

BRUSHWOOD CENTER

Health, Equity, and Nature Accelerator: Celebrating Five Years of Change in Lake County

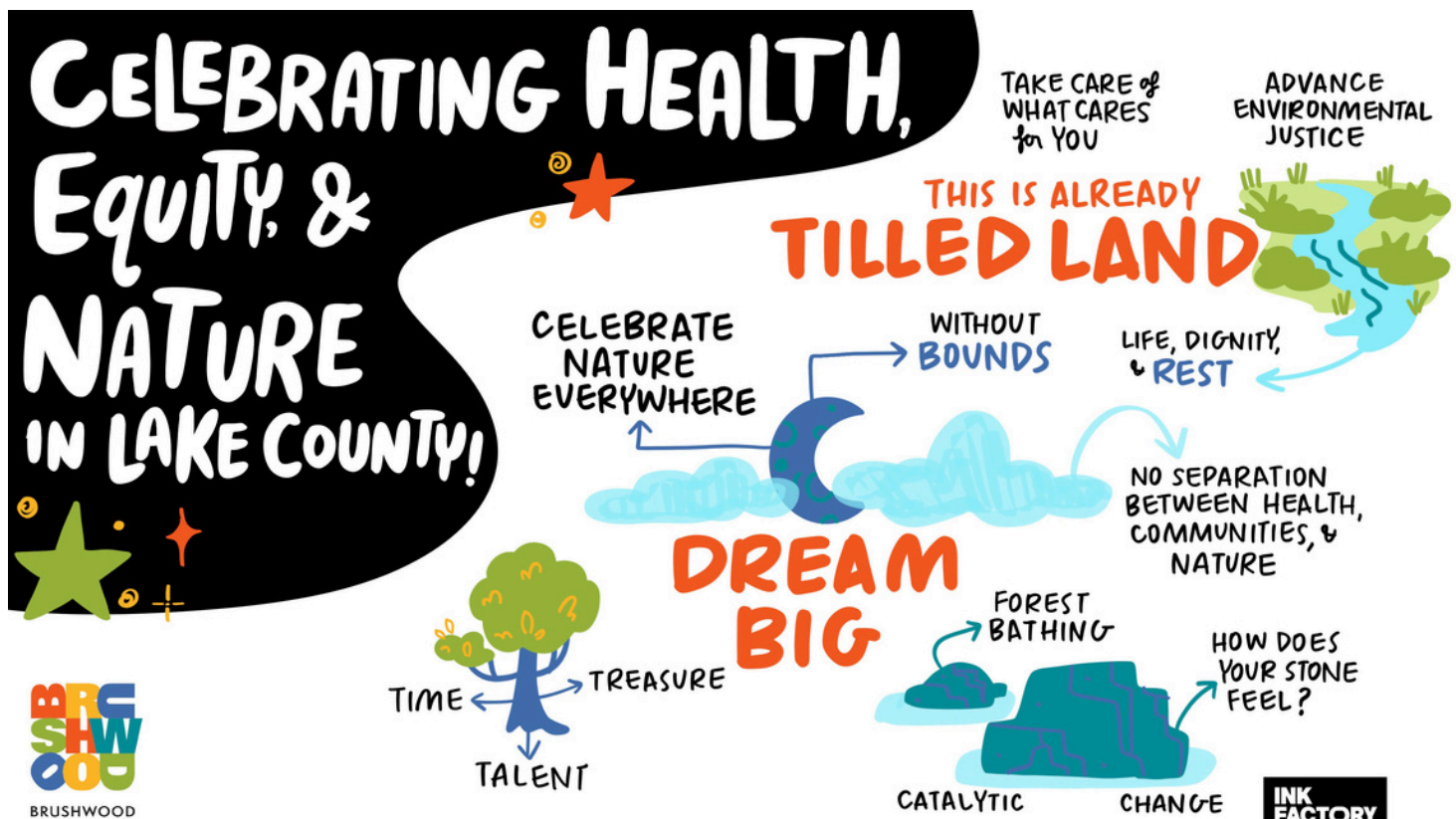
JULY 2026



OVERVIEW

2026 marks the five year anniversary of Brushwood's *Health Equity and Nature Accelerator*. To celebrate this milestone, Brushwood Center and the Morrison Family Foundation hosted the HEN Anniversary Celebration, an event designed to highlight impact, celebrate the five-year anniversary and the launch of Nature Everywhere Waukegan. Participants included local elected officials, community organizers, and leaders from healthcare, environmental, governmental, and philanthropic fields. Over the course of a morning, this group explored all of the accomplishments of the last five years, new opportunities on the horizon through the Nature Everywhere coalition, and brainstormed new collaborations and the resources needed to make them possible.

This report features content shared at the Anniversary Celebration, including a summary of the impact of Brushwood Center's 2023 report, *Health, Equity, and Nature: A Changing Climate in Lake County, IL*, the ongoing work of the Accelerator, and exciting wins from our community partners like Nature Everywhere to serve as examples of how communities can actually create long-term change.



The opening remarks and presentation of the event were documented by Kenshasa, an artist from Ink Factory, whose visual note-taking piece is featured above.

OPENING REMARKS

By Ashley Cullen-Williams, Brushwood Center Senior Program Director

There is no separation between the health of people and the health of the places we call home. Not human community on one side, and nature on the other—but one living system we are all responsible for sustaining.

Before the *Health, Equity, and Nature Accelerator*, much of this work in Lake County was happening with deep care, but often in silos. Organizations were stretched. Communities were being served, but not always centered. And nature—though always present—was not always recognized as a core part of healing or equity. People were doing important work, but without fully naming the connection between clean air, green space, water, and human wellbeing. And yet, the truth was always there.

Mother Earth has never stopped providing—air that allows us to breathe, water that sustains life, land that holds us, and green spaces that restore us. The issue was never scarcity. It was access, connection, and intention.

I was raised with what I call “Black house rules”—values like take care of what takes care of you, don’t waste what you’ve been given, respect shared space, and leave things better than you found them. These were more than cultural lessons—they were instructions for survival and care. And when we apply them to the land, they become a blueprint for environmental justice.

This initiative marked a turning point. Partners began to ask different questions: What if health doesn’t stop at the clinic door? What if community voice leads



Ashley Cullen Williams delivers opening remarks at the HEN Anniversary Celebration on April 21, 2026.

strategy? What if clean air, water, and green space are not privileges, but rights—and essential infrastructure for healing?

From that shift, a shared vision emerged: centering community voices and assets, prioritizing communities most impacted by inequity, advancing climate and environmental justice, expanding access to green spaces, integrating nature into healthcare systems, and investing in culturally rooted spaces where people feel seen, safe, and supported.

As a mother, born, raised, and raising in Waukegan, this is not abstract for me. I think about the environments my children are growing up in—the air they breathe, the spaces they play in, the conditions that shape their sense of safety and possibility. And I know that every family deserves not just services, but environments that support life, dignity, and rest.

We are at both a place of celebration and a threshold. We are celebrating what has been built together: a shift from fragmented care to connected ecosystems of support, from isolated efforts to shared accountability, from programs to relationships that include both people and the planet. And we are also looking forward to it.

Because the next five years of this work sit at a powerful intersection—health equity and nature, justice and environment, community voice and systems change. The opportunity before us is not only to sustain this momentum, but to deepen it: to fund, build, and scale models where healing is environmental, and environmental justice is health justice.

This is just the beginning of what becomes possible when we remember what has always sustained us—and choose to invest in it together.

Thank you for being here, for believing in this work, and for helping shape what comes next.

HISTORY

In 2021, Brushwood Center launched the Health, Equity, and Nature Accelerator. Brushwood's programming had long focused on the importance of increasing access to nature and the arts for increasing individual and community well-being, but there were often roadblocks. Structural inequities, the legacies of environmental degradation and systemic racism, all exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, made it abundantly clear that nature programming alone was not enough.



Lake County residents deserved more, and we needed real, strategic, long-term change. Building on a legacy of community organizing and environmental justice in Lake County, this project was the next evolution in Brushwood's commitment to health and nature, and a catalyst for visioning new paths forward.

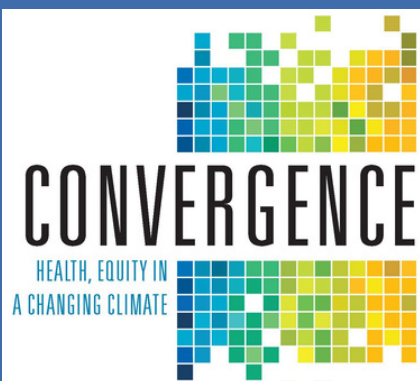
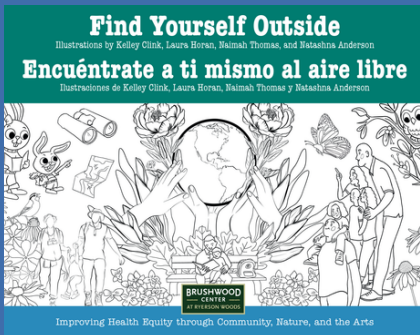
Thanks to years of relationship building, and a confluence of factors depicted above, the Health, Equity, and Nature Accelerator was born. This initiative was designed to activate healthcare investment in nature-based solutions and drive collaboration among community, governmental, environmental, and healthcare sectors. The first project, creating a report on the status of Lake County's nature and health equity, took two years, extensive collaboration, and a lot of creativity.

REPORT IMPACT

It has been three years since the release of *Health, Equity, and Nature: A Changing Climate in Lake County, IL*. Published in 2023, this report was the first of its kind, overlaying social drivers of health, environmental inequities, and health disparities across the county. Interwoven with this data was beautiful artwork and joyful community reflections, and the overwhelming rallying cry to build new systems that work for everyone.

This report was created with the intention of making crucial health data accessible to all, and that meant going beyond the page through connection and art, including:

- A companion art exhibition, **Visible**, featuring over 20 artists who worked to interpret both the findings of the report, and the question of what health, equity, and access to nature means to them.
- Creation of a children's activity book, **Find Yourself Outside**, which explained key concepts like access, assets, and community building to youth in our community.
- Hosting **annual leadership roundtables** and presentations to countless groups across the region to further disseminate and discuss report findings.
- **Convergence**, a music performance which brought the data to a new life on stage, and has been performed 12 times for nearly 2,000 people, including 1,300 students in Lake County.



To date, **over 5,000 print and digital copies** of the Report have been distributed, both in English and Spanish. The report has been shared with and by a diverse range of groups, from community members and residents, to health care providers, climate change communities and forums, and regional institutions.

These materials have been incorporated as required readings for first-year students at Rosalind Franklin University medical school, been utilized in biology lab courses at College of Lake County, and spurred countless conversations around how to address health inequities in our region.

Partners found the report useful for staff and community education, policy-making, programming, strategic planning, and fundraising. Based on reports from partners, we estimate that over **over \$4 million** have come into Lake County through grant-writing efforts supported by data and statistics from the HEN Report.

The impact was not only material; partners shared that the report shifted the conversation around health and nature in Lake County, both on the ground where the work is happening and in philanthropic giving.

“There is a hunger in the community for localized data that can be used to address issues that people care about, but it’s so hard to come by. Every time I share data from the report people are eager to know where they can access this information.”

“This report wasn’t brand new information, but it was the first time it stuck. The community here in Waukegan knows that we get the short end of the stick. But this report shared the why, that this is real. It launched so many different things.”

“The report has shifted the conversation around health and nature in Lake County. The tie was always there, but only anecdotal before. There was never strong enough evidence or connection for people to have a serious conversation around it, until now.”

The report made community members feel heard, it connected the dots between lived experiences and major systemic inequities. It provided a new tool for storytelling and problem analysis using localized data. It shifted the conversation.

LOOKING FORWARD

Brushwood Center's *Health Equity and Nature Accelerator* continues to move the needle forward on nature and health equity through ongoing collaborative work, including:

TIERRA: Transforming Internal Experiences for Resilience and Restoration through Acceptance

In 2023, Brushwood Center collaborated with DePaul University and the Highwood Library & Community Center to create a bilingual, trauma-informed, group-based intervention in nature called TIERRA. TIERRA combines third-wave Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) with forest bathing to foster radical hope. The program trains Community Health Workers (CHWs) who then deliver the intervention in their communities. **Twenty-two CHWs and clinicians have been trained in TIERRA, and 85 individuals have participated across 10 community interventions.** Data collection is ongoing as the program expands, but a study of the initial pilot found :

- 71% of individuals who had some amount of depression before undergoing TIERRA had **reduced scores of depression**
- 67% of individuals who had some amount of anxiety OR high trauma scores before undergoing TIERRA had **reduced scores of anxiety or trauma,**

Since the initial 2023 pilot, the program has expanded to five additional Lake County Partners, and continues to grow through new collaborations and cultural adaptations.

Maternal & Environmental Health Training

During the Summer of 2026, Brushwood Center is partnering with Rosalind Franklin University and the Illinois Public Health Association to launch a Maternal and Environmental Health Training for CHWs. This training, hosted through IPHA's training portal, features six modules that cover important environmental health concerns that impact maternal health outcomes, including Air Pollution, Pregnancy in Heat Stress, and Climate Change, Environmental Disasters and Displacement, and Toxic Chemical Exposure and Pregnancy.

CELEBRATING WINS

The HEN Report ends with a list of over fifty different recommendations for action, ranging from program considerations to needed policy shifts. These recommendations were organized under six different categories, meant to inspire readers to take the data from the report and use it in transformational work across sectors and scales. Through interviews and share-outs at the HEN Anniversary Celebration, our community partners have shared incredible examples of community-driven, intersectional and equity focused initiatives underway in Lake County. To help inspire additional actions, we want to highlight a few of these wins and how they align with the report recommendations:



Nature Everywhere Waukegan

***Presented at the Celebration by Nature Everywhere Leadership Team Members
Bruce Boyd, Michelle Luu, and Frank Pettis***

In 2025, Waukegan joined over 100 Nature Everywhere Communities — a national initiative led by the Children & Nature Network — supported with technical guidance to increase equitable access to nature everywhere children and families live, learn, and play.

Being part of this network means Waukegan benefits from national research, peer learning, and proven strategies — while contributing its own story to a growing movement. Nature Everywhere Waukegan launched as a collaborative effort of local grassroots partners, including the city, schools, nonprofits, and individuals, with representation from youth leadership, environmental justice, parks and recreation, and conservation sectors to advance our vision and strategies.

Current partners in Nature Everywhere Waukegan are: Brushwood Center, Boys & Girls Club of Lake County, Youth Conservation Corps, Lake County Audubon Society, Lake Forest Open Lands Association, Lake County Forest Preserve District, Waukegan Park District, City of Waukegan, The Josselyn Center, and the Children & Nature Network.

These organizations believe that every person in this city deserves safe, joyful, equitable access to the outdoors. This collaborative is not only centering the voices of Waukegan residents, but also highlighting the city's rich environmental assets, like the park district and ravines, through targeted programming and partnerships.

The coalition is grounded in three core strategies:

1. Activate and Connect Natural Assets

Expand safe, welcoming access to parks, trails, bike paths, and public transit while strengthening connections between blue and green spaces. In spring of 2026, NE-W hosted a biking event for early childhood in collaboration with the Lake County Forest Preserve District, and a biking event with the Boys & Girls Club of Lake County. NE-W is currently working with partners to potentially institutionalize these types of events and support partners' capacity to host these events more regularly.

2. Grow a Nature-Centered Workforce

Invest in youth leadership, training, and employment opportunities in land stewardship, environmental education, outdoor recreation, green buildings, and regenerative agriculture. This strategy is centered on building a generation of young people in Waukegan who are skilled, employed, and rooted in the land they care for. In an initial survey, over 180 youth survey respondents shared that they were interested in nature-based careers, but were not aware of what the opportunities or pathways were.

The group is exploring ways to embed this career exploration into existing nature-focused school clubs and after-school programming. This would include career exposure & exploration, job skills development, internships and apprenticeships, and post-secondary support.

3. Advance Nature-Based Climate Solutions

Integrate natural infrastructure and regenerative practices into community strategies to build resilience and equity. Climate resilience and equitable access aren't separate goals. When we invest in natural systems, we protect the communities that need protection most.



College of Lake County's Urban Farm Center

Presented at the Celebration by Eliza Fournier (CLC)

CLC's Urban Farm Center was an idea brought from community stakeholders to CLC to support hands-on learning, food production, and entrepreneurial support. This 24,000 square-foot facility will support local food system in a community long over-burdened by food insecurity and diet-related health disparities, like diabetes and heart disease. This site will be home to three businesses:

- the Lakeshore Farm, a 12,000-square-foot, year-round growing space offering training and production in microgreens, mushroom, and vertical hydroponic growing
- the Lakeshore Kitchen, a 1,000-square-foot shared commercial kitchen for small food entrepreneurs to grow their business, culinary and nutrition education, and farm-to-table meals for students and community
- the Lancer Fresh Zone, a 1,700-square-foot retail space for locally grown produce, prepared foods from Lakeshore Kitchen, and locally produced food products

This space will help create career pathways in agriculture and food-related fields for students in Waukegan, support small business growth, expand access to fresh, local food, strengthen regional supply chains and contribute to the economic revitalization of downtown Waukegan. CLC's decision to invest significant time and resources into this project at their Lakeshore Campus in Waukegan exemplifies the theme of prioritizing communities overburdened by systemic inequities. The Urban Farm Center is currently under construction and slated to open in Fall of 2026.

Eliza Fournier, Director of CLC's Urban Farm Center, shares updates on the project during the April 2026 HEN Anniversary Celebration





Superfund Site Remediation

In December of 2025, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced improved plans to remediate asbestos contamination from the Johns-Manville site in Waukegan. The new plan outlines more environmentally friendly strategies to removing the asbestos, which will protect the rare dune plants of the surrounding Illinois Beach Nature Preserve. This win was due in large part to the strong community support and organizing efforts of local groups like Clean Power Lake County.

Another Superfund site in Waukegan, the Yeomen Creek Landfill, has also undergone an exciting transformation. Now operating on this former landfill is a community solar farm. The solar farm is located on Waukegan School District 60-owned land, transforming the area into a source of renewable energy while providing direct benefits to local families and supporting the district. WPS60 will save money on annual energy costs, and the solar farm will also give students new ways to learn about clean energy. Thanks to the hard work of the City of Waukegan, WPS60, and Illinois Solar for All, up to 1,000 Waukegan residents will also be able to cut their electric bills by up to 50% through a cost savings program. The Yeomen Creek Solar Farm exemplifies climate justice in its focus not only on toxic remediation, but also by building renewable energy infrastructure, and providing financial assistance.



Expanding Public Green Space Accessibility

Presented at the Celebration by JT Taube (Waukegan Park District)

In 2024, the Waukegan Park District was awarded \$600,000 to renovate Roosevelt Park. Improvements will include a multi-age, inclusive playground, a basketball playcourt, and improvements to surfaces to increase park access for people of all abilities. Construction begins in Summer of 2026. Planning public outdoors spaces using principles of universal design, considering how people of all experiences and abilities



JT Taube, Manager of Planning Services, Waukegan Park District, shares updates on WPD Projects

may interact with a space, is key to creating inclusive spaces that enable all members of a community to recreate equitably. This project is an excellent example of how communities can increase outdoor access through improvements to existing spaces.



Rosalind Franklin Community Connections

Information from Interview with Dr. Melissa Chen in May of 2026

Following the release of the HEN Report in 2023, leaders from Rosalind Franklin University in North Chicago, like Dr. Melissa Chen, seized the opportunity to educate students on local health disparities. With a majority of their students coming from outside of Lake County, the HEN Report Executive Summary helps provide context for the community around the university. The executive summary has become required reading for third-year medical students at RFU. Additionally, Dr. Chen has distributed copies to colleagues, clinicians from out of state who work at RFU's health clinic, and used it to help drive conversations on how the university can better serve surrounding communities. Dr. Chen also began hosting RFU's Community Days, an annual event where students can connect with local leaders, community organizers, and change makers to better understand the needs and assets of Lake County, IL.



*Brushwood's Coalition Building Manager,
Jess Rodriguez, speaking with M1 students
at RFU's 2025 Community Day*

These events have been a huge success, with student surveys demonstrating:

- 90% of students reported increased understanding of local health inequities
- 85% of students reported increased knowledge of the impact of structural forces on health outcomes
- 84% of students reported being more likely to become involved in Lake County community organizations.

This project is an incredible example of how one leader can champion community voices within their institution or workplace, and begin to shift thinking for the next generation of healthcare leaders.



LCFPD Program & Preserve Expansion

Presented at the Celebration by Alyssa Firkus (Lake County Forest Preserve District)

The Lake County Forest Preserves District have expanded their programming and conservation efforts. In 2025, nearly 750 acres were added to the Forest Preserves holdings or placed under contract, including two new preserves (Lotus Country and Mshkode). They have also begun master planning at multiple preserves, including reimagining and reinvesting in the infrastructure of Greenbelt Preserve in North Chicago to add critical new trail connections, reduce underutilized parking lots and facilities, and better meet the needs of local residents. Major habitat restoration efforts are also in the planning stages at 9 different forest preserves, including Greenbelt.

The Forest Preserves has also invested in engaging under-served populations by offering bilingual education and public programs. LCFPD now prints their Map and Guide, Fishing Guide, Birdwatching Guide, and Birdwatching Checklist in Spanish. Two new bilingual education staff now lead hikes and programs in English and Spanish. They also have funded a new community engagement program, which aims to recruit, engage, and steward volunteers from across Lake County.



Event attendees participating in breakout group visioning sessions.

VISIONING SESSION SUMMARY

The HEN Anniversary Celebration ended with table discussions and group visioning exercises. Attendees were challenged to dream big and imagine the kinds of programs, initiatives and resources that could take community health work to the next level. They were then invited to brainstorm what resources and support were needed to make these visions possible. The group share out was documented on worksheets, and the data has been summarized through thematic content analysis.

KEY THEMES:



Access: Access was emphasized, particularly access to the **lakefront**, to **transportation**, and to **outdoor resources**. Groups mentioned prioritizing accessible lakefront paths, like Chicago's Lakefront Trail, and greater bike access/trails (including dedicated paths and a bike donor program). Specifically, there was mention of paths connecting CLC to the lake, improved walkways over the Amstutz, and restoring SuperFund sites and old buildings. Additionally, the idea of a gear library came up in multiple groups.

Youth Development and Education: This included expanded youth programming utilizing the Waukegan ravines and the lakefront, partnering with schools, and creating youth leadership opportunities to create job pathways. A nature-based curriculum and nature-driven scholarships were also mentioned, along with creative ideas like transforming the NRG coal plant into a children's museum and establishing a youth symposium.

Community Wellbeing: Multiple groups discussed the need for multi-generational gathering spaces, like a hobby and craft space, community gardens, and improved infrastructure like a designated festival ground in downtown Waukegan. Others discussed promoting pollinator gardens, community gardens (like an Urban Farm Stand), and banning harmful toxins.

Infrastructure & Public Health Improvements: Nature as a source of healing was mentioned by multiple groups, as well as increasing access to healthy, local foods, offering free food/grocery support, free healthcare, and free internet access for all residents. Others mentioned the idea of nature prescriptions and nature-engagement as homework assignments, improving public transportation (especially to green and blue spaces), expanding library branches, and enhancing marketing/storytelling to cultivate Waukegan pride.

AREAS OF SUPPORT:

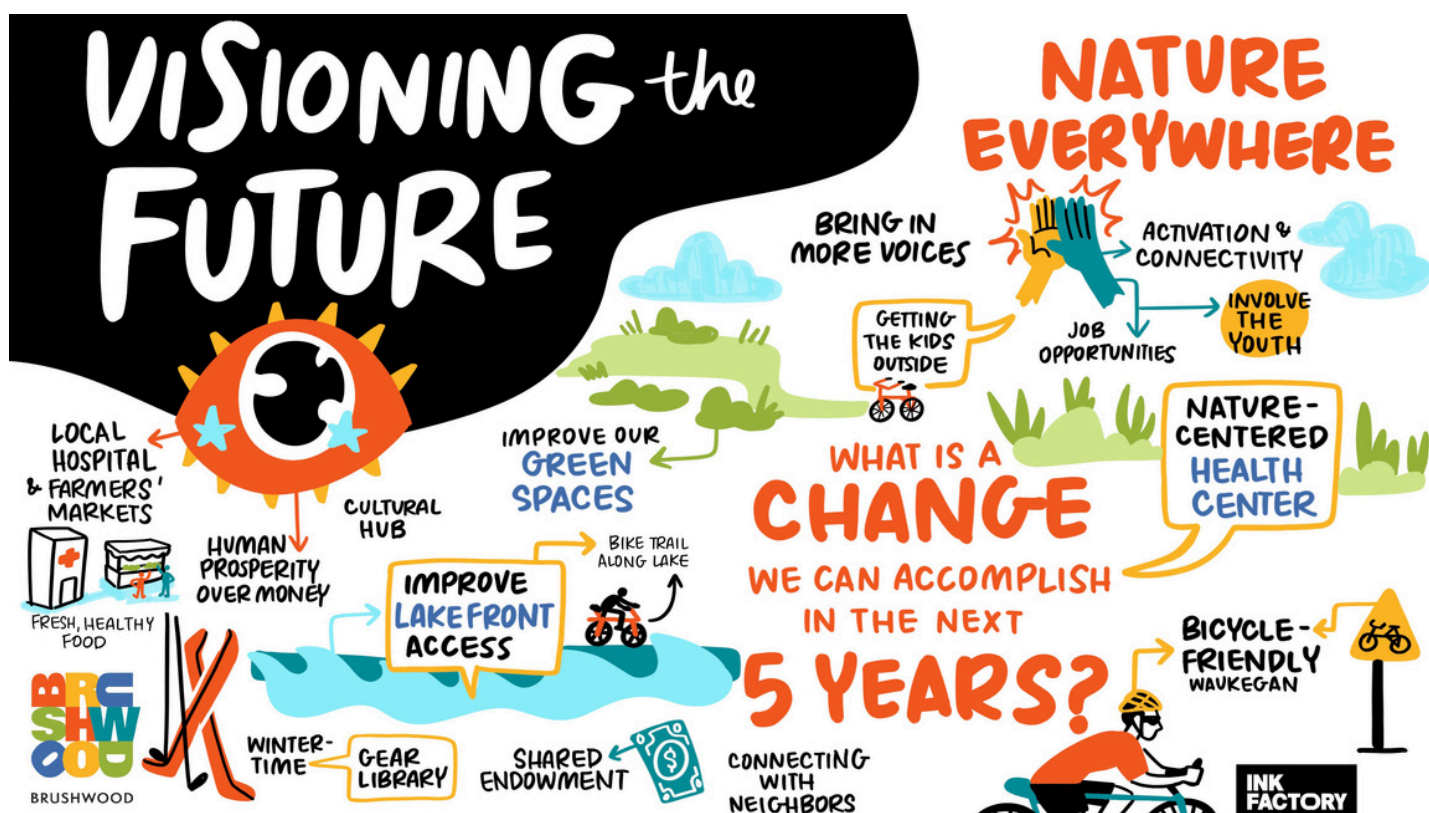
Funding and Investment: Groups emphasized the importance of securing a combination of private and public dollars, involving external funders/foundations. There was also discussion of pooling resources, reimbursing community members for their voice, and seeking multi-year philanthropic support for coalition building, perhaps as a shared endowment.

Political Will and Leadership: All ideas require municipal and state support. Participants spoke about the importance of involvement of elected officials to

champion the ideas, build relationships with local government, and ensure political support and consistency in leadership.

Addressing Physical and Logistical Barriers: Several barriers need to be solved, particularly regarding the inaccessibility of the Waukegan Lakefront. Logistical support is also needed for projects, and transportation is cited as a limiting factor.

Strategic Collaboration and Shared Vision: Success depends on defining what is feasible, creating a project plan, conducting feasibility studies, and engaging community members throughout each step. Community development meetings and inviting the community to the table are essential, as is embedding work into the education system. Greater collaboration is needed across sectors and cities to build awareness and buy-in, identify gaps, and foster a shared sense of value and collective identity.



The group visioning session was also documented by Kenshasa, an artist from Ink Factory, whose visual note-taking piece summarizing the group share-out is featured above.

We are so grateful to all of our partners who lead and collaborate in this work.

To learn how you can support this work going forward, please contact Mirja Spooner-Haffner, Director of Development at m Spoonerhaffner@brushwoodcenter.org.

BRUSHWOOD CENTER

VISION

We work toward a future of resilient and connected communities, both human and ecological, where all lead healthy and thriving lives.

MISSION

Brushwood Center at Ryerson Woods works collaboratively with community partners, artists, health care providers, and scientists to improve health equity and access to nature in Lake County, Illinois, and the Chicago region. We engage people with the outdoors through the arts, environmental education, and community action. Brushwood Center's programs focus on youth, families, Military Veterans, and those facing racial and economic injustices.



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