THE CENTURY PLAN

SOLVING FOR TOMORROW, TODAY

PLAN PREVIEW



Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning

TABLE OF CONTENTS

3 The Century Plan: A vision for the region, by the region.

4 Northeastern Illinois is at a pivotal moment

6 Understanding where we are — and where we're headed

16 Grand challenges: focusing where regional action matters most

18 Transportation

22 Water

26 Electric grid

30 Housing

34 Open space

38 From challenges to action

The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) is the is a regional government planning agency that works on behalf of the 7 counties, 284 municipalities, and 8.6 million residents of northeastern Illinois. One of the agency's core responsibilities is to develop a long-rage plan looking at least 30 years into the future.

The Century Plan: A vision for the region, by the region.

Northeastern Illinois is at an inflection point where this generation of leaders need to think big and act boldly to invest in the systems that will help us all thrive in this century and beyond.

To get there, the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) is convening leaders across the region — from government, business, and civic spheres — to develop The Century Plan. *Together,* we're defining what we need to do, why it matters, and how we get there. This process is now shifting from its discovery stage to alignment around a focused regional direction.

The *Plan Preview* frames the next phase of conversations. It captures where the region has been in the past, where we are today, and what the future could hold — all informing a selection of "Grand Challenges" that need system-level solutions at a regional scale.

These realities are at the core of The Century Plan:

- **The region has extraordinary assets.** As Dr. Manuel Teodoro said at CMAP's Chicago Water Week event this spring, "In Chicagoland you've got the talent, the infrastructure, and you've got the water." But these assets are complex regional systems built for the last century.
- **Northeastern Illinois is at greater risk of experiencing a "polycrisis"** where multiple independent crises — climate change, rapidly advancing technology, and an aging population to name a few — can converge and amplify their combined impact on our economy, communities, and daily lives.
- **Chicagoland is at a crucial moment to secure our global economic position.** We're on the bubble of the top 25 metros in the world, and our future competitiveness depends on how we plan, coordinate, and invest as a region.

Leaders and stakeholders across diverse sectors are pointing to the big systems — that touch our everyday lives and drive our economy — as key areas needing regional solutions. These challenges are too big for any one community or organization to solve on their own. As Lockport Mayor Steven Streit said at a Century Plan convening, "Coordination is more necessary than ever."

I am optimistic. The Chicago region has done hard and bold things before — we literally reversed a river! We know the scale of solutions needed, and we know collaboration across sectors is key for our future competitiveness, resilience, and quality of life.

Will we shape the future or let it shape us? One thing is certain: northeastern Illinois doesn't shy away from innovation, hard conversations, or big ideas. The past few months of developing The Century Plan have been full of inspiring conversations that flip our challenges into opportunities. I've seen a sense of shared responsibility to make the future brighter for everyone. I invite you to come along and help shape our region's next big vision, The Century Plan.



Erin Aleman

CMAP Executive Director

NORTHEASTERN ILLINOIS IS AT A PIVOTAL MOMENT



Northeastern Illinois entered the 21st century with extraordinary advantages. Generations of leadership and investment have given the region assets that few metropolitan areas can match: a transportation network that connects us to the nation and the world, abundant freshwater, established communities and infrastructure, a diverse and relatively affordable housing stock, significant natural and working lands, and one of the world's largest and most diverse economies.

Other regions around the globe are investing billions to build the advantages Chicagoland already has today. But the value of these assets in the coming years will depend on how we invest in and adapt *now*.

The region is changing. Our population is getting older, households are spending more on basic needs, and emerging industries are putting new demands on natural resources, energy, and infrastructure. Technology and a changing climate are reshaping how people live and work and what we need from the systems around us. These pressures will not be felt equally: longstanding disparities mean some residents and communities have greater access to opportunity — and more resources to adapt to change — than others.

The region has a choice in how it responds to change. Some of the region's greatest achievements have come when governments, businesses, civic organizations, and communities have organized around a shared problem and worked across boundaries to solve it — reversing the flow of the Chicago River, preserving the lakefront for the people, and building world-class research and education facilities, to name a few. Our ability to think big and act boldly is *itself* an advantage.

The Century Plan will build on this tradition. At a moment of significant change, the opportunity is not simply to preserve what previous generations built. It is to organize around the choices that matter most, make better use of the strengths we already have, and position northeastern Illinois to thrive for decades to come.

THE CENTURY PLAN PREVIEW

This report offers a preview of the emerging direction of The Century Plan. It brings together what we know now about the region today, the issues communities are facing, and the forces that could reshape our trajectory. Taken together, these insights reveal where regional action will matter most — and the five challenges around which The Century Plan will organize that action.

The stakes are significant, but so are the opportunities. We will need to be clear-eyed about our current challenges while remaining optimistic about the possibilities in the coming decades and next century. The Century Plan is a roadmap to guide regional alignment around what matters most and how ***we*** take action to secure the future we want.

The Plan Preview is also an invitation. As the planning process moves from discovery toward action, the next step is to bring more voices into the conversation to help test these ideas, deepen our understanding of the challenges and opportunities ahead, and begin building the partnerships needed to act on them.



UNDERSTANDING WHERE WE ARE — AND WHERE WE'RE HEADED

The Plan Preview builds on several streams of research, engagement, and analysis conducted over the last year. The following pages bring together key findings from three of them: regional research on how northeastern Illinois is changing, conversations with communities and regional leaders about what they are experiencing today, and strategic foresight exploring forces that could reshape the region in the decades ahead.

The Century Plan is looking to diverse views to answer the same fundamental question: **What challenges are facing northeastern Illinois and where can regional action make the greatest difference?**

THE REGION TODAY

What data tells us about how northeastern Illinois is changing

To start the planning process, CMAP released the *State of the Region* report examining the trends shaping northeastern Illinois today and what those changes mean for people's ability to live and thrive here. The findings reveal a region with enormous strengths, but one that is changing in consequential ways.

The region is changing, and so are the people who call it home. The region's population has remained relatively stable at about 8.5 million people, but beneath that stability are significant shifts. Between 2010 and 2023, the number of households increased by about 8 percent —

indicating a trend toward more households with fewer members. The population is also getting older: over the past two decades the number of seniors grew by roughly 360,000, while the number of children declined by 275,000. These trends are expected to continue, with the population over 60 projected to grow nearly 37.5 percent by 2050.

Life is also getting more expensive. Many residents are spending more of their income on basic needs. Since 2000, rents in the region nearly doubled and homeownership costs rose by 80 percent, while the median income grew by only 70 percent. In recent years, nearly half of renters regionwide were burdened by the cost of housing, spending more than 30 percent of their household income on rent.

The character of our broader economy is changing too. Northeastern Illinois remains an economic powerhouse, producing $867 billion in goods and services in 2024 — more than 42 individual states. But growth in the region's economic output has lagged its major metropolitan peers. Recent job growth has been led by industries that serve local communities (e.g., healthcare, retail) rather than those that compete in global markets and typically deliver higher-wage jobs (e.g., life sciences, logistics, marketing). Between 2015 and 2023, more than 99% of the net job growth in the region was in locally-serving industries. At the same time, emerging industries driven by rapid advancements in technology could create new opportunities for growth, while placing new demands on our lands, resources, infrastructure, and workforce. And the physical systems that support the region are under growing pressure.

Much of the infrastructure in northeastern Illinois was built decades ago and now requires significant reinvestment — from roads, bridges, and transit to water, the electric grid, and other essential systems. More frequent severe weather is putting these systems under new stress, while resources that have long seemed abundant — including our freshwater supply — are under increased pressure.

These findings show a region with considerable strength undergoing meaningful change. Northeastern Illinois' economy, communities, infrastructure, and natural resources give us a strong foundation to build from. We have an opportunity to make more of our regional advantages: adapting our assets to meet changing needs, opening new opportunities for people and business, and strengthening the region's quality of life.

A shared regional strategy will help Chicagoland embrace the opportunities that change presents and fortify our strengths into even greater advantages in the decades ahead.

Explore the full findings of the *State of the Region* report at cmap.is/where-are-we-today



U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates (2019-2023).
U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census (2010).
CMAP, 2026 Regional Transportation Plan socioeconomic forecast draft estimates, expected October 2026.
U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Consumer Price Index for all Urban Consumers, all items and selected items for the Chicago-Naperville-Elgin, IL-IN-WI MSA, 2000-2023.
CMAP, Local Housing Profiles, accessed December 15, 2025, https://cmap.illinois.gov/data/land-use/local-housing-profiles/.
U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, "CAGDP1 County gross domestic product summary" (2024).
Lightcast, 2025, accessed December 15, 2025.

LOCAL INSIGHTS: PRIORITIES ACROSS OUR COMMUNITIES

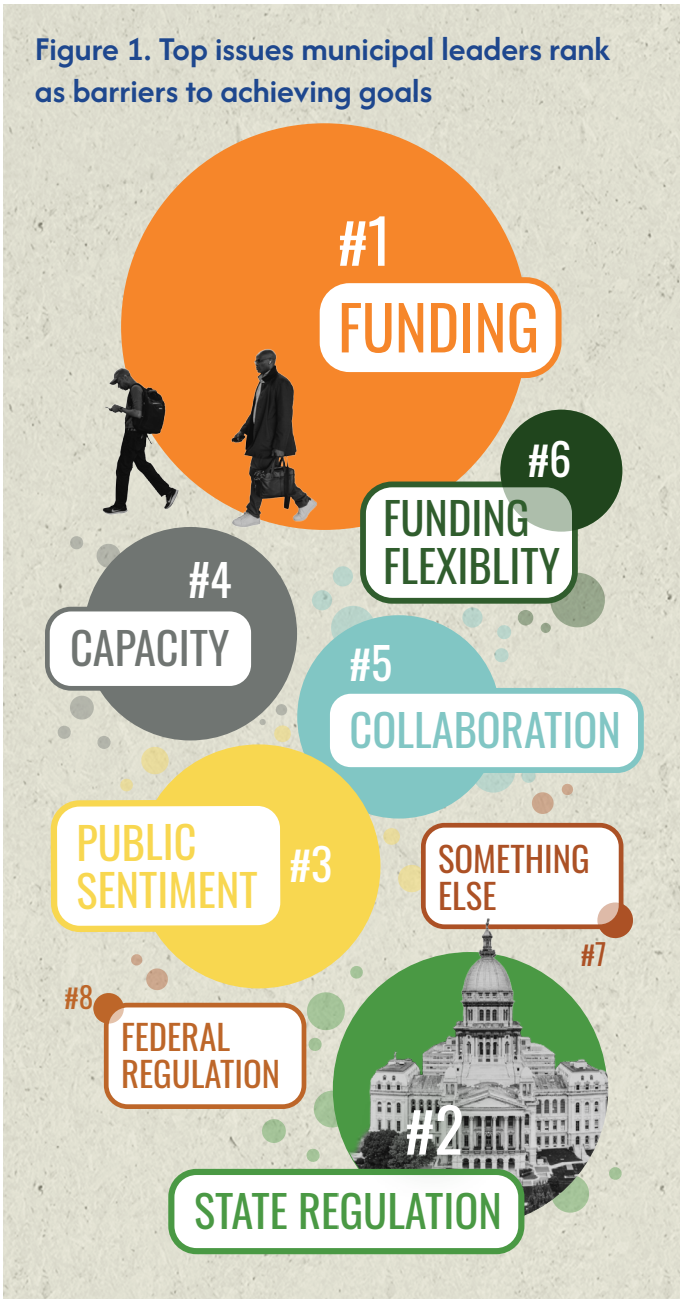
What communities are working toward — and what is getting in the way

Across northeastern Illinois, communities are already working toward many of the same goals. CMAP reviewed more than 110 recent municipal and county plans and found common priorities across communities with very different contexts, histories, and development patterns. The agency then partnered with the region's Councils of Government to convene workshops with over 200 mayors, managers, and municipal staff to talk about how these ambitions are taking shape locally.

The plans point to a consistent picture of the types of places that communities want to become. Across the region, communities are working toward:

- **Vibrant centers with opportunities for all.** Communities want to make better use of the places and infrastructure they already have, coordinating transportation and development to support thriving downtowns and commercial areas, safer streets and sidewalks, and opportunities for local growth.
- **Safe, livable, and accessible communities.** Plans call for infrastructure that supports everyday quality of life and a broader range of housing choices that can respond to changing household needs, ages, and incomes.
- **Balanced growth that preserves natural resources.** Communities want to accommodate new development while protecting open space, water, farmland, and other natural assets — using tools such as infill development, conservation strategies, and stormwater investments to help balance those goals.

Figure 1. Top issues municipal leaders rank as barriers to achieving goals



2026 CMAP analysis of local insights workshops results, 2026

Municipal leaders shared that achieving these goals is much harder than defining them. Fewer than one in four participants said their communities had made "a lot of great progress" toward any of the shared goals. The barriers they described were remarkably consistent across the region: nearly half identified public sentiment and trust as a major barrier, while roughly four in ten pointed to limited staff capacity, and difficulty collaborating or coordinating with other jurisdictions and

agencies. Rising costs, limited funding, and complex state processes add to the challenge (Figure 1 on previous page).

Those barriers have practical consequences. Communities described:

- Passing up grant opportunities because applications require more staff time than they can spare
- Development delayed by roadway approvals
- State and federal requirements consuming limited capital budgets
- Projects becoming more difficult when multiple agencies bring different rules, timelines, and priorities

These barriers become especially consequential when communities confront issues that extend beyond their boundaries. Local officials pointed to flooding, drinking water, housing, transit, industrial development, street networks, trails, and energy infrastructure as issues where decisions in one place affect another — or where progress depends on several units of government working together.

Communities were not simply identifying problems; they were asking for ways to work together differently. Across the region, local officials called for more opportunities to collaborate, better coordination among agencies, clearer shared priorities, and regional approaches to challenges that communities cannot effectively address alone.

Learn more about local communities' priorities, challenges, and opportunities: cmap.is/local-insights

> **We're trying to build great towns because people choose to live here. We might find ourselves talking about something as simple as a sewer, but it goes to quality of life.**
>
> Mayor from Southwestern Cook County

> **We share systems but fundamentally aren't working together on what we're building. So, the systems are pulling in different directions.**
>
> Deputy Commissioner from Chicago

> **A regional standpoint is needed for these types of challenges. For instance, looking at where the right places would be to develop data centers depending on needs and capacity.**
>
> Village manager from Will County

FUTURE INSIGHTS: FORCES SHAPING THE REGION

What strategic foresight tells us about the changes we should prepare for

What we know about the region today cannot adequately prepare us for the conditions we will face decades from now. Although many of the forces that will shape the future — such as increasingly severe weather and evolving technology — are already at work, how they will evolve, interact, and affect the region over time is far less certain. Yet decisions we make now about infrastructure, development, and public resources will shape the region for generations, even as conditions around us change in ways we cannot predict today.

That's why The Century Plan is using strategic foresight to look beyond the challenges most visible today and ask difficult "what if" questions about different potential futures rooted in today's reality. CMAP convened experts across diverse sectors for a series of workshops to explore the long-term changes that could drastically impact the region.

This is not an effort to predict the future. Instead, strategic foresight helps us test how the region might fare under different conditions and identify the choices that could position northeastern Illinois for success. This practice helps build a more resilient plan by anticipating shifts that could have consequences for decades.



This process spotlights powerful forces that could reshape the region, including rapidly advancing technology, environmental volatility, and economic precarity. There is also an increasing risk of a "polycrisis"— when multiple disruptions occur at once and amplify each another, such as extreme heat straining the electric grid before a major storm disrupts transportation while rising costs limit the resources available to respond. It also identified important shifts in the world around us, including the evolving nature of work, a rapidly changing global economy, growing digital connectivity, and deteriorating public trust.

The same forces can create **new opportunities** while also introducing **new pressures**. For example,

- Technological advances could create new industries and increase productivity while disrupting jobs and placing new demands on electricity.
- Climate pressures could make the region's freshwater and relative resilience increasingly valuable while putting greater stress on infrastructure and communities.
- Changes in how and where people work could offer more flexibility in daily life but also change housing and transportation needs.

Across the possibilities explored through foresight, some issues consistently show potential to shape the region's ability to thrive:

- **Climate volatility** and **aging infrastructure** put pressure on the on the physical systems communities rely on.
- **Advanced technology** creates significant opportunities, but its benefits depend on whether infrastructure, communities, and institutions can adapt alongside it.
- **Energy** becomes a critical differentiator for both economic growth and climate action.
- **Population change** continues to reshape what residents need from housing, transportation, and public services.

Woven through these dynamics, persistent inequities exacerbate negative impacts and diminish transformational opportunities.

We cannot know exactly what the future will bring. But we can make choices now that leave the region stronger across many possible futures by investing in our most essential assets and preserving our ability to adapt.

Forces of change are deeply connected — an opportunity or disruption that begins in one system rarely stays there. Decisions in one location or system affect the opportunities available to others. Stronger coordination and regional-scale solutions will be essential for addressing interconnected trends so we can thrive despite forces outside our region's control.

Explore the strategic foresight process for The Century Plan: cmap.is/strategic-foresight

About the future of housing...

These systems that have created our communities were developed in a different era and now, when we're thinking about the future that we want together in our communities, we really need to harness our ability to partner, listen, and pave a new way.

Brenda O'Connell, Illinois Housing Development Authority Senior Policy Advisor, at the February 2026 Housing Summit in Lake County

About balancing growth and development with preserving open space...

We tend to talk about growth and conservation as competing interests. We need housing. We need jobs. We need investment. We need infrastructure. We need a strong tax base.

And then there is conservation, as though conservation is something we figure out after we've decided where everything else is going to go. I don't think that can be our model for the next century.

Michael Davidson, CEO and President of Openlands, at a September 2026 Catalyst Series event in McHenry County

EXPERT INSIGHTS: CONVENING LEADERS FOR HONEST DIALOGUE

What conversations with regional and national leaders reveal about challenges and opportunities in northeastern Illinois

It's time to think big. That's why CMAP is bringing together national and regional experts — and leaders across government, business, civic, philanthropic and academic spheres — for honest conversations about our region's challenges and strengths.

Expert panelists have joined CMAP's Board to dive deep on critical issues — the future of energy, protecting natural lands, and economic development trends. And Catalyst Series events are exploring questions like:

- How do we steward our Great Lakes advantage?
- What new approaches will position our transportation system to thrive?
- How do we balance economic growth and innovation with resource preservation?

These conversations are testing the ideas coming forth in The Century Plan and deepening leaders' understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing northeastern Illinois. Through these convenings, the region is building alignment around critical issues and exploring bold, cross-sector strategies.

The Century Plan is embracing these opportunities to foster deeper understanding among regional leaders and build momentum toward shared solutions. Learn more at cmap.is/catalyst-series.





About stewarding our Great Lakes advantage...

In Chicagoland, you've got the talent, the infrastructure, and you've got the water. What we need now is a better [water] governance institution. Nothing else gets better without fixing this problem. Everything else is a Band-Aid.

Manuel Teodoro, University of Wisconsin-Madison Professor of Public Affairs, at a May 2026 Catalyst Series event, part of Chicago Water Week

About maintaining our energy advantage to power future prosperity...

The biggest challenge and the biggest opportunity is making sure we have forecasts right so that we're not overbuilding and burdening people with additional costs or underbuilding and losing our resource adequacy. Not only are companies coming here because of the lower prices they're also coming here for reliability.

Stacey Paradis, Commissioner, Illinois Commerce Commission, at a May 2026 CMAP Board meeting panel discussion on energy policy

About how our transportation assets can drive change...

The ability to be economically competitive going forward can't be solved inside any city — whether it's a size of Chicago or the size of Joliet. We've got to work together across municipal lines and counties to think about big solutions to big challenges, facing all of our regions in the 21st century.

Chicago starts in an enviable position with a tremendous amount of fixed transportation assets [...] What's coming though is digital technologies that are going to be really different from what we've had in the past. What it's going to ask us to do is be more efficient with what we've already built. [...] We're going to need to build different kinds of public-private partnerships with the government and private sector working together.

Adie Tomer, Brookings Institution senior fellow, at a Catalyst Series event in Will County on the future of transportation



OUR OPPORTUNITIES ARE CONNECTED

A larger pattern emerges across research, conversations, and strategic foresight

Grounded in input from different voices and perspectives, The Century Plan is revealing a region with tremendous advantages. But we cannot rely on yesterday's playbook for tomorrow's success.

Our systems will need to evolve and perform differently in the future to meet changing needs and demands. Our most consequential challenges and opportunities are increasingly connected and do not live in one sector or stop at geographic boundaries. We will need new tools, broad investment, and coordination across sectors for northeastern Illinois to thrive in this century and beyond.

Regional trends show that the conditions around us are already changing. Local conversations highlight communities' ambitions for growth and a higher quality of life as well as the systemic barriers holding them back. Future scenarios reveal how forces outside the region's control could deepen inequality, drive costs, or strengthen our competitive advantages. And conversations with leaders across diverse fields point to a region at a "jump ball" moment — where thinking boldly and collaborating can position northeastern Illinois to lead nationally and globally.

The Century Plan development process also spotlights how regional planning can fill a critical gap. Local communities are understandably focused on the day-to-day challenges like rising costs and the state of infrastructure. At the same time, strategic foresight and data trends point to consequential system shifts — population changes, technology advancements, and climate volatility — that no one community or organization can address on their own. This is where a regional vision and alignment around coordinated actions can deliver tremendous value.

With The Century Plan, northeastern Illinois can come together around a shared vision. We can make deliberate choices about how the systems we have inherited will support the region we want to become.

This means looking beyond individual projects and jurisdictions to better understand the shared challenges that require shared direction. Regional collaboration on these issues today is critical to creating new competitive advantages and opening possibilities for communities, residents, and businesses *tomorrow*.

GRAND CHALLENGES: FOCUSING WHERE REGIONAL ACTION MATTERS MOST

The challenges and opportunities emerging in The Century Plan are not simple and straightforward. They're interconnected and systemic, requiring expertise and action from many different players for solutions to succeed. For this reason, The Century Plan focuses on complex, cross-cutting issues that will shape the region's long-term trajectory and where coordinated regional action can make a meaningful difference.

The plan frames these issues as "Grand Challenges" facing the region. CMAP convened hundreds of leaders across diverse sectors to help identify these challenges.

TOGETHER, WE ASKED:

Will this challenge shape the region's long-term trajectory? The Grand Challenges are critical — they cut to the heart of our competitiveness and perpetuate inequalities. Without regional action, they will undercut our long-term quality of life and economic prosperity.

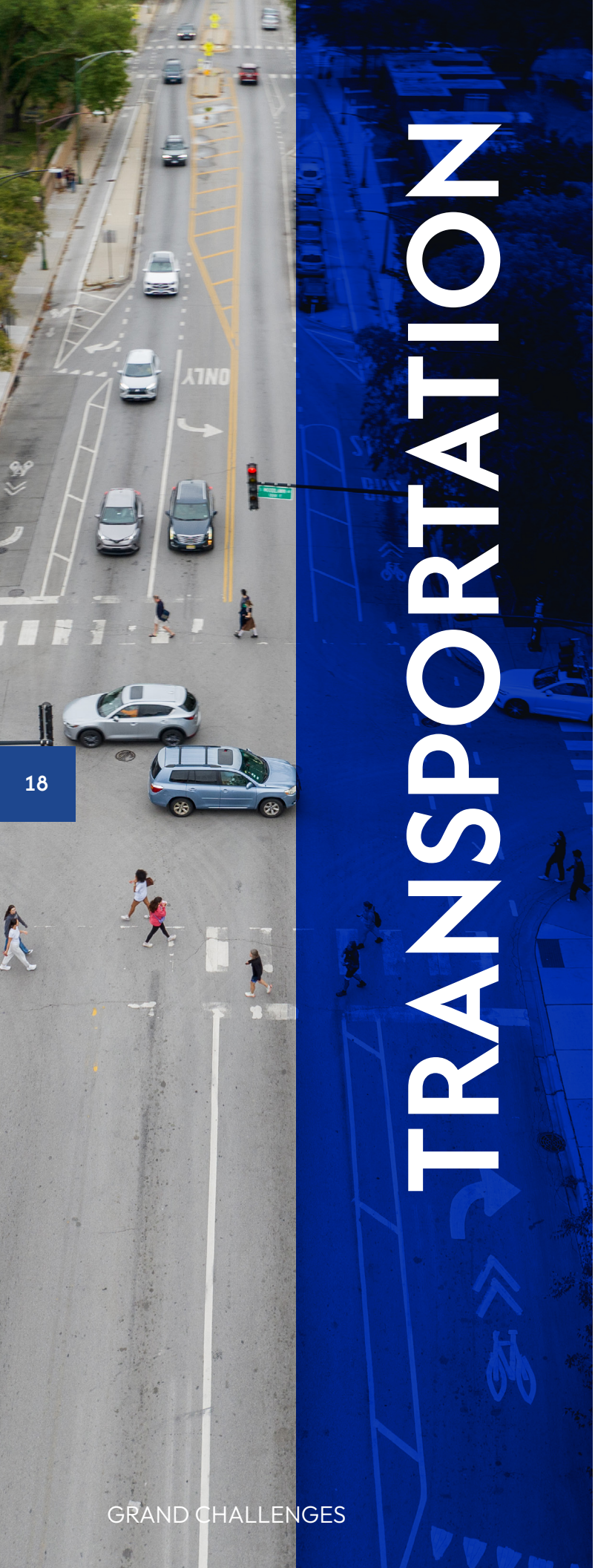
Is this challenge structural? Grand Challenges impact the systems we share — systems that were often designed to meet the needs of the past, not the future.

Does it require regional action? No one entity owns a Grand Challenge. It crosses local boundaries and touches multiple sectors. It is unlikely to resolve through existing approaches or individual actions alone.

Can working together unlock new opportunities? Addressing the Grand Challenges opens up potential innovation, investment, or shared solutions that produce benefits beyond solving a single problem. With collaboration, we can be better prepared to shape the outcomes we want.

THE CENTURY PLAN
GRAND CHALLENGES





TRANSPORTATION

Great transportation systems are designed and built with intention, by putting people first.

THE NEED FOR ACTION

Every day, millions of people in northeastern Illinois rely on roads, rails, and transit to reach work, school, and each other, while nearly 700 million tons of goods worth more than $1 trillion move through the region every year, rivaling entire nations in economic scale. This network was built by generations who turned bold plans into innovative transportation investments that supported a thriving economy.

But this network was mostly built last century, and it needs reinvestment. Travel is becoming harder and more costly for the region's residents and businesses, limiting our economic potential. The regions that lead the world in economic competitiveness and quality of life got there by reimagining what a system built around people could look like. A shared vision can empower communities and businesses to plan ahead, make strategic investments, and maintain our competitive edge for the century ahead.

WHAT WE KNOW NOW

The region's legacy transportation system is colliding with the demands of this century. Our aging infrastructure needs to be reimagined as funding becomes less dependable and costs accelerate. At the same time, demands on the system are changing as extreme weather and new technologies reshape what a future-ready system needs to handle.

- **Transportation expansion is in tension with maintaining existing assets.** Core regional assets — expressways, bridges, and rail stations — were built in the mid-1900s and need reconstruction. At the same time, development patterns extend our transportation network and bring new, long-term infrastructure and service costs.
- **Funding is not keeping pace.** Motor fuel taxes — a main source of funding for transportation — are becoming less dependable as vehicles and travel patterns change. Construction costs have also risen for decades, growing 66 percent between 2020 and 2023 alone and outpacing new funding.
- **Extreme weather increasingly impacts the system.** More frequent and severe rainfall puts roads, rails, and bus stops at growing risk of flooding and downed trees. About a third of the region's major roads and nearly one in ten bridges face high flood risk. The region is also projected to see more extreme heat and freeze-thaw cycles that can make infrastructure increasingly unsafe and costly to repair.
- **Technology is changing how we get around.** Electric vehicles, automation, and new mobility options are shaping the future of how people and goods move. Over the last few years alone, electric vehicle registrations in northeastern Illinois have grown nearly fourfold.

OUR OPPORTUNITY

If northeastern Illinois rises to this moment, we can create a transportation system that better serves everyone — one that reflects the way our residents live, work, and move today, and the future we want to build together. By planning as a region and renewing aging infrastructure, we can shape a future system where traveling is easy, safe, and seamless.

Commuters would enjoy predictable, stress-free trips; families would have more time together instead of sitting in traffic; students could reach schools and libraries more reliably; and neighborhoods would feel more connected across the region. Streets would be designed for safer walking and biking, and transit would connect communities to everyday destinations with integrated, fast, and reliable service. A modern system would also help communities handle extreme storms without major disruptions, keeping emergency vehicles moving and reducing travel delays.



With coordinated planning, the region can work together to make transportation investments that strengthen — not strain — our shared future. Aligning growth and transportation decisions would make every dollar go further, ensuring that the regional transportation system can support the demands of local development. A modern system would also benefit the region's businesses through more reliable travel, better workforce access, and transportation networks that support partnerships and long-term competitiveness.

Taken together, these opportunities position northeastern Illinois to compete with leading regions worldwide while making everyday life better for the people that live here.



CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

The Century Plan will continue to explore how a modern transportation system can meet the region's needs for decades to come. To advance this conversation, the team will be asking questions like:

- How we pay for maintaining and building roads is becoming less connected with how we use roads. We largely rely on gas taxes, but vehicles are increasingly more fuel efficient and/or run on electricity. **How can we realign transportation funding to preserve and modernize our system?**
- Where we build homes, jobs, and destinations directly shapes how much it costs to build and maintain the transportation network that connects them. **How can communities and regional partners work together, using good data, to make transportation dollars go further and improve access for everyone?**
- Our transportation system was built for a different era, and it's already being tested by more severe weather and fast-changing technology. **How should the region build a transportation system that can adapt to change?**



CMAP, "The Freight Landscape," 2025, 17, accessed December 15, 2025.
CMAP analysis of Illinois Department of Transportation and Illinois Tollway construction records, 2024.
Federal Highway Administration, National Bridge Inventory, 2024, accessed March 1, 2025.
CMAP, Transportation Resilience Improvement Plan, 2026, accessed December 12, 2025.
CMAP, "Risk-based vulnerability assessment," 2024, accessed December 17, 2025.



WATER

Water is one of our top regional strategic advantages — but its future is not guaranteed.

THE NEED FOR ACTION

Northeastern Illinois is defined by freshwater, and it can seem like this resource is endlessly abundant. But our water security is not guaranteed. Aging infrastructure, limited groundwater, resource-intensive industries, and rising costs are putting pressure on communities. These issues show up at the kitchen sink and in local boil-water orders, but they are shared across jurisdictions.

No single institution is charged with considering how shifting water sources, costly repairs and upgrades, and increasing demand play out regionally — or finding ways we can collaborate to unlock progress. Taken together, these pressures put us at risk of squandering one of the region's strategic advantages — unless we can develop a shared vision and make strategic investments for our water future.

Nearly half the region relies on shared water infrastructure. 165 municipalities serving 44% of the region's population buy water from another community or public water supplier. Decisions about water infrastructure, investment, and reliability can affect communities far beyond the supplier's boundaries.



WHAT WE KNOW NOW

The region's drinking water system is highly interconnected, but decisions about it are largely made one community at a time. Nearly 250 water systems rely on Lake Michigan, groundwater, and rivers to serve more than 8 million people. In recent years, these local water systems have had to navigate escalating demands, costs, and uncertainty about future needs.

- **Some areas face growing risks to reliable groundwater.** The region can continue to rely on many of its groundwater sources, but parts of northeastern Illinois are seeing aquifers depleted faster than they can recover. Five communities have switched from groundwater to Lake Michigan since 2017, and ten more plan to do so by 2035.
- **Lake Michigan is a shared and limited resource.** Access to Lake Michigan is an extraordinary strength, but longstanding legal protections restrict how much lake water Illinois can use. Lake Michigan already serves 172 municipalities and will have to accommodate future homes and businesses in those locations. These constraints mean that Lake Michigan cannot be a universal solution to all regional water challenges.
- **The region faces major infrastructure needs.** Northeastern Illinois' drinking water infrastructure requires billions of dollars to preserve and modernize — but the region lacks a complete picture of where the greatest needs are. Local communities have varying resources for maintaining their own pipes, pumps, and treatment systems. With hundreds of independently managed systems, the region has limited capacity to invest strategically or find opportunities to reduce costs.



OUR OPPORTUNITY

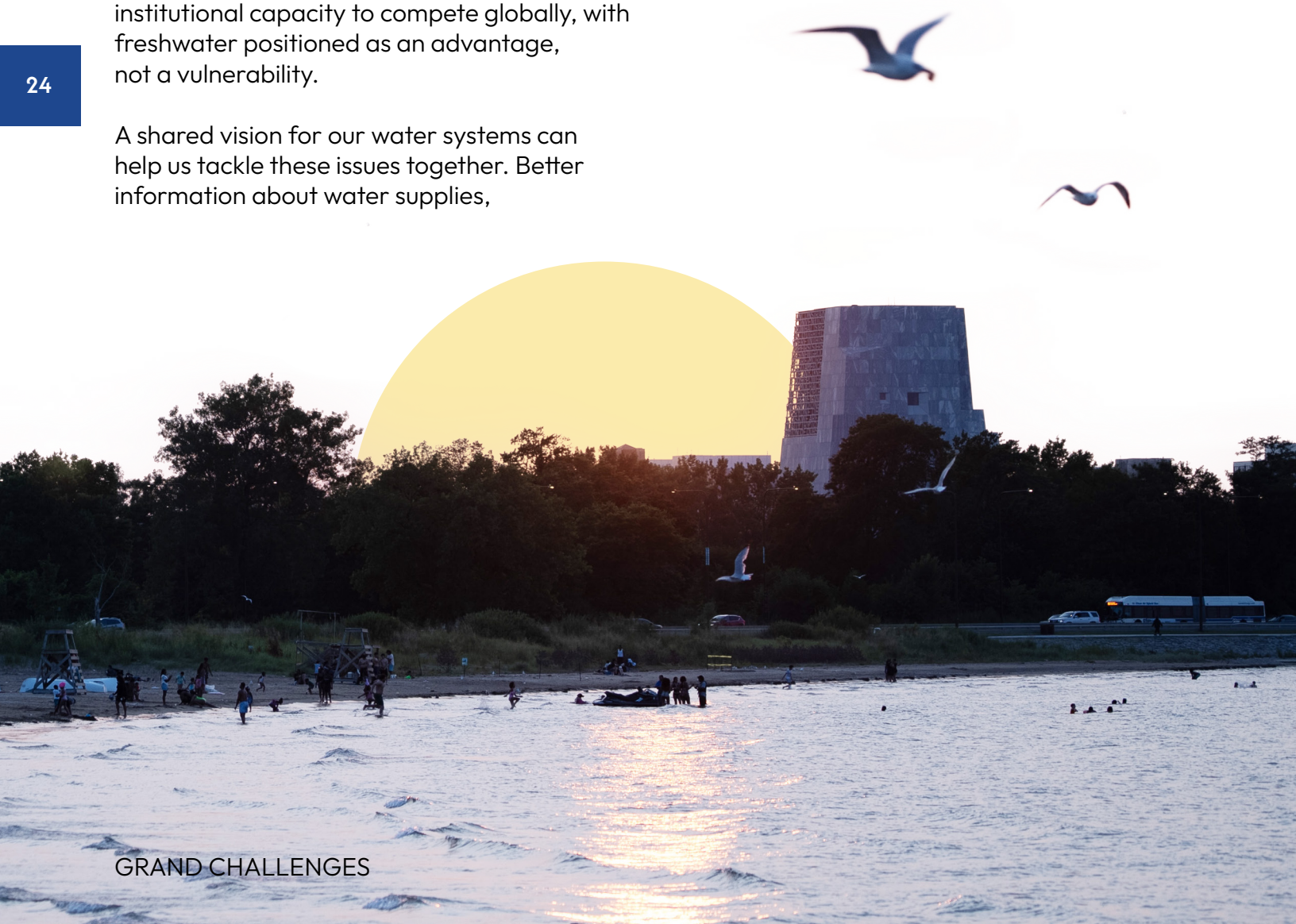
As water becomes more valuable around the world, northeastern Illinois can make freshwater a foundation for healthy communities, economic growth, and a high quality of life. Few regional issues have such tangible benefits.

Successfully addressing water challenges would mean we can trust each glass of water from the tap. Households would count on safe, reliable water at a cost they can afford. Neighborhoods would see fewer outages and boil-water orders from failing infrastructure and fewer road closures for emergency repairs. Communities would have dependable infrastructure to support schools, businesses, hospitals, playgrounds, and public life. The region would have the physical systems and institutional capacity to compete globally, with freshwater positioned as an advantage, not a vulnerability.

A shared vision for our water systems can help us tackle these issues together. Better information about water supplies, infrastructure, costs, and future needs can help communities uncover more options and form stronger partnerships.

By coordinating investments, we can ensure that local infrastructure works together as one system and spend limited public dollars where they matter most. Bringing water decisions into focus alongside housing, land use, and economic development can help us balance stewardship and growth for decades to come.

Together, we can ensure unrivaled freshwater access remains one of northeastern Illinois' greatest strengths — supporting healthier people, stronger communities, and a more resilient, prosperous region. This is an extraordinary opportunity: work across boundaries, invest wisely, and we can secure the region's water future.



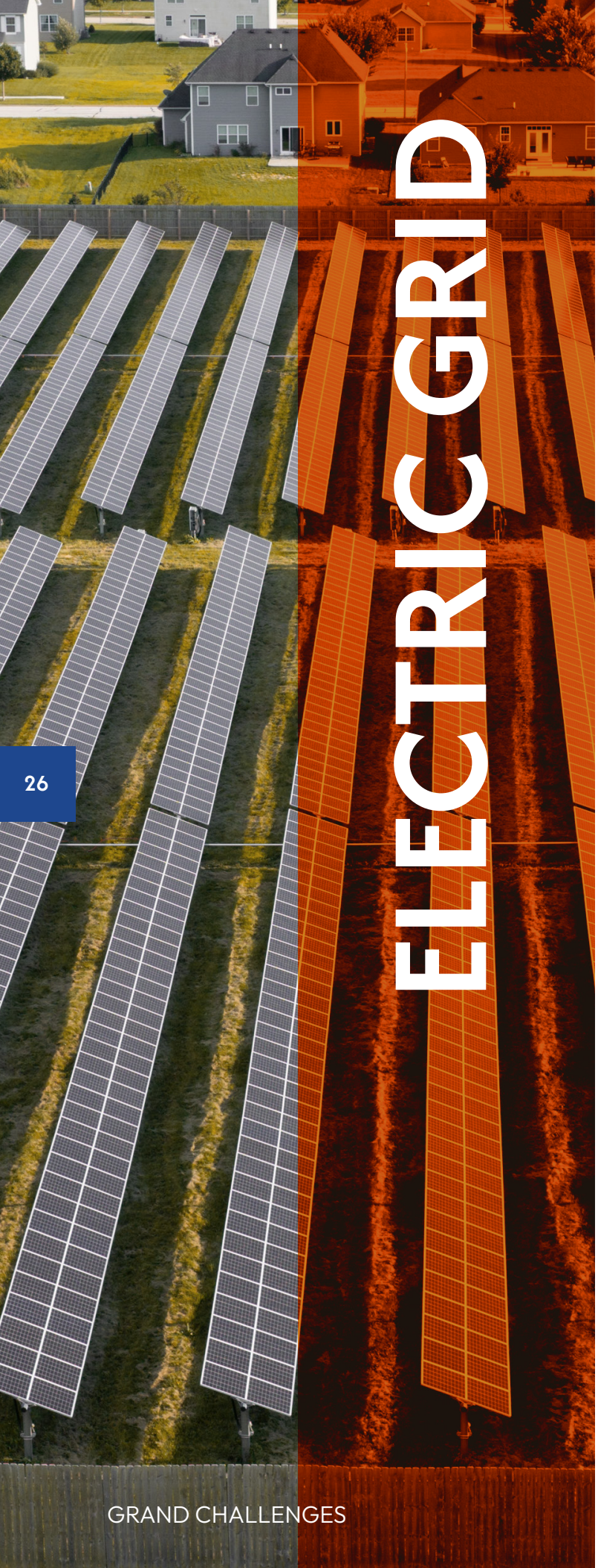
CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

The Century Plan will continue to explore how a modern water system can meet the region's needs for decades to come. To advance this conversation, the region will be asking questions like:

- Communities manage their own water systems, but their decisions can affect water supplies and costs beyond their borders. **How can water stakeholders work together to make better decisions about the water resources and infrastructure we share?**
- More communities are turning to Lake Michigan as groundwater supplies come under pressure. At the same time, new homes and businesses are adding demand in places that already rely on the lake. **How can we plan for growth together so the region can meet today's water needs and prepare for the future?**
- Communities need to replace aging pipes, remove lead service lines, meet new treatment needs, and keep water systems running. But not every community has the same resources to pay for this work. **How can we make limited public dollars go further while keeping water reliable and affordable?**



Illinois Department of Natural Resources Lake Michigan Allocation Program, LMO-2 Form Data, 2017, accessed 2024.
Illinois State Water Survey, Illinois Water Inventory Program, accessed 2024.
Illinois State Water Survey, "Tier 1 Water Supply Planning Groundwater Updates: Shallow Groundwater Assessments, Groundwater Supply, and Ongoing and Upcoming Work," November 2025, accessed December 17, 2025



Modernizing the grid can power a stronger, cleaner economy.

THE NEED FOR ACTION

Northeastern Illinois' electric grid powers our homes, businesses, and ambitions. For generations, reliable and affordable electricity has been one of our competitive advantages, and it remains essential to driving the next century of growth. But much of the physical grid — the wires, transformers, and substations — was built for a different era. Demand is surging as new technologies reshape our economy and as industries and transportation increasingly shift away from fossil fuels. Beyond generating more electricity, the system will need targeted upgrades to run more efficiently, integrate and store clean energy, and withstand more severe weather, while keeping infrastructure costs down to ensure affordable power for households and businesses. This is more than an infrastructure constraint. It is a chance to determine whether the region will thrive in a more electricity-dependent future.

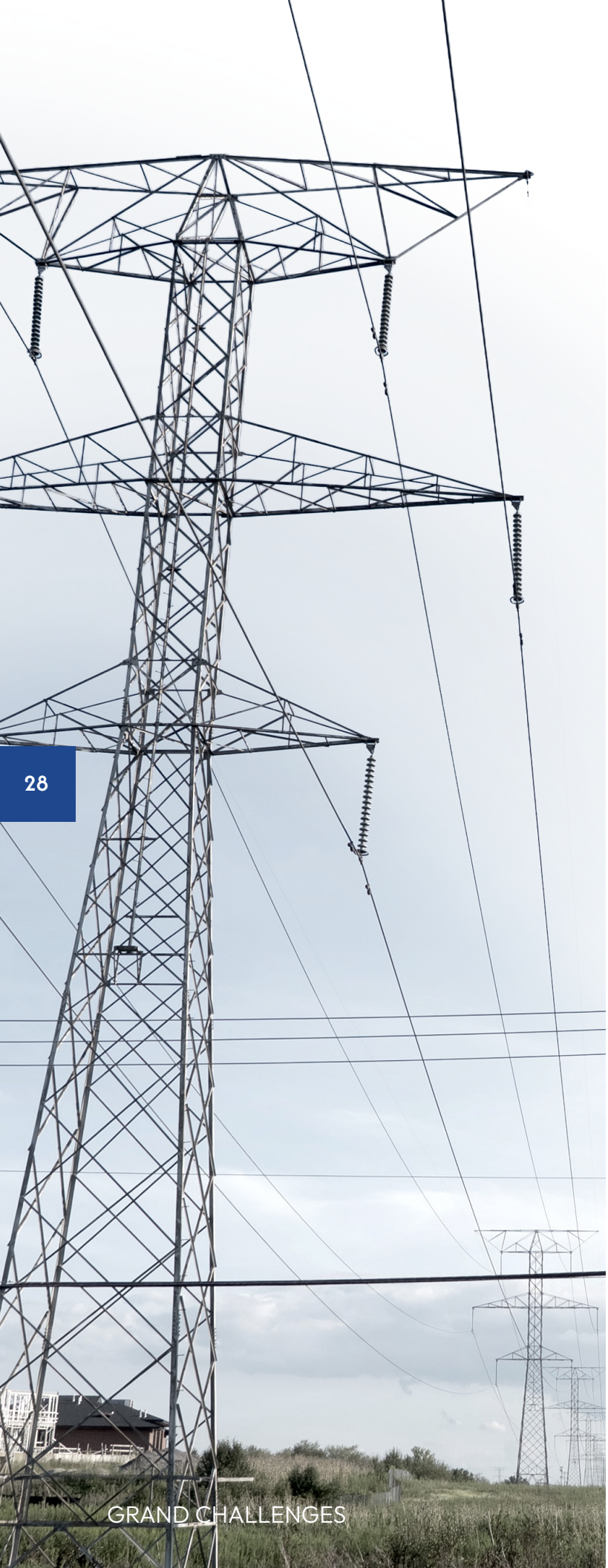


The grid is one system, with three interconnected parts. Generation produces electricity. Transmission moves it long distances. Distribution delivers it to homes and businesses. Different organizations plan for and manage each part, often on different timelines. Changes in one segment affect the others. Building a cleaner, more reliable grid requires coordinated decisions across all three.

WHAT WE KNOW NOW

Northeastern Illinois is entering a period of rapid change in how power is produced, stored, delivered, and used. Modernizing the grid is increasingly important to the region's growth and climate goals, and local choices will play a major role in getting this clean-energy transition right.

- **Demand could double.** State estimates suggest summertime peak electricity use could increase 36 percent by 2035 and double by 2050 — driven by energy-intensive industries and the need to electrify buildings, vehicles, and industries. The shift is already underway: More than one-third of Illinois freight carriers expect to operate electric trucks within the next decade. Without action, greater demand could strain the system, risking rolling blackouts, higher energy bills, and less capacity for future growth.
- **Grid capacity is increasingly shaping economic activity.** Communities can only attract new industries and jobs if their local electric system can deliver enough reliable, affordable power. For example, a single high-volume truck charging hub could use as much electricity as Woodstock, a city of 25,000 people. That's more than many communities could handle without costly upgrades.
- **Illinois is planning ahead.** State policies have set ambitious emission-reductions goals and created a new, statewide process to plan for future electricity needs. These decisions will determine how new capacity, infrastructure costs, and customers' energy bills evolve. With input, these processes can also better align grid planning and spending with local and regional goals.
- **Local governments need better information.** Communities make critical decisions about land use and development but lack clear information about grid capacity, planned upgrades, and emerging constraints. Better resources and new partnerships can help communities prepare for growth and understand its impact on electricity needs or costs.



OUR OPPORTUNITY

If northeastern Illinois gets the clean-energy transition right, we can build a modern electric grid that supports lasting economic growth and helps address climate change. With coordinated action, the region can make sure the grid can deliver reliable, affordable power as demand grows.

Households would have the confidence to choose electric cars and appliances, knowing the grid and their budgets can keep up. Greater resilience would ensure communities have reliable power during dangerous heat and severe storms to keep temperatures safe, food fresh, and medical equipment running. Businesses would have more investment and operational options without years of delay or costly upgrades. Communities would breathe easier near cleaner truck routes and industrial areas. Local governments would have the information to understand their electric capacity and attract jobs and investment.

Regional collaboration can help make this vision a reality. By coordinating investments, we can prepare for new demand while avoiding unnecessary upgrade costs. New strategies — including greater efficiency, batteries, and flexible electricity use — can unlock additional capacity from the infrastructure we already have. Planning for the interactions of economic growth, transportation, land use, and the electric grid can help us balance ongoing economic needs, new development opportunities, and climate action.

A future-ready grid would enable the region to compete and thrive without infrastructure becoming a barrier to progress. With shared action, we can build a grid that is more reliable, more resilient, and ready to power a stronger, cleaner economy.

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

The Century Plan will continue to explore how a modern electric grid can meet the region's needs for decades to come. To advance this conversation, the region will be asking questions like:

- Illinois is now setting a long-term roadmap to meet growing energy demand while lowering emissions and protecting reliability and affordability. But many choices that shape those needs are made locally. **How can northeastern Illinois bring local knowledge and regional priorities into state, utility, and multistate grid planning?**
- The risks of climate change mean northeastern Illinois needs to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase the grid's resilience to extreme weather. **How can the region reimagine our electric system to increase available power and reliability during winter storms or on blistering summer days?**
- Modernizing the grid will require major investment that can drive up monthly bills if we overbuild, but many households already struggle with energy costs. **How can the region control infrastructure costs and ensure every community benefits from a modern grid?**



Illinois Power Agency, Illinois Commerce Commission, and Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, Resource Adequacy Study, 2025, accessed September 17, 2026.
Illinois Trucking Association, Illinois Trucking Index Report, week of March 30, 2026.
Climate and Equitable Jobs Act, IL Public Act 102-0662, 2021.
Clean and Reliable Grid Affordability Act, IL Public Act 104-0458, 2026.



HOUSING

Attainable housing options are central to thriving communities and a vibrant economy.

THE NEED FOR ACTION

For generations, attainable housing has made northeastern Illinois a place where people can find opportunity and put down roots. Average housing costs here have increased less and remain lower than in other large metros, giving us a strong foundation.

Today, however, too many residents struggle to find homes that fit their needs, budgets, and lifestyles — and businesses feel the impact when they can't attract the talent they need. Decades of slow construction activity, a shrinking range of housing options, and growing affordability issues are threatening the region's ability to remain welcoming, economically competitive, and responsive to changing needs.

The scale and complexity of the housing supply challenges facing northeastern Illinois are too great to address one community or one project at a time. Local decisions shape what gets built, but their effects extend beyond municipal boundaries — influencing where people can live, how easily employers can find workers, and where growth and investment can occur. The region has an opportunity to work together to expand housing options, improve affordability, and ensure housing remains a regional strength.

WHAT WE KNOW NOW

The region is building fewer homes than it did two decades ago, before the Great Recession; lagging supply is driving up prices. At the same time, an aging population, smaller households, and remote work are reshaping demand. Simply put, we do not have the houses people need, in the locations they want to live, at the prices they can afford.

- **Rising costs are straining budgets.** One in four homeowners and nearly half of renters spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs. Housing prices are growing faster than incomes, which makes it harder for people to build their lives here.
- **Demand is changing faster than the market.** Despite a slight population loss of 50,000 people between 2010 and 2023, the region added nearly 240,000 additional households — meaning that more, smaller households are driving demand for more housing units. The fastest growing household types are those with unrelated roommates and nonmarried couples, but development trends favor large single-family homes and one-bedroom or studio apartments, with few options in between.
- **The homes people need are changing.** The region is projected to have 685,000 more residents over age 60 by 2050, and nearly half of workers telecommuted at least once per week in 2025. As these trends affect the housing market, the region will need a wider range of housing types, at more price points, and in different communities to better meet residents' needs.
- **New home construction has fallen.** The region is not building enough housing to meet growing demand. Between 2010 and 2023, only three housing units were built for every four new households. Many factors — construction costs, labor shortages, financing hurdles, and regulations — are impeding development. Because new housing is not being added, what is available is often more expensive than most residents can afford.
- **Aging homes need reinvestment.** Nearly two-thirds of homes in northeastern Illinois were built before 1980, including many of the homes that make up the region's most attainable housing. Maintaining and modernizing this stock is essential to preserving housing choice, but many repairs can be difficult for owners to afford.



OUR OPPORTUNITY

Ensuring everyone can find a place to thrive — by providing the right types of housing, at the right prices, in the right places — has far-reaching benefits. More choices that are connected to services, amenities, and transportation options can mean a young adult can afford to stay in the community where they grew up, a family can find a home that fits as its needs change, and older adults can remain close to the people and places they know as their needs evolve. It can mean shorter trips to work, school, and everyday needs — and less financial strain.

Homes local workers can afford also boost our competitiveness for business investment because employers can feel confident that the workforce they need can afford to live in the region. Building more homes in places already connected to jobs, services, and transportation can also make better use of existing infrastructure and give people more options for getting around, supporting the region's climate goals along the way.

Together, we can make housing a foundation for people, communities, and the region to thrive.



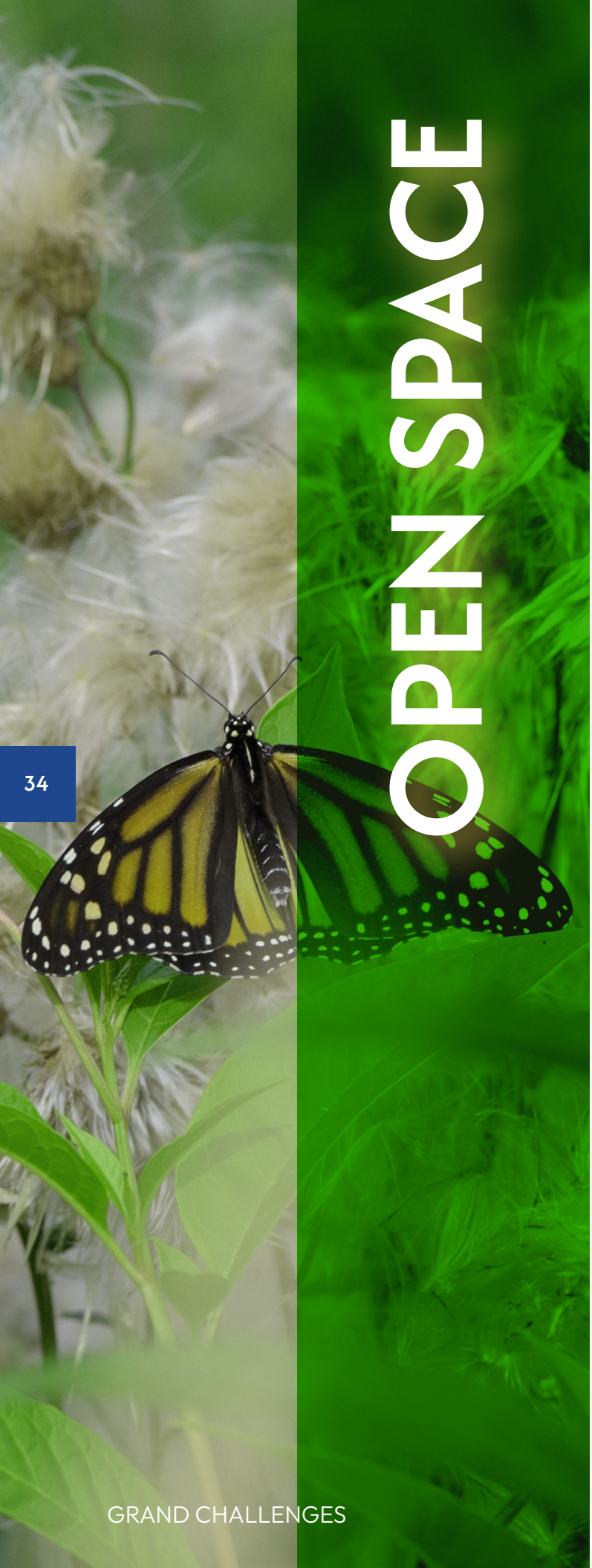
CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

The Century Plan will continue to explore how to meet the region's housing needs for decades to come. To advance this conversation, the region will be asking questions like:

- Improving local regulations can help to expand opportunities for new housing development, but proposals also need to account for local needs and conditions. **How can policies that encourage new housing development account for local context and support community planning goals?**
- National and regional socioeconomic trends are reshaping housing demand — both where and what types of new housing will be needed. **How can regional stakeholders support a broad range of housing types for different life stages and economic circumstances?**
- As housing becomes less attainable, new growth is projected to occur mostly along the region's edges, where greenfield sites can offer easier development but fewer amenities and transportation connections. **How can the region make homebuilding more viable in existing communities to support residents' affordability and mobility needs?**
- Market-led housing supply can provide households with more choices to find a home that fits their needs and budget, but many residents will still struggle to pay for housing. **What is the role for publicly subsidized and affordable housing in a healthy market?**
- With more frequent and severe storms, property owners and local governments could face higher insurance and recovery costs that exacerbate unaffordability. **How can the region improve the resiliency of the region's housing stock while mitigating the upfront investment costs that could dampen development activity?**



CMAP, "Key housing market trends in northeastern Illinois," January 19, 2022, accessed September 17, 2026, https://cmap.illinois.gov/news-updates/key-housing-market-trends-in-northeastern-illinois/.
CMAP, Local Housing Profiles, accessed December 15, 2025, https://cmap.illinois.gov/data/land-use/local-housing-profiles/.
U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates (2010-2014 and 2019-2023).
U.S. Census Bureau, Decennial Census (2010).
CMAP, "New household travel survey highlights emerging post-pandemic travel trends," April 22, 2026, accessed September 17, 2026, https://cmap.illinois.gov/news-updates/new-household-travel-survey-highlights-emerging-post-pandemic-travel-trends/.
CMAP, 2026 Regional Transportation Plan socioeconomic forecast draft estimates, expected October 2026.
CMAP, "The role of housing rehabilitation," January 14, 2026, accessed September 17, 2026, https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/6b196397fbe34cd681648749b4137175.



OPEN SPACE

Great regions do not leave the health of their land and water to chance.

THE NEED FOR ACTION

Open space — from our prairies, woodlands, and wetlands to playgrounds, parks, and farms — are central to daily life in northeastern Illinois by supporting cleaner air and water, better health, and deeper pride in the places we call home. That legacy is under pressure. As the region continues to grow, development decisions can make room for new homes or jobs while encroaching on the land and water resources that make our communities strong — and the benefits they provide are not reaching every community equally.

Left unaddressed, this is not just a loss of land. It is a loss of the natural infrastructure that gives us access to green space, reduces temperatures, manages stormwater, and supports agriculture and the open space economy. With a shared approach, the region can grow in ways that protect natural resources and expand access for everyone.

> **Everyone here wants growth and wants to preserve natural resources and farmland. What's the right balance of investment or growth and natural areas? We haven't figured that out yet.**
>
> Director from McHenry County

WHAT WE KNOW NOW

Several forces are leading communities to take a new approach to growth — one that embraces how protecting open space and building vibrant communities can reinforce each other.

- **Development outpaces conservation.** Despite slower population growth, the region's developed footprint keeps expanding faster than land is set aside for conservation. For every acre protected as open space in recent years, two are newly developed. These patterns reflect choices about how and where we build; two thirds of new development since 2010 has been on greenfield, as opposed to infill in areas that are already developed.
- **Local decisions impact the natural systems that extend beyond manmade boundaries.** Individual community decisions about development and open space preservation can fragment ecosystems and water resources, making it harder to protect these natural systems that span jurisdictions. Without a shared regional vision, we risk the broader health of northeastern Illinois' ecosystems and the Great Lakes region.
- **Climate impacts are increasing the value of open space.** The region is experiencing more frequent and severe flooding — damaging homes, businesses, and infrastructure — and more days of extreme heat, which threatens public health. Trees, parks, and preserves are among the best defenses against the impacts of climate change. They absorb greenhouse gases, reduce heat-islands, and recharge groundwater aquifers. Protecting natural assets is critical to the region's resilience.
- **Local leadership is crucial.** Federal and state resources for conservation have contracted, but communities still want to steward natural assets and expand open space. Since 2022, voter-approved tax measures in five counties — along with a $50 million bond in Will County — have shown a strong commitment to conservation. Key questions remain about where growth occurs, how development is designed, and how communities connect protected lands.



OUR OPPORTUNITY

The 1909 *Plan of Chicago* envisioned an extensive network of public parks and forest preserves, boulevards that bring nature into the city, and a lakefront forever open, clear, and free. The region has built on that legacy for more than a century: county conservation districts now steward thousands of acres of natural land, and a broad network of land trusts, foundations, and civic partners advocate for its protection and expansion.

Today, we have an opportunity to renew that legacy and embody a 21st century vision for conservation and stewardship. What will this generation's investment in open space look like?

Regional coordination can create an expanded network of natural lands — with parks and preserves connected by trails, waterways, and natural corridors — that is greater than the sum of its parts. That same coordination can guide new investment, like planting trees where shade is needed most, turning vacant industrial land into new parks and habitat, and completing the trails and greenways that connect communities to nature.

A shared vision can bring more nature into daily life while accommodating future growth, so growth and green space reinforce each other instead of competing — helping both dollars and landscapes go further. Strong green spaces can protect biodiversity and water quality, strengthen resilience to flooding and heat, and make the region an even more competitive place to live, work, and invest.



CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

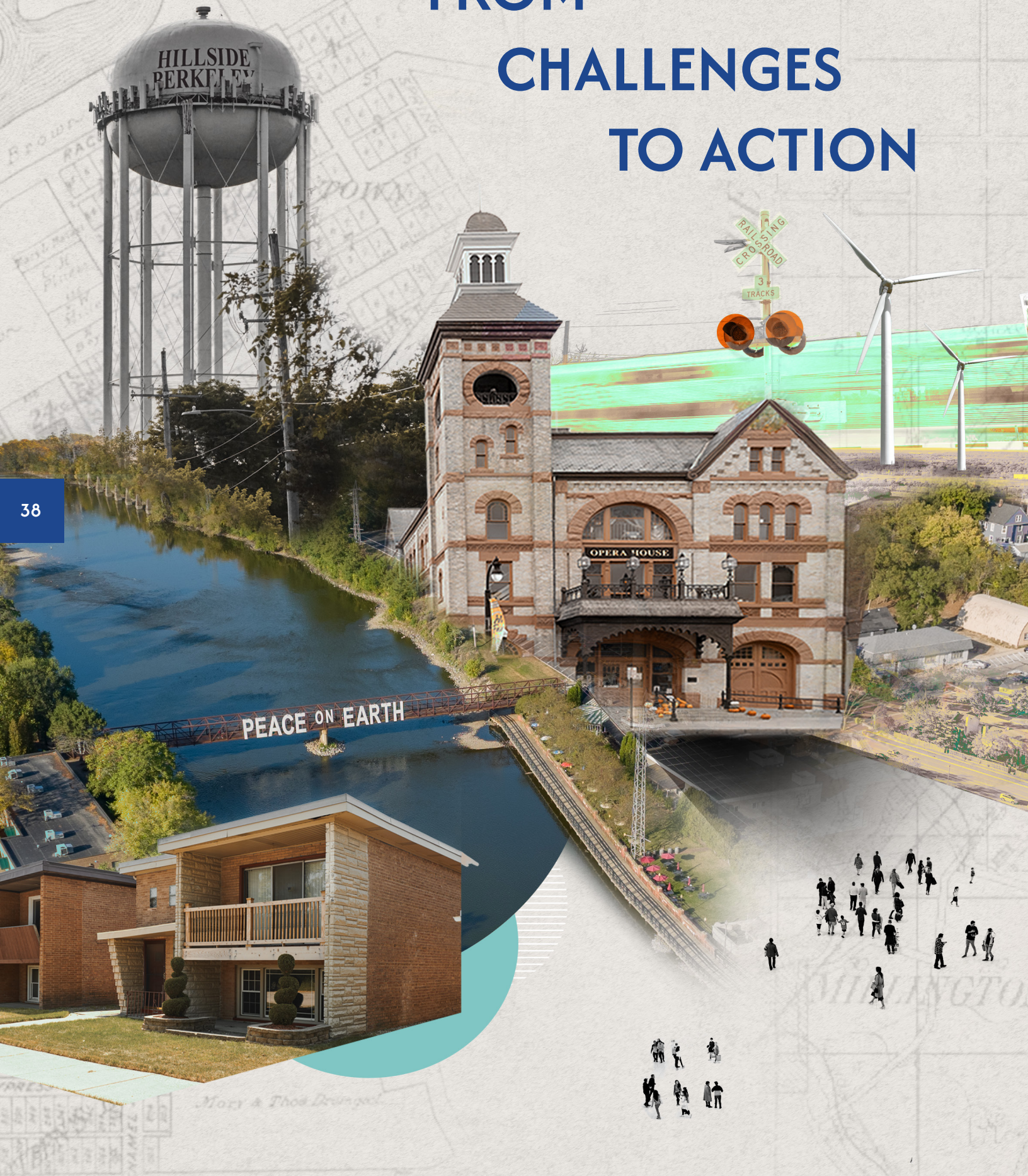
The Century Plan will continue to explore how greater stewardship and open space can meet the region's needs for decades to come. To advance this conversation, the team will be asking questions like:

- Communities want both economic growth and access to nature, but the actions that support one can work against the other. **How can local, county, regional, and state partners work together to find approaches that support both at once?**
- Voter-approved measures for conservation show what's possible when communities invest in green space. The region has conserved about 268,000 acres of land, well short of the 400,000-acre goal set in ON TO 2050. **How can the region scale up investments to close the gap and broaden access to green space?**
- Farmland supports the region's economy and, unlike paved development, helps recharge groundwater, manage stormwater, and keep habitats connected across the landscape. Yet it's often the first land to convert as development pushes outward, closing off options for future conservation. **How can communities and regional partners help working lands stay economically viable, so the region keeps these benefits in place?**
- Decisions about natural lands and open space are made at many different levels of government and don't always add up to a shared vision. **How can partners at every level work together toward developing and implementing a regional approach?**
- Some communities have far more tree canopy coverage, parks, and green space than others, and much of the region's planned trail and greenway network remains unfinished. **How can the region prioritize equitable investment, so every community benefits from a greener, more connected region?**



CMAP, Northeastern Illinois Land Use Inventory, 2010 and 2023, accessed March 25, 2026.
Openlands, "Local investments deliver early wins for nature," March 24, 2026, accessed September 17, 2026, https://openlands.org/2026/03/24/local-investments-deliver-early-wins-for-nature/.

FROM CHALLENGES TO ACTION



The Century Plan's Grand Challenges are regional by nature. They cross jurisdictional boundaries, involve many different actors, and cannot be addressed by any one community, agency, business, or organization acting alone. Fortunately, northeastern Illinois has shown that it can align around difficult issues, shift alignment into action, and turn challenges into new advantages. We already have recent models to build on, including:

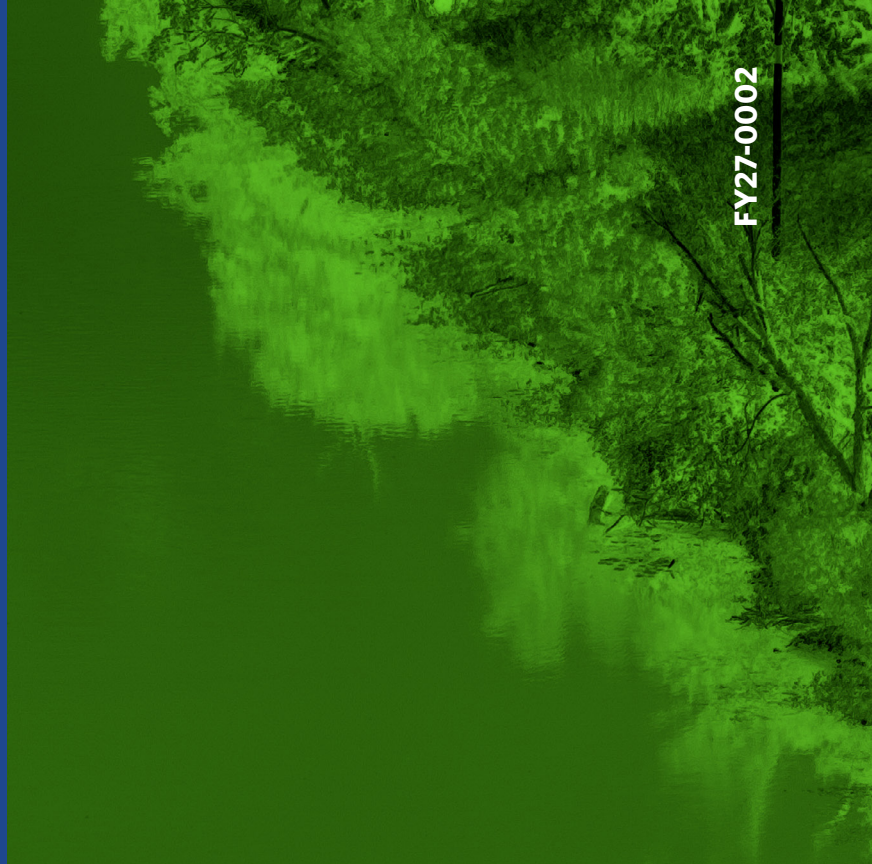
- **Securing the future of regional transit.** Faced with a looming fiscal cliff and the need for structural reform, leaders across northeastern Illinois came together to outline a vision for the transit system our region actually needs: one that is financially stable, safe, reliable, better integrated, and positioned to serve the economy. The Plan of Action for Regional Transit established a regional agenda and led to historic state action to fund and reform transit. **Learn more at cmap.is/PART**
- **Competing together as one regional economy.** Through the Greater Chicagoland Economic Partnership, the region's counties and economic development organizations are working across jurisdictional boundaries to pursue joint opportunities, attract investment, and strengthen northeastern Illinois' position in a competitive global economy. **Learn more at cmap.is/GCEP**
- **Building a shared roadmap for climate action.** The Comprehensive Climate Action Plan for Greater Chicago brought together a 13-county, tri-state region around a common path for reducing emissions. It shows how a challenge too large for any one jurisdiction or sector can become a roadmap for regional action. **Learn more at cmap.is/CCAP**

The Century Plan builds on this momentum, acknowledging that the future demands new ways of thinking, planning, and governing. It will set a clear direction for what the region needs to accomplish and will serve as a north star for future planning and policy efforts — acknowledging that our world will change, new opportunities will emerge, and the region will need to adapt.

The Century Plan is a shared vision for a better, stronger northeastern Illinois — and an invitation to act on it. To think big, to ask hard questions, to collaborate, to align around what we know will matter most for the region's future.

The next century will be shaped by the choices we begin making today. Let's commit to solving for tomorrow, today — together.

THE CENTURY PLAN
SOLVING FOR TOMORROW, TODAY



The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP) is northeastern Illinois' comprehensive planning organization, serving 7 counties, 284 municipalities, and 8.6 million people. On behalf of the region, CMAP is leading the development of a new regional vision — The Century Plan. Voices across government, civic spheres, business, and communities are working together to prioritize what the region will need to thrive for the next 20 to 30 years. The Century Plan will serve as a roadmap to guide regional alignment around what matters most and how we take action to secure the future we want.

433 West Van Buren Street
Suite 450
Chicago, IL 60607

cmap.illinois.gov
312-454-0400

Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning