

STRATEGIC PLAN

2026



THE PREMIER TOURISM DESTINATION FOR ART, CULTURE, FOOD, HISTORY, ARCHITECTURE, SHOPPING AND FUN IS JUST DUE WEST OF CHICAGO.

Table of Contents

1. Letter from Chair
2. Executive Summary
3. Introduction and Purpose of Plan
4. Current landscape and travel trends
5. Market Position and Opportunity
6. Strategic Focus Areas
7. Goals & Tactics

1. A letter from the Chair:

February 2026

Explore Oak Park and Beyond enters 2026 with great excitement for the year ahead and those to come. Having shed the identity of Visit Oak Park and introduced new branding in 2025, Explore Oak Park and Beyond is proud to bear a name that embodies our entire region, as well as the 19 individual communities we have the honor of serving and the tourism assets unique to each.

While our name has changed, we remain committed to our mission: Explore Oak Park and Beyond is the leader in promoting the unique communities, cultures and experiences found in Chicago's western suburbs.

Explore Oak Park and Beyond is proud to introduce its 2026 strategic plan, the framework by which this organization will continue to carry out its mission and build upon the work accomplished in previous years. With the guidance of our experienced and knowledgeable board of directors and the efforts of our competent, dedicated staff, Explore Oak Park and Beyond will execute our strategic plan in-house over the course of the year and into 2027, by which time the organization will have engaged the services of a firm to develop a three-year strategic plan.

These efforts will expand the positive impact Explore Oak Park and Beyond already has in our region, as well as lay the foundation for the organization's future and continued success.

We look forward to the work ahead and your continued support.

Sincerely,

Jim Prescott
Chairperson
Explore Oak Park and Beyond

2. Executive Summary

Tourism is getting more competitive and more complex. Travelers want trusted, authentic recommendations, while destinations are navigating economic uncertainty and growing expectations to prove impact. Despite these pressures, demand for new experiences remains strong. Travelers are

more selective and value-conscious, seeking places that feel meaningful and worth the trip. This creates an opportunity for Explore Oak Park & Beyond to focus on visitors motivated by the desire for authentic experiences that feel accessible.

This region is well-positioned to compete in this environment because it offers distinctive architecture, iconic food culture, heritage sites, and unexpected experiences. People are more likely to visit a place they already recognize or feel comfortable with, as it feels easy and low-risk, but what actually motivates them to come is the promise of something new, unexpected, or different. This plan outlines Explore Oak Park & Beyond's one-year strategic approach for 2026, bridging the organization from a sunsetted plan to a comprehensive multi-year strategy to be developed in FY 2027. It allows the organization to align with its recent rebrand, respond to current market conditions, and use new data and stakeholder insight to refine priorities.

Over the next year, the organization will focus on strengthening destination awareness, driving visitation and economic impact, deepening partnerships, and improving data-driven decision-making. Together, these efforts allow Explore Oak Park & Beyond to remain a trusted destination authority and ensure tourism continues to deliver meaningful benefits to the communities it serves.

3. Introduction and Purpose of Plan:

The tourism industry is changing rapidly. Travelers increasingly rely on trusted recommendations and authentic destination content when deciding where to go and what to do, while destinations face greater competition and rising expectations for measurable economic impact.

This strategic plan is Explore Oak Park & Beyond's response to that evolving landscape. It focuses on strengthening our role as a trusted destination authority, deepening strategic partnerships, investing in data-driven marketing, and building sustainable systems that support visitation and local businesses. Section 6 of this document goes into greater detail.

We are implementing a one-year strategy to bridge the gap between our sunsetted strategic plan and the comprehensive, long-term plan that will be developed with an external firm in the future. This short-term approach allows us to:

- Adjust to our recent rebrand and ensure our messaging, campaigns, and organizational structure are aligned with the new brand identity.
- Respond to immediate market conditions that are likely to shift in 2026 (e.g., tourism trends, regional and international travel behaviors, economic factors).
- Stay flexible during a period of uncertainty, political, economic, and industry-specific, so we can make informed decisions before committing to a longer-term plan.
- Use new data (from recent surveys, stakeholder feedback, and performance metrics) to refine current priorities while preparing for a deeper strategic planning process led by a consultant.

2026 Plan

Mission:

To elevate the 19 communities we serve and the region’s distinctive attractions as vibrant, inclusive destinations that drive visits, strengthen the local economy, and create meaningful connections for all who explore them.

Brand Story:

Just due west of Chicago, you’ll find an area steeped in some of the Windy City’s greatest hits. It’s the kind of place where internationally renowned architecture, myriad cultures, hundreds of miles of trails, and the best-of-the-best Italian beef all come together under the soft glow of vintage signs. You’ll arrive in districts that grew up and around the train—places where legendary figures and gangsters called home or an escape. You’ll explore destination-worthy shops, a smorgasbord of global cuisine, and streets that fill up with year-round cultural festivals, races, and holiday events. Here, just due west, you’ll discover some of the best things about this area have been preserved for you to sip, sample, and dive in.

Do more, just due west.

4. Current landscape and travel trends

Consumers increasingly seek local, meaningful, culturally rich experiences over generic sightseeing, favoring immersive visits that connect with communities and heritage, a strong advantage for small regions with distinct identities. This allows us to focus on the assets we have, including architecture, Chicago iconic food places, interesting cemeteries, mobster lore, destination shopping, Brookfield Zoo Chicago, and all things “weird”.

Tourism Economics forecasts the economy will improve in 2026-27, supported by tax cuts/extensions, reduced uncertainty, and the fading effects of tariffs on inflation.

Hot Take: People want to feel like they found something cool on their own.

Shifting International Travel (Tourism Economics)

U.S. inbound international travel has been under pressure, with forecasts of flat or declining international visitation and spending, driven by broader geopolitical sentiment and perceived policy

environments, a factor that may affect global tourism unless offset by strong domestic and drive-market demand.

Inbound travel down:

- Weaker sentiment towards the U.S. from abroad
- Travel restrictions
- Higher costs (foreign currency exchange)
- US inbound arrivals recovery delayed to 2029; however, Mexico, Italy, and Argentina show growth.
- The Illinois Office of Tourism is investing in advertising and sales missions in 2026, targeting the UK, Germany, Ireland, and Mexico

While Canadian travel to the US has declined YTD, Canadian travel to other world regions has increased an estimated 8.7%.

Regional Rise of Alternative Urban Destinations

In 2025, the annualized inflation rose to 3% in September versus 2% target. If not for tariffs, inflation would be 2.6% instead of 2.9%.*

Travelers are gravitating toward walkable, character-rich places outside major urban cores, often for affordability and ease. Shorter, closer trips are the future (at least in 2026). Places with vibrant culture and affordability are gaining traction, reflecting growing interest in secondary cities, signaling opportunity for markets beyond the biggest metros.

Hot Take:

- Tourists and locals want a reason to cross the city line
- Tourists and locals are already familiar with the region, but novelty is the hook
- “Weird” feels like a reward, not a risk, for short trips

What’s driving the rise:

- High costs and congestion in big cities
- Remote and hybrid work means location flexibility
- Desire for authentic, local experiences, especially when looking for dining and culture
- Shorter, regional trips instead of long-haul travel
- Families and friend groups looking for “easy wins” close to home

Oak Park Market Trends and Performance (Tourism Economics)

- Demand remains 9.6% below 2019 levels YTD, remaining flat compared to the previous year
- Hotels are making more money even though they’re not necessarily getting more guests, because prices are higher and there are fewer rooms available.

- In Q3, the short-term rental market performance indicates a 45% occupancy rate, and an ADR (avg. daily rate) of \$209 with a REVPAR (revenue per available room) of \$94.

5. Market Position and Opportunity

What we know:

- This region is a day-trip destination for Chicago and DuPage residents
- This region is a repeat-visit destination for regional travelers - second trip to Chicago
- This region is a less crowded, more affordable option for people seeking an urban experience

What we were told during our branding process by tri-state visitors and Chicago day trippers:

Question: “What would bring you to visit for a day trip or overnight trip?”

Answer: Unique festivals and activities in the area that are outside of Chicago. This is easier for families to be part of. I work with college kids, and it helps people to connect with their city. They can still get involved with activities nearby that are different from their usual experiences.

Question: “ How would you research places to visit for said trip?”

Answer:

- Recommendations from friends and family
- Destination organization website
- News/media sources (NYT Travel, Eater, Midwest Living)
- Online research via a search engine (blog posts and guides)
- Social media (Instagram reels, TikTok)
- Travel books/magazines

Question: “ How is the area perceived by visitors? What do you see as areas for improvement around this perception?”

Answer: If people are finding your material, that is a sign of success. Cross-pollination is important. If we have any hope in people coming here and staying here, we need more activities and other attractions that are outside of Oak Park.

Hot Take: Unique events and activities will bring people here, and they will look to user-generated content to learn about them.

6. Strategic Focus Areas

- Brand positioning & storytelling
- Visitor experience & product development
- Destination awareness & promotion

- Partnership development
- Data-driven decision making
- Economic impact

7. Goals & Tactics

Goal 1: Strengthen Destination Awareness and Brand Identity - Elevate the Explore Oak Park and Beyond brand through cohesive storytelling and multi-channel marketing. This will enhance regional alignment under one cohesive tourism identity.

- Onboard our new PR agency
- Continue investment in evergreen content and itineraries
- Align messaging across all channels

Goal 2: Drive Visitor Growth and Economic Impact - Stabilize/increase annual visitor volume and understand economic impact.

- Create seasonal campaigns
- Bundle experiences with our assets (Hotel + Zoo or Hotel + FLW Tour)
- Target drive markets for stability and fly markets for growth

Goal 3: Strengthen Community and Stakeholder Engagement - Deepen relationships with local partners and stakeholders to increase member value while enhancing business development and collaboration.

- Create co-ops
- Provide capacity-building workshops for businesses and villages, and host meaningful workshops with dynamic speakers

Goal 4: Strengthen Organizational Capacity and Measurement - Build data-driven decision making and ensure financial and operational sustainability

- Invest in tourism data platforms and analytics
- Improve reporting and insight-sharing for board members and partners
- Develop new KPIs

This one-year strategic plan positions Explore Oak Park & Beyond to move forward with clarity while preparing for a comprehensive, long-term strategy in FY 2027. Progress will be reviewed regularly, allowing the organization to adjust as needed while staying focused on delivering value to our communities and partners.

Explore Oak Park and Beyond Board Members:

Jim Prescott, **Chair**

President, Prescott Group LLC

Donnie Biggins

Owner, Robert's West Side and Bobby's East Side

Jackie Iovinelli, **Vice Chair**

Executive Director, Park District of Forest Park

Laurie Kokenes

Executive Director, Explore Forest Park

Erika Corona-Owens, **Treasurer**

Marketing Manager, Loyola Medicine

Liz Holt

Founder, Taproot Akashic Healing

Susan Crane, **Secretary**

Historic Properties and Special Events
Manager, Park District of Oak Park

Nancy Cummings

Owner & Founder, Cummings
Marketing/Communications

Andrea Rodgers

Senior Vice President, Guest Experience &
Operations, Brookfield Zoo Chicago

Pete Janunas

Owner, Gears 2 You

Anne Pezella

Realtor, Baird & Warner

Camile Wilson-White

Executive Director, Oak Park Area Arts Council

Dan Yopchick

Chief Communications Officer, Village of Oak
Park

Darion Hills

Executive Director, Park District of Broadview