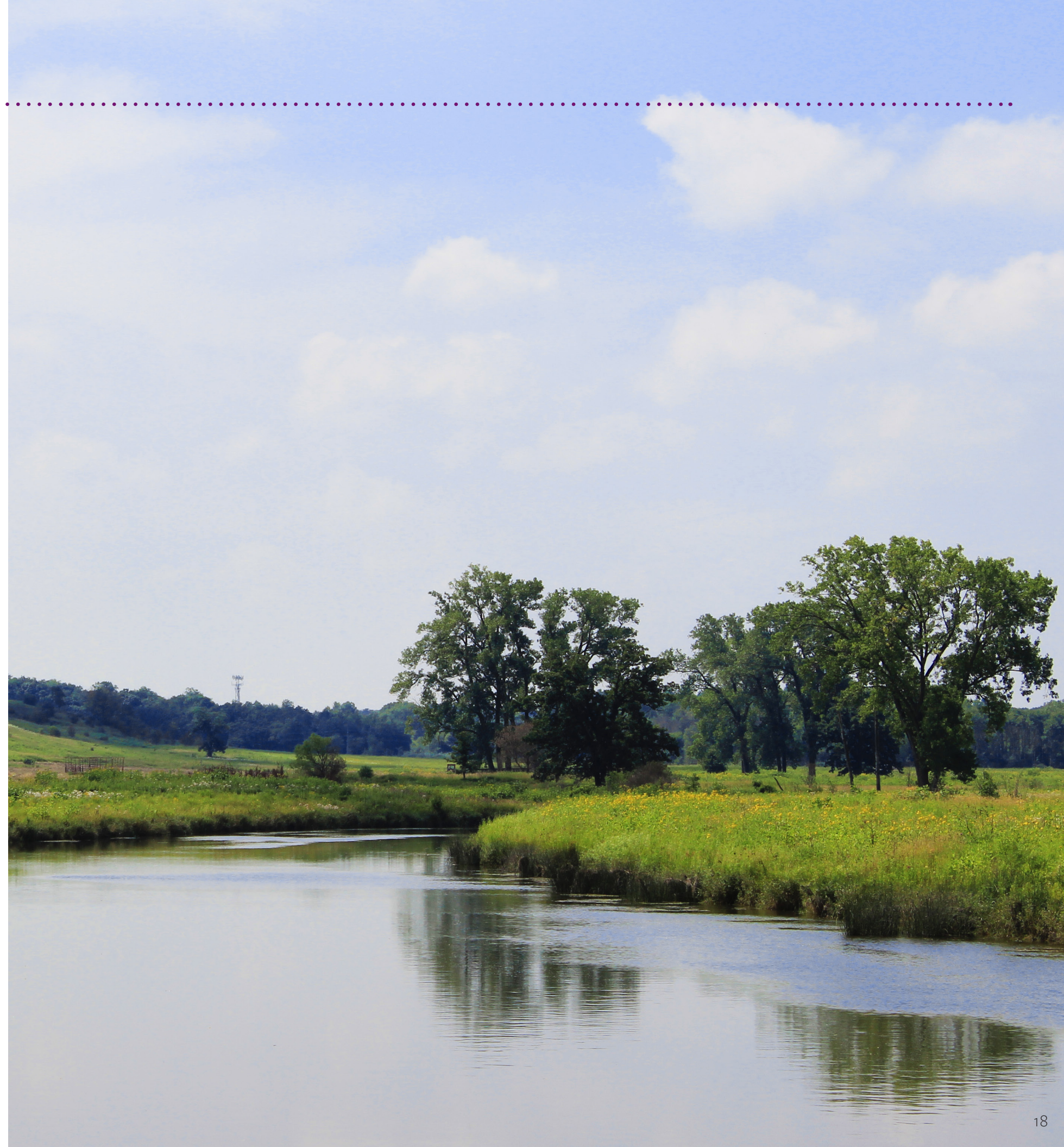
By 2023, Openlands will engage more residents in Cook County where they live with diverse and exceptional programs that deepen their appreciation for the rich natural and cultural heritage of their communities. We will amplify the number of residents who paddle Chicago's rivers, justifying stronger protections for our waters and inspiring revitalization of their banks. Communities across Cook County will express resounding support for unprecedented restoration, acquisition, and connection to their world-renowned forest preserve system on the ten-year anniversary of the *Next Century Conservation Plan*.



HACKMATACK NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Established in 2012 as a mosaic of protected lands spanning the Illinois-Wisconsin border, this national wildlife refuge provides habitat for grassland birds; recreation and education opportunities for the more than 12 million residents of the metropolitan areas of Chicago, Madison, Milwaukee, and Rockford; and economic support for local communities.

By 2023, Openlands will inspire residents to preserve thousands of acres within the refuge. We will work collaboratively to prevent major threats, such as tollways, from cutting through this glacial landscape of ancient kames and old oak savannas. We will raise regional awareness of the diversity of its pristine headwater streams and globally significant wildlife such as whooping cranes and Blanding's turtles.



LAKE COUNTY

Lake County encompasses many of Illinois' most outstanding natural areas that include towering oaks, rare ravines, glacial lakes, and expansive prairies.

By 2023, Openlands will inspire many residents across Lake County to manage their properties as healthy habitats for plants, birds, butterflies, and other native species. We will showcase models of healthy and gorgeous landscapes and invite visitors from across the region to experience the ravines and bluffs of the Openlands Lakeshore Preserve. We will engage thousands of people in caring for and protecting the lands they love in ways that protect their investment in this rich tapestry of blue and green.



PRAIRIE PARKLANDS MACROSITE

MIDEWIN NATIONAL TALLGRASS PRAIRIE

This magnificent tract of land southwest of Chicago is the country's first national tallgrass prairie. Openlands helped to lead the coalition that transformed Joliet Arsenal into Midewin, which is the largest open space in northeastern Illinois and the largest tallgrass prairie restoration east of the Mississippi River.

By 2023, Openlands will catalyze the adoption of plans that assure land uses complement, rather than compete with, one other. We will help to secure thousands of acres of heritage farms, protect the water quality of pristine prairie rivers, and ensure enduring protection with new allies of Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie.

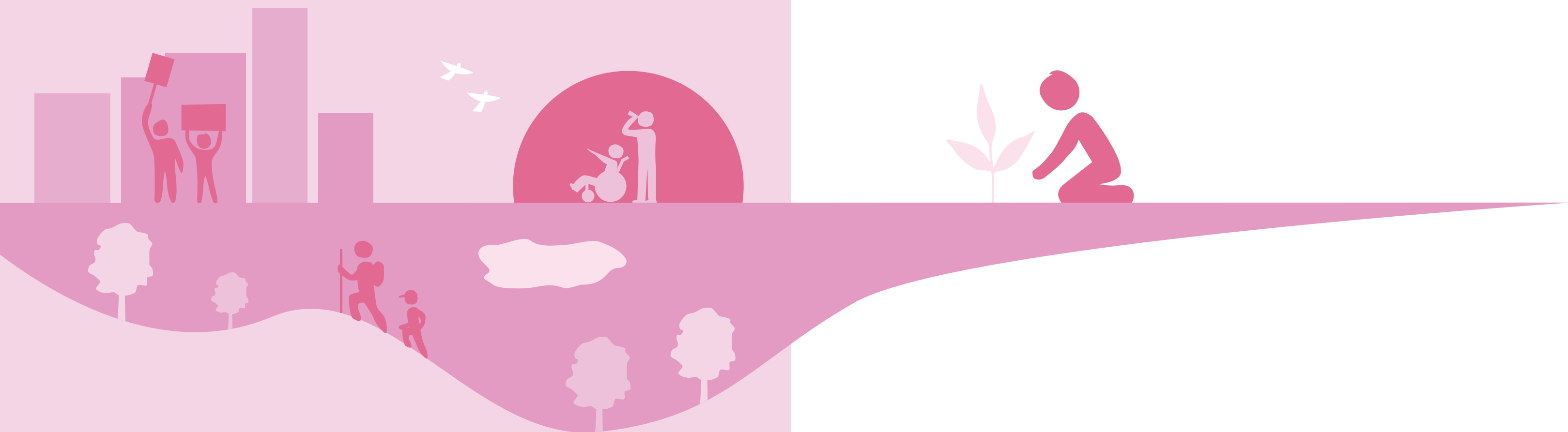


2

BUILD ADVOCATES FOR NATURE

It takes people to steward the land.

People are core to Openlands' work, and they have been since our founding as a project of the Welfare Council of Greater Chicago. We believe that nature is vital to all people and that our health, welfare, and quality of life are improved by nature. We plant trees in neighborhoods and protect the region's wild lands and waters for people. We measure success in acres of protected land and numbers of people engaged. We understand that human allies are key to sustaining the balance of our entire ecosystem. Openlands commits to working with communities to build a more resilient region.





By 2023, Openlands will increase the number of people paddling on the Chicago river system by improving the number of access points, coordinating water quality training, and emphasizing issues relevant to the adjacent waterway. We will build advocates for river and community health.



By 2023, Openlands will plant and maintain thousands of trees along public parkways and in parks by collaborating with community organizations and local governments. Residents will gain a deeper understanding of the value of trees, which reduce flooding, cool heat islands, and build community resilience in the face of climate change. Our TreeKeepers program will be offered in Spanish with fully translated materials.

2 BUILD ADVOCATES FOR NATURE



By 2023, Openlands will complete the construction of 34 new schoolyards and will be poised to implement the Space to Grow program more broadly to transform public schoolyards into vibrant spaces to play, learn, and be outside, while helping residents to reduce urban flooding.



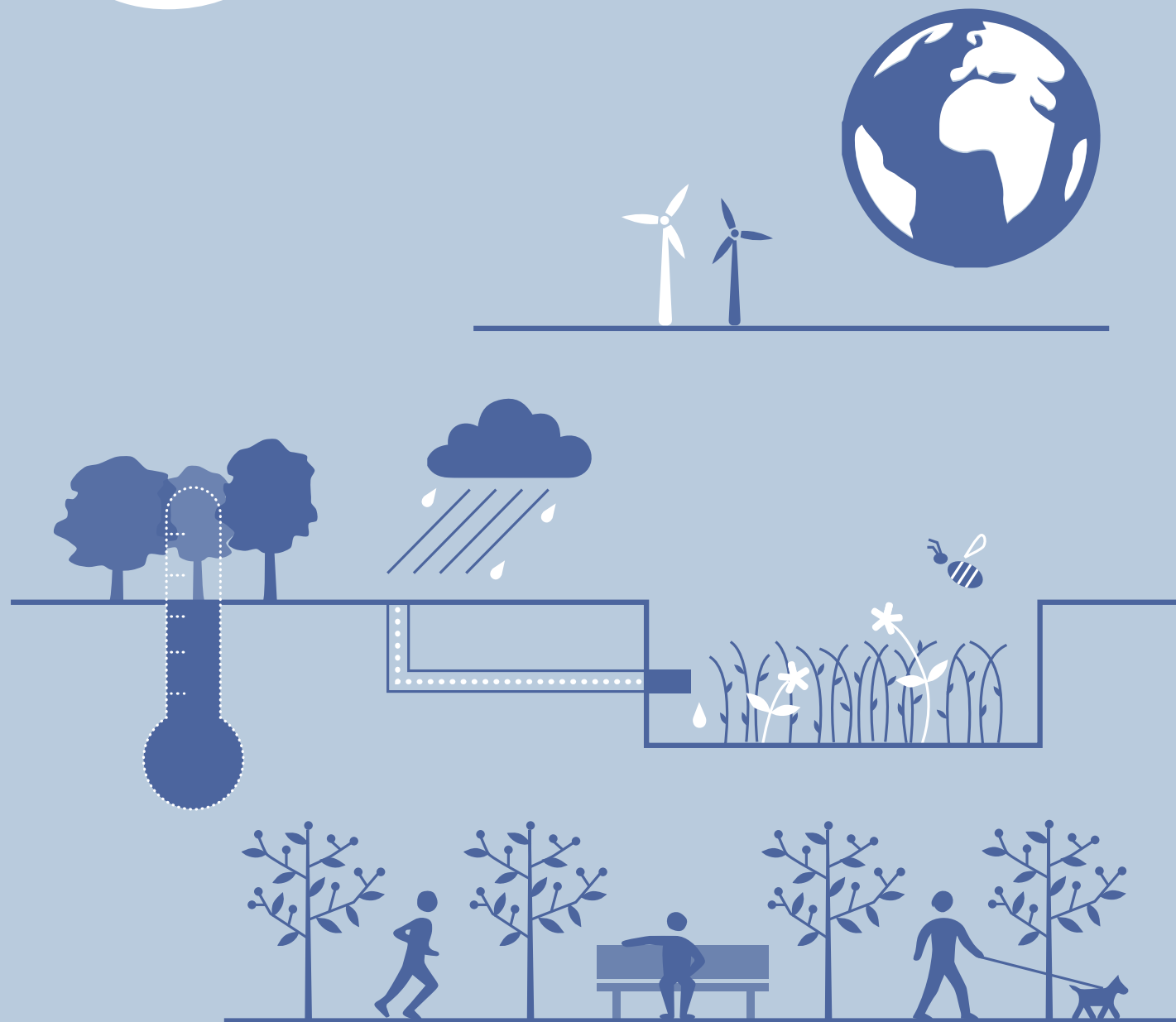
By 2023, with the leadership and enthusiasm of hundreds of volunteers, Openlands will introduce thousands of students from public schools in Chicago and across our priority landscapes to the natural world around them.

At 100 public schools across Chicago, Openlands will provide continuing education to the school community by conducting English and bi-lingual garden and nature education workshops that help teachers and community gardeners feel confident to use their schoolyard gardens.



3

ADVANCE NATURE- BASED SOLUTIONS TO COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE



The growing threat of climate change demands coordinated action at every level.

Cities and regions can—and have a responsibility to—prioritize and confront this global threat. In the Chicago region, climate change is currently being felt in unusual weather extremes: warmer winters with deeper snow, wetter springs with more intense rainfall, and warmer summers scorched with drought. All of these conditions have cascading impacts on our communities and lives. Openlands commits to using nature-based solutions to transform how our region addresses climate change.



3 COMBAT CLIMATE CHANGE

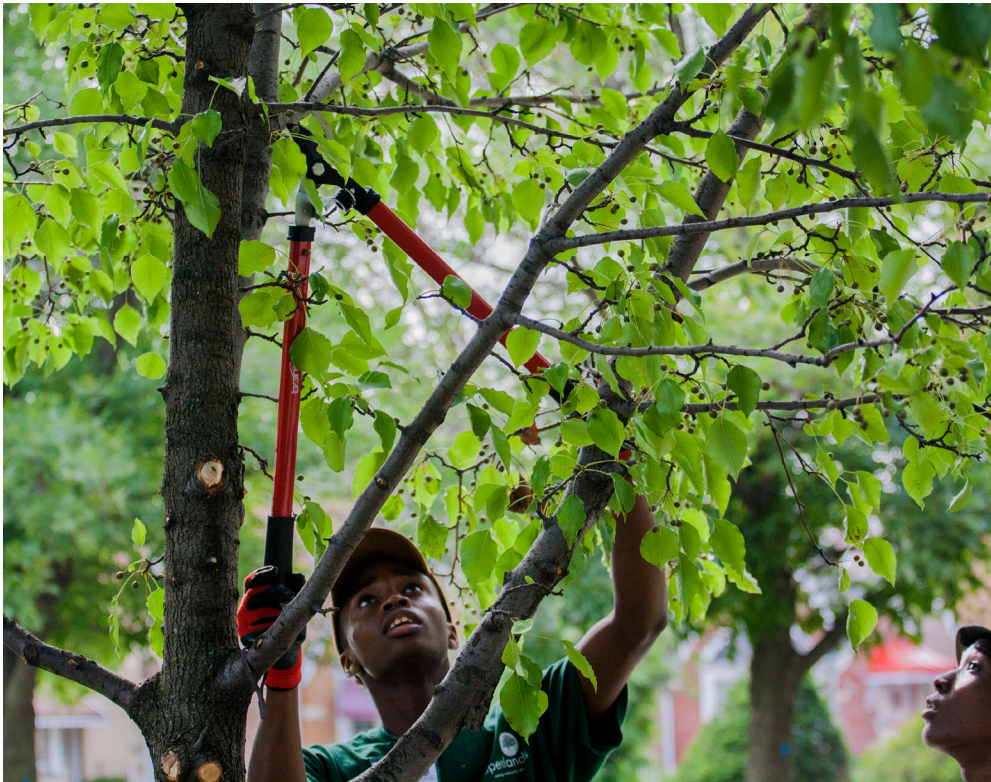
By 2023, Openlands will work with others to support our vision for an interconnected and climate-resilient system of land and water throughout the Chicago region. We will use established resiliency-based metrics. We will develop, champion, and implement a wide array of nature-based solutions. We will encourage resilient places in the face of a changing climate.



Farmland, trails, parks, and preserves link our region together in a vibrant web of green that allows plant and animal species to move and adapt.



Restored grasslands and healthy forests remove carbon from the atmosphere.



Shade from trees reduces heat islands—large, concrete areas that retain heat—in our communities.



Green space in schoolyards and neighborhoods helps to reduce flooding.

4

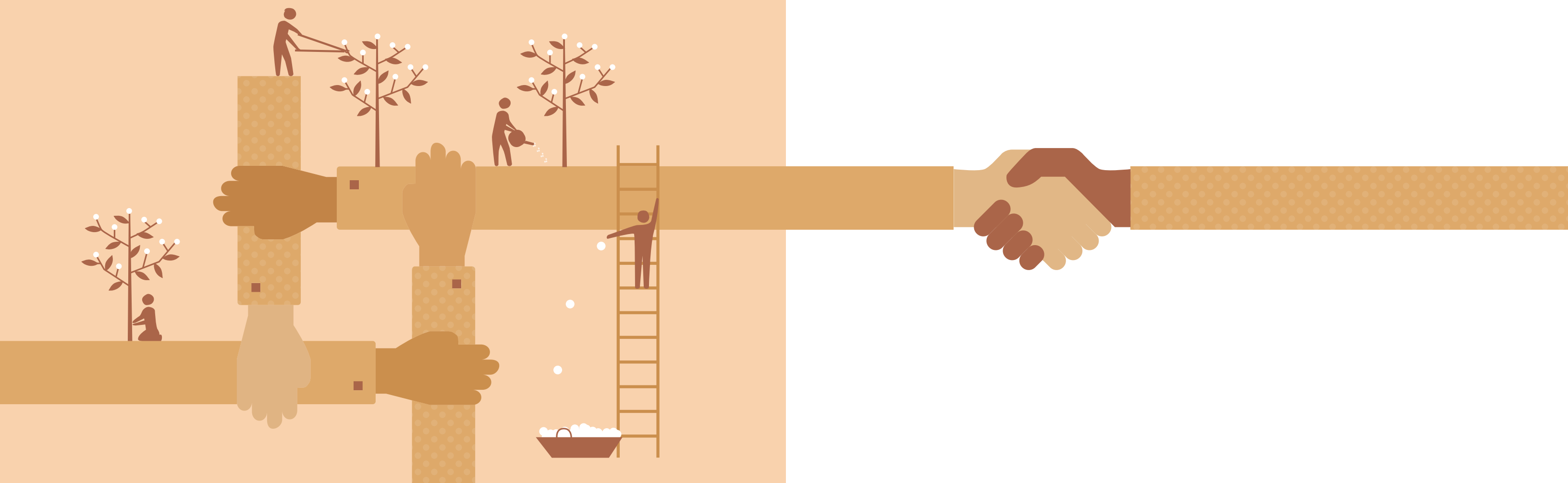
STRENGTHEN THE HUMAN AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES OF OUR ORGANIZATION

The effectiveness and impact of our work is directly tied to the strength of our organization.

Openlands commits to ensuring that we are strong and highly functioning at every level of operation. As much as we have accomplished, we strive for more. Building organizational capacity is ongoing and essential.

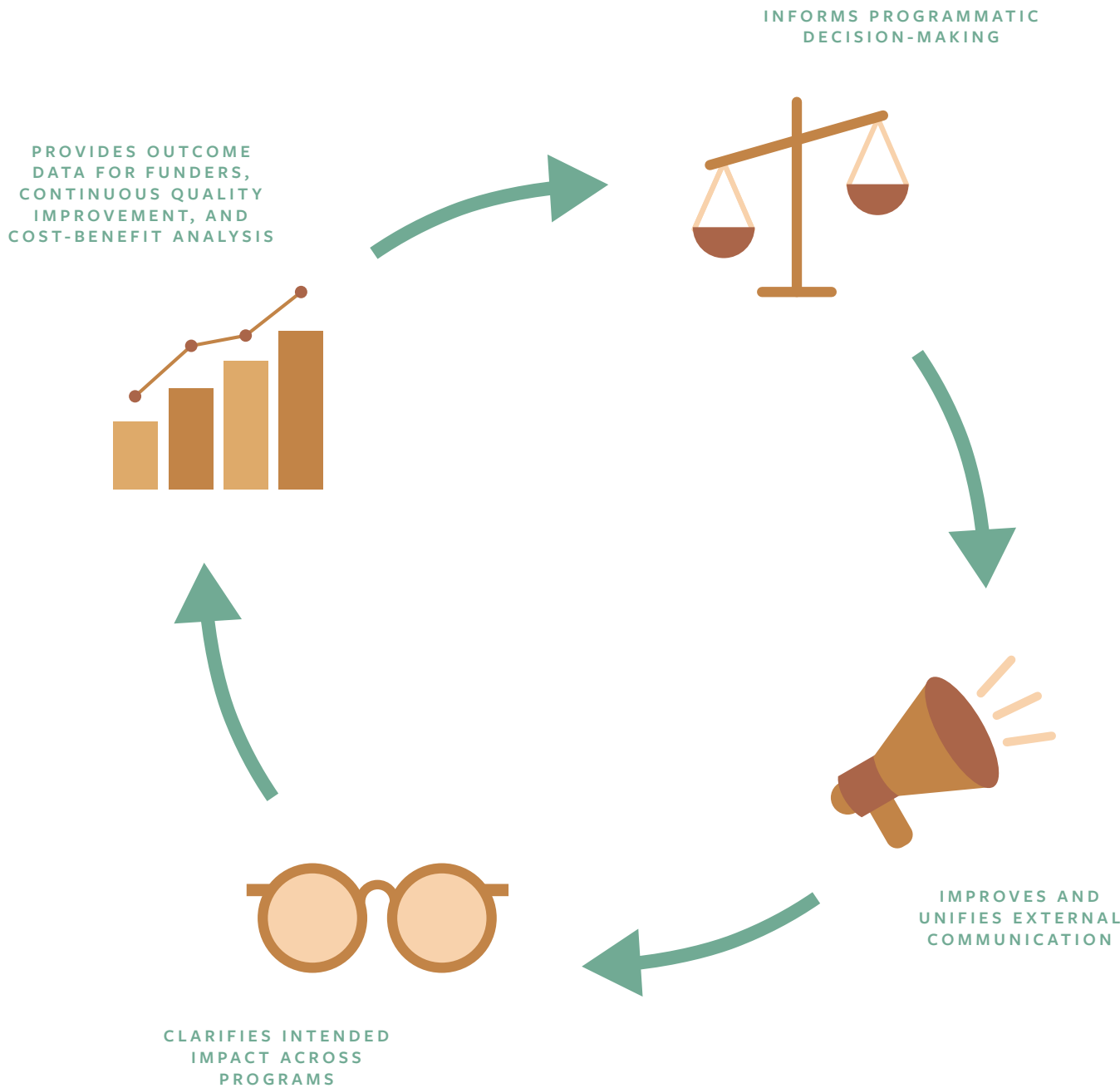
Five years from now:

- *Our staff and board will reflect breadth, depth, and diversity of skills and backgrounds.*
- *The resources we need—financial, relational, operational—will be solidly in place.*
- *We will be fully prepared for the succession of the CEO.*



EVALUATION: MAKING THE CASE

At Openlands, we believe that program evaluation is every bit as important as program implementation. We want to know—through well-constructed studies and evidence—what impact our work is having and what improvements are needed to maximize that impact. For Openlands, such evaluation is a measure of not just program quality but our own organizational integrity.



“

“A region that includes a tapestry of parks and natural habitats—including native trees along its streets and roadways, and community and school gardens—is a city that honors nature, that recognizes the sense of inquiry and wonder that encounters with birds and butterflies and bats inspire.... Such a city honors its people too.”

- Wendy Paulson in “City Creatures”
(OPENLANDS BOARD MEMBER)

“Ecological restoration is the process by which humans relearn the realities of the place, the importance of acquired wisdom and knowledge, and the relationship that the resident human culture must develop with the place, and its biota.”

- Gerould Wilhelm, “What is Ecological Restoration and Why is it Important?”
(CO-AUTHOR OF “FLORA OF THE CHICAGO REGION”)

“Our work should raise the threshold of hope.”

- George Overton
(OPENLANDS CO-FOUNDER)

in the
process

“Public spaces always need vigilant champions, not only to claim them at the outset for public use, but to design them for the people that use them, then to maintain them to ensure that they are for everyone, that they are not violated, invaded, abandon or ignored.”

- Amanda Burden at TED 2014
(NEW YORK CITY’S FORMER CHIEF PLANNER)

“The debate over climate change is no longer about what causes global warming. Rather, the issue is how to ensure that billions of at-risk people and businesses around the world can rapidly adapt and ensure that their communities are as resilient as possible.”

- World Economic Forum, 11/13/18

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Photography: (in order of appearance) pp2-8, Patrick Williams; p9 top, Patrick Williams; p9 bottom, Jasmin Shah; p12, p15, Patrick Williams; p16, Metropolitan Water Reclamation District; p17, Aimee Collins; p18, Brandon Hayes; p19 Patrick Williams; p20, Daniel Kullman; pp21-26, Patrick Williams; p27 top, Patrick Williams; p27 bottom, Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago; p29, Jasmin Shah; p31, Rachel Cheung; p32 top and lower right, Patrick Williams; p32 lower left, Marwen; p37-38, Rachel Cheung



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