



PLANT  
CHICAGO

# STRATEGIC PLAN

2026-2029

# WHO WE ARE

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Our mission is to cultivate Local Circular Economies

We envision a paradigm shift in production, consumption, and waste at the local level, generating economic opportunity and equity for all residents.

We describe a local circular economy as a collaborative economic practice sustained by the local circulation of materials, nutrients, knowledge, and money. In contrast, our current global economic system is largely linear and extractive - a "take-make-dispose" model that is dependent on the infinite extraction of resources.

We challenge this system by cultivating local circular economies that keep resources, knowledge, money and opportunities circulating within the community - by reusing, repairing, sharing, and recycling. We believe that building local economies centered on people and communities is essential to creating a more sustainable future - one that is regenerative, transparent, diverse, and inclusive.

## **WHAT MAKES US DIFFERENT** *A people first approach to a sustainable city.*

Conversations about circular economies often leave out equity. Focus tends to be placed on the environment, resources, and operational systems, overlooking people and communities as a resource. However, the concept of circular economies in many ways builds on the knowledge and sustainable practices of Indigenous and low-income communities. Plant Chicago celebrates this and centers people in our approach. Our sustainability programs are driven by community needs that are generated by the negative effects of linear systems. We work to empower residents and address what prevents them from living healthier, sustainable lives. Collectively, we can cultivate inclusive, circular communities that are beneficial for both people and the planet.

# BACK OF THE YARDS

## DESERVES A HEALTHY AND RESILIENT SYSTEM.

We focus our work in Back of the Yards and the surrounding communities as they have been disproportionately impacted by negative environmental practices dated back to Chicago's meat packing history. These vibrant communities have faced systematic disinvestment, resource depletion, and economic exclusion----perpetuated by the extractive practices of linear economic systems. The resulting impacts include natural resource depletion, waste accumulation, negative health outcomes, food insecurity, and economic strain on the residents. Exacerbating these challenges are systemic barriers such as limited access to affordable and sustainable alternatives, a lack of culturally relevant sustainability programming, and insufficient awareness of circular economic principles. These factors hinder community participation in building regenerative systems that could foster environmental sustainability, economic equity, and local resilience.

Addressing these challenges requires inclusive, community-driven solutions. Because Back of the Yards is a neighborhood proudly composed of immigrants, the food and manufacturing industries, and social activists, our programming leans into these strengths to empower residents to transform these historical challenges into opportunities for long term well-being.

Hecho en: Back of the Yards Mural  
at Grano Cafe y Pan.



# WE BELIEVE

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## **Waste is an opportunity:**

The best natural resource is the one that has already been extracted. We see waste streams as valuable resources that should be repurposed rather than discarded.

## **Our system must be challenged:**

We can and will cultivate healthier, more sustainable communities by creatively challenging extractive systems. As we do this, we firmly believe that diversity, equity, and inclusion must be centered.

## **Together, communities are strong:**

Lasting, collaborative partnerships are key to creating environments where individuals, organizations, and communities flourish.

## **Results require action:**

Action is the most effective stimulus for progress. We promote hands-on, practical approaches to change.

## **Knowledge is power:**

Sharing what we learn empowers others. We have as much to learn from others as others do from us.

*Our pumpkin smash takes place every November.*

# WHAT WE VALUE

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## **Collaboration:**

Working across roles and disciplines to advance shared goals with our partners

## **Health:**

Promoting well-being for people, the economy, and the environment

## **Growth & Learning:**

Nurturing improvement through reflection, education, and adaptation

## **Community Accountability:**

Acknowledging and aligning ourselves with the lived experiences of those around us

## **Resilience:**

Staying grounded and adaptive, especially in hard times

*Our values reflect what matters most to us as an organization and support our mission to cultivate local circular economies. They guide our choices from program design to hiring to how we show up in the community.*

# OUR PROGRAMS

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Through our community-driven, hands-on programs and initiatives, we equip residents and businesses with tools to live more sustainably. Our programs and initiatives are focused on:

## **Education & Knowledge Sharing:**

Providing a hub for equitable access to sustainability and circular economy education and knowledge sharing, including STEM programming for youth, sustainability workshops for adults, and more.

## **Local Business Support:**

Creating infrastructures that provide economic opportunities for local, sustainable, and often disenfranchised business owners.

## **Access to Local Food:**

Tackling inequitable food systems by providing low-income households access to fresh and nutritious food while supporting local food producers.

## **Waste Diversion:**

Supporting local economic systems while actively diverting materials from landfills.

## **Equitable Decarbonization:**

Working to ensure that low-income households can access benefits from sustainable development, such as renewable energy and building decarbonization.

These core programs have laid the groundwork for meaningful change in Back of the Yards. Our 2026–2029 Strategic Plan builds on that foundation, focusing our collective energy on the priorities and partnerships that will strengthen community voice, expand circular practices, and ensure a resilient future for both people and the planet.

# WHAT WE HEARD

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Starting in late 2024, Plant Chicago engaged staff, board members, market participants, and community partners in a collaborative process to shape the organization's three year Strategic Plan. Guided by a Strategic Planning Committee (SPC) composed of staff and board representatives and facilitated in partnership with Najera Consulting Group, the process was designed to ensure that the plan reflects the voices and lived experiences of those most connected to Plant Chicago's mission of cultivating local circular economies.

As a result of this work, Plant Chicago identified three strategic priorities to support our vision of a local and inclusive circular economy:

- 1. Champion Circular & Sustainable Practices Through Education and Community Partnerships**
- 2. Celebrate Community Voice, Circular Practices, and Impact**
- 3. Strengthen the Internal Structures for Organizational and Personal Resilience**

*Across surveys, focus groups, and interviews, participants consistently affirmed PC's role as a trusted convener and educator advancing circular economy practices at the neighborhood level. At the same time, they voiced aspirations for deeper community connection, more substantial internal alignment, and a more visible presence within the community.*

*More details on our process and key themes can be found at the end of this document.*

## Strategic Priority 1:

# Champion Circular & Sustainable Practices Through Education and Community Partnerships

### Goal 1:

## Expand Education & Circular Economy Leadership as a Primary Tool for Change


- Deliver culturally relevant education,
- Develop inclusive leadership development, and
- Develop mentorship pathways that build grassroots circular economy leadership.
- Broaden digital and offline education strategies to amplify diverse community voices, improve access, and deepen participation in sustainability efforts.

### Goal 2:

## Catalyze Healthy & Sustainable Community Outcomes Through Collaboration

- Establish a shared framework for community-led collaboration that supports collective action and measurable improvements in community health, sustainability, and resilience.
- Collaborate with local businesses and local values aligned organizations.

*Plant Chicago Education Manager, Tom Knapp, leads a school group through a tour of our various grow systems.*



# Strategic Priority 2: Celebrate Community Voice, Circular Practices, & Impact

## Goal 1:

### Expand Opportunities for Community Voices

- Increase leadership opportunities for local residents (e.g., advisory committee, board service, etc.) that strengthen grassroots circular-economy leadership and deepen community ownership of outcomes.

## Goal 2:

### Enhance digital and offline storytelling strategies

- Develop a multi-lingual communications plan that amplifies diverse community practices, deepens participation in sustainability efforts, shares resources, and highlights collective impact.

*Neighbor and entrepreneur, Obdulia Vega, with her daughter, Jocelyn Vega.*



# Strategic Priority 3: Strengthen Internal Structures for Organizational and Personal Resilience

## Goal 1:

### Deepen Investment in Staff, Board, and Our Culture of Purpose

- Invest in the systems and structures that support equitable compensation, internal growth opportunities, and a resilient organizational culture.
- Build an inclusive, transparent governance model that strengthens board-staff collaboration and aligns with organizational values.

## Goal 2:

### Build a Values-Aligned Resource Development Strategy

- Develop an adaptable, mission-driven resource development strategy that supports financial sustainability, aligns with organizational values, and enables long-term transformative impact.

Plant Chicago staff




# OUR PROCESS

Starting in late 2024, Plant Chicago engaged staff, board members, market participants, and community partners in a collaborative process to shape the organization's 2025–2028 Strategic Plan. Guided by a Strategic Planning Committee (SPC) composed of staff and board representatives and facilitated in partnership with Najera Consulting Group, the process was designed to ensure that the plan reflects the voices and lived experiences of those most connected to Plant Chicago's mission of cultivating local circular economies.

The process began with data gathering and framing conversations to understand Plant Chicago's current reality and the systems it seeks to influence.

## **Phase 1: Discovery and Framing (Fall–Winter 2024)**

Internal and external surveys were conducted with staff, board members, and community partners to capture diverse perspectives on the organization's mission, strengths, and opportunities for growth. Participants engaged in a SWOT Interplay analysis which examined how internal factors (such as staff capacity, partnerships, and programs) interact with external forces (including funding trends and community needs) to identify the most strategic opportunities for impact.



*These insights informed the design of the Strategic Planning Retreat, where participants engaged in a mission assessment, clarifying our organizational identity, values, and opportunities for growth.*

# OUR PROCESS

*continued...*

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## **Phase 2: Deepening Engagement with Staff, Board, and Community Partners**

**(Winter 2024-25)**

Following the retreat, engagement deepened through staff and community focus groups, individual interviews, and reflection sessions with board members and partners. These conversations explored Plant Chicago's evolving role, clarified decision-making structures, and strengthened alignment between mission and daily practice. Participants also surfaced opportunities to embed diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) more fully into the organization's culture and to broaden partnerships within the community.

## **Phase 3: Collaborative Strategy Development and Refinement**

**(Spring 2025)**

Working sessions with staff and board members, refining emerging strategic priorities. Through iterative reflection and collaborative analysis, participants distilled ideas into five thematic areas: community engagement, cross-sector collaboration, organizational culture, financial sustainability, and governance. The SPC worked closely with Najera Consulting Group to synthesize this input into a strategic framework that balanced ambition with practicality.

## **Phase 4: Validation and Collective Alignment**

**(Summer 2025)**

In the final phase, the board and staff reconvened to validate the emerging priorities of the plan. These discussions confirmed alignment between mission and capacity and established shared ownership of implementation.

*Thank you to everyone who filled out surveys, participated in focus groups, listening sessions, and otherwise shared feedback.*

*We appreciate your attentiveness and commitment to circular economies.*

# KEY THEMES

that emerged across all listening tools:

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## **Equity and Accessibility:**

Participants urged Plant Chicago to strengthen equity and inclusion in programming, particularly through bilingual outreach, affordable local offerings, and culturally relevant engagement. They also called for more visible representation of Back of the Yards residents in program design and leadership.

***"It still feels like there's a divide after you cross 47th Street."  
- Community Participant.***

## **Education and Partnerships as Strengths:**

Across all audiences, Plant Chicago's educational programs, local partnerships, and visible market activities were recognized as vital assets. These efforts not only model circular economy principles but also build trust and inspire participation.

***"Our outcomes are the real impact—the behavior change we want to see."  
- Staff Member.***

## **Internal Alignment and Leadership Development:**

Staff identified a need for stronger internal communication, clearer roles, and leadership practices that support collaboration, professional growth, and well-being.

***"Staff often rely on leadership for decisions, and there's a desire for more shared accountability and communication."  
- Staff Focus Group Participant.***

## **Deeper Community Engagement:**

Stakeholders emphasized the need for residents to be collaborators, not just participants, in shaping programs and priorities. Community members asked Plant Chicago to meet people where they are, engage across cultures and languages, and ensure that circular economy principles feel relevant to everyday life.

***"We'd like to see more community groups come together around shared goals."  
- Focus Group Participant.***

## **Clarity and Communication:**

Many participants expressed a desire for more transparent and accessible communication (internally and externally) about what Plant Chicago does and why it matters. Staff and partners encouraged more storytelling and community-driven messaging to make the concept of a "circular economy" more tangible and relatable.

***"Why should the average person care about circularity?"  
- Staff Member***