

HorizonLines



To: Anyone Who Has a Compelling, Credible Vision for Chicago
From: World Business Chicago
Re: Horizon Lines Visions for Chicago 2050 Open Call
Date: March 5, 2026

Horizon Lines — Visions for Chicago 2050

A Vision Competition for Chicago's Future. [Enter here.](#)

Horizon Lines is a signature initiative of World Business Chicago, the Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, and the Department of Planning and Development. It's also the next chapter of a citywide effort focused on 2050.

We believe cities rise when good ideas gain momentum. When civic imagination meets civic alignment. When investment follows vision, not convenience. Think of things like reversing the Chicago River and building Millennium Park.

Chicago has the talent and creativity; what it needs is a spark that brings bold ideas into public view and helps shape how the city thinks about its future across neighborhoods, downtown and everywhere in between.

Horizon Lines is that spark, a competition that's about vision, created to find and share transformative ideas for Chicago's next 25 years. It's designed as an open civic invitation, grounded in the belief that Chicago's future is best imagined by the people who live, work, build and care for this city every day.

We invite architects, designers, planners, community leaders, artists, innovators and interdisciplinary teams to propose bold ideas that can help shape Chicago's future over the next quarter-century.

This is not a call for development proposals or construction-ready plans. We want to see your visions for the city, and showcase them in front of civic, business and government leaders. This initiative aligns with our [ChiForward program](#), created to attract capital to transformative projects that help the world see, and invest in, the city's true promise.

Why Now?

Chicago's greatest strength is its people: nearly 3 million residents with deep knowledge of their neighborhoods, industries, and future. Across the city, there are bold, extraordinary ideas about how Chicago should grow, evolve, and lead, and this call is an invitation to bring those ideas forward.

Horizon Lines is intentionally inclusive: welcoming ideas from long-time residents and new arrivals, from neighborhood leaders and first-time visionaries, from established institutions and independent voices alike. We believe the city's future should be shaped by all those who call it home.

The goal is clear: to support the long-term vitality of residents and businesses, retain and grow opportunity over the next 25 years, and position Chicago and its region as a place people choose to stay, invest and build their futures.

Horizon Lines exists to surface and champion extraordinary ideas. It combines:

- a global vision and design competition culminating in a public exhibition at the Chicago Cultural Center this summer
- a collection of visionary essays, which will appear in the Opinion section of the *Chicago Tribune* starting March 22, and
- a citywide investment platform called ChiForward.

Together, these elements surface and share transformative ideas — bringing them out of archives, inboxes and conference rooms and into public view, where they can inform conversation, influence priorities and help attract investment.

This is Chicago deciding to dream big.

Show Us Your Vision for the Future

We seek ambitious, visionary and implementable ideas that explore what Chicago could build, enhance, protect or re-envision by 2050.

Ideas may address but are not limited to:

- New architectural icons and reimagined civic landmarks
- Transformative public spaces
- Future mobility, transit and city infrastructure
- Housing and neighborhood vitality
- Climate resilience and environmental innovation
- Economic engines and cultural districts
- Systems that make Chicago safer, more connected, and more equitable
- Street-level interventions that improve daily life
- Bold proposals that challenge existing assumptions about Chicago's future

Projects should reflect our city's diverse communities and contribute to a more just, equitable and globally compelling vision for Chicago.

Come to Us With Compelling, Credible Visions

We ask proposers to think at the scale of history: Think about the next multi-century icon. The Eiffel Tower was completed in 1889. More than a century later its impact has only grown. Chicago, too, deserves the next global landmark for the next 100 years.

Finalists should demonstrate not only imagination, but also credibility. We want a clear and thoughtful path for how the idea could move forward over the next decade.

Detailed submission criteria can be found later in this document.

Finalists will receive direct engagement and early attention from City leadership and planning officials to help advance their ideas. This early attention from planning officials is intended to reduce barriers to progress and give ideas a clear, supported route toward implementation.

What Participants Receive

Horizon Lines is more than a competition. It's an engine for visibility, coordination and momentum around Chicago's future.

Selected finalists will receive:

Honoraria

World Business Chicago is offering honoraria in acknowledgment of the time and effort involved in preparing submissions. These will be awarded as a single \$5,000 honorarium to the winning submission and five \$1,000 honoraria to notable projects/runners-up.

Public Visibility

A citywide exhibition at the Chicago Cultural Center this summer will showcase finalist visions and the stories behind them, supported by a robust marketing campaign to engage the public.

Expert Feedback

Opportunities to refine and strengthen ideas with input from a review panel and jury of civic leaders.

Investment and Partnership Pathways

Visibility through [ChiForward](#), which highlights promising concepts and introduces them to networks of investors, institutions, and public-sector partners interested in Chicago's future.

Early Engagement of City Planning and Economic Development Officials

World Business Chicago CEO Phil Clement, Deputy Mayor and DCASE Commissioner Kenya Merritt and Department of Planning & Development Commissioner Ciere Boatright chair this initiative. The goal is to ensure finalist visions are informed by real civic priorities and positioned to navigate the city's planning and development landscape over time.

Who Should Apply?

We welcome submissions from:

- Architecture, landscape and urban design firms
- Community-based organizations and neighborhood design leaders
- Universities, student teams and research groups
- Artists, futurists, systems designers, technologists
- Public–private partnerships
- Interdisciplinary teams formed specifically for this competition

You do not need prior experience with City processes or large-scale development to apply. If you have a compelling, thoughtful vision for Chicago’s future, we want to hear from you.

Each team must have a Chicago-based lead business (for-profit or non-profit), but partnering organizations and team members can be based anywhere. This requirement is intended to ground ideas locally, not to limit participation. We encourage partnerships that connect neighborhood knowledge with regional, national or global expertise.

Our Values

Every submission should reflect the principles at the center of Horizon Lines:

Ambition

Chicago deserves ideas as bold as its architecture and as expansive as its skyline. We support big thinking, not incrementalism.

Visibility

Good ideas shouldn’t stay quiet. We elevate the ideas that can reshape Chicago — and give them the audience they deserve.

Coordination

Cities succeed when the right people are in the room together. We connect and align design, community, public agencies and investors.

Equity

We champion visions and investments that everyone in the city can enjoy and that benefit all communities by embedding equity into how ideas are shaped and advanced, who participates and where opportunities take root.

Confidence

Chicago's future requires belief. We cultivate both by making progress visible and momentum undeniable.

Selection Criteria

Finalists will be chosen based on:

- **Vision:** Does the concept demonstrate bold, future-facing thinking?
- **Impact:** Will it make visible, tangible improvements for Chicagoans?
- **Equity:** Does it meaningfully benefit communities across the city?
- **Credibility:** Is there a realistic pathway for the idea to be advanced, tested or enabled over the next decade?
- **Inspiration:** Does it expand public imagination about what Chicago can be?
- **Alignment:** Does it strengthen Chicago's global competitiveness and local quality of life?

Submissions will be evaluated by a panel of judges including:

- Deputy Mayor and Interim DCASE Commissioner Kenya Merritt
 - World Business Chicago CEO Phil Clement
 - Chicago Planning Commissioner Ciere Boatwright
 - Lever for Change Board Chair Julia Stasch
 - Chicago Architecture Biennial Board Co-Chair Nora Daley
 - Chicago Community Trust President & CEO Andrea Sáenz
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Timeline

- March 5, 2026: Open Call launches
- Informational webinars. Register at the links below.
 - [March 17 at 10 a.m.](#)

- [March 19 at 3 p.m.](#)
 - [March 24 at 2 p.m.](#)
 - Submissions due [here](#) by April 15
 - Finalists announced in May
 - Memorial Day to Labor Day: Public Exhibition at the Chicago Cultural Center
 - September: Winner announced
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What We're Asking For (and What We're Not)

Because Horizon Lines is a vision competition with only a small amount of money attached, we are intentionally keeping submissions lightweight and accessible. This is not a request for full architectural designs, technical drawings or detailed development plans. We are asking for clear ideas, grounded in place and communicated visually.

Submission Requirements

Each submission should include the following four elements:

1. Vision Statement (1,000-1,500 words)

A concise narrative describing:

- The core idea and why it matters for Chicago's future
- The problem or opportunity it addresses
- How it could shape the city by 2050
- A brief explanation of where and how the idea might live in Chicago:
 - A specific site, corridor, neighborhood, or system or
 - A representative or hypothetical location used to illustrate the concept
- A high-level outline of how the idea *could* move forward over time:
 - Who might be involved (public agencies, community partners, private sector, etc.)
 - What types of policy, planning, or investment tools could enable it
 - Why this idea is plausible to test, pilot, or advance in the next 10 years

This should be written for a general civic audience, not a technical review board. *Think: a compelling essay, not a design brief.*

2. A Strong Visual Representation (Required)

Each submission must include at least one strong visual that brings the idea to life. This may be:

- A conceptual rendering
- A hand drawing or sketch
- A collage or illustrated diagram
- A speculative axonometric or perspective
- A hybrid graphic combining text and imagery

The visual does not need to be technically precise or construction-ready. Its purpose is to:

- Make the idea immediately understandable
- Help the public imagine the future
- Anchor the vision in a physical or spatial way

We are evaluating clarity and imagination — not rendering polish. However, if you're chosen as a finalist, we will request high-resolution images for display at the Chicago Cultural Center.

4. Team Information (Brief, Capped at 500 Words)

- Team name and lead Chicago-based organization
- Names and roles of key contributors
- One short paragraph on why this team is suited to imagine this future

No resumes or portfolios required.

What We Are *Not* Asking For

To avoid confusion or overwork, it may help to explicitly state:

- No construction documents
- No cost estimates
- No engineering studies
- No zoning or code analysis
- No detailed phasing plans

- No expectation of unpaid professional services beyond this submission

Optional

- Additional images or renderings

[Submit Your Vision Here](#)