Help us guarantee another 50 years of groundbreaking, award-winning, culture-defining journalism
“The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.”
—Journalist and publisher Ida B. Wells-Barnett

“It is the stories we don’t get, the ones we miss, pass over, fail to recognize, don’t pick up on, that will send us to hell.”
—Columnist Molly Ivins

“Journalism is the first rough draft of history.”
—Washington Post co-owner Philip L. Graham

“People are hungry for stories. It’s part of our very being. Storytelling is a form of history, of immortality too. It goes from one generation to another.”
—Journalist Studs Terkel
The Chicago Reader has been covering the stories behind the headlines for nearly 50 years.

This includes features on the people, businesses, nonprofits, and places that make Chicago tick.

From the original founders in 1971, to the journalists of this century, the Reader has been writing about up-and-coming cultural creatives and fighting corruption by those in power.

Providing free journalism from day one, the Reader is here for the people, by the people. We speak Chicago.
History

For more than five decades, the Chicago Reader has been the go-to guidebook for the best—and worst—our fair city has to offer. From the best bars, restaurants, cultural events, music, arts, apartments, and even romantic partners, to the worst behavior by our elected officials and institutions, the Reader has covered it all with a signature swagger and voice.

As we face unprecedented times for our industry—and our world—the Reader has transitioned to a full 501(c)(3) nonprofit. The Reader Institute for Community Journalism wants to ensure another 50 years of groundbreaking, award-winning, culture defining journalism and reporting.

As the nation’s first free weekly, the Reader has produced award-winning journalism covering the wide spectrum of human experience in Chicago, from culture and the arts, to politics and corruption.

We have not shied away from the truth. Since its founders initially sold the Reader a few years ago, the paper has passed through many owners and organizational structures. Not too long ago, the Reader faced the real possibility of closing its doors forever. Luckily for the paper, its staff, and the city of Chicago, new leadership took the reins.

We have now launched the Chicago Reader Century Circle to sustain this legacy institution. Building a fund now ensures future generations of Reader leadership and staff will be better prepared to weather whatever comes our way while providing a seamless reading experience for the audiences that count on us.
What's Next?

The Chicago Reader is still making news—the current team continues to win awards for groundbreaking coverage on evictions, criminal justice, immigration, arts reporting, and more.

Cultural coverage is at the heart of the Reader. Finding the now and next in music, theater, dance, visual arts, literature, architecture, comedy, film, television, and beyond is what we do. Our team has its finger on the pulse of this city, living in it, covering it, and proudly uncovering the stories often overlooked in mainstream media. We plan to produce more investigative reports in 2022, and have added a social justice reporter and a Racial Justice Reporting Hub and Writers Room.

Our reach is large across multiple platforms, all free and accessible. The print paper, with a biweekly circulation of 60,000 to 1,200 locations, continues to attract a loyal following. Our digital and social growth has not slowed since we rebranded, and we launched a new website in 2021.

We have also greatly diversified our team, so that it more broadly represents the city we serve. This includes staff, freelancers, vendors, distribution, and more. Our staff is 40 percent people of color, more than 50 percent female identifying, and more than 30 percent LGBTQ.

Our strategy for our first full year as a 501(c)3 nonprofit is to continue the trend toward more individual donors and members, with less reliance on advertising. We are further diversifying our revenue streams in new areas. When COVID-19 decimated our ad revenues, we quickly pivoted to merchandise and creative projects including best-of books by our writers, a new Chicago Reader Book Club, and additional new revenue events.

What follows on the next page are income and expense numbers. The mission for the coming years is to grow the journalism work by increasing staff and freelancers. Most importantly, we want to do this through conservative growth, and creating an endowment for this work.
**The Numbers**

**INCOME & ADVERTISING**

When the *Reader* was separated from the *Chicago Sun-Times* in October 2018, it was losing more than $1 million a year, and was 100 percent dependent on advertising—95 percent of that being print ads, the rest digital. When Publisher Tracy Baim took over, her mission was to not just diversify revenue within advertising, but to also bring in new forms of revenue. Once the path to nonprofit status was authorized by the owners, in the summer of 2019, that diversification began in full force. The timing was important, because when COVID-19 hit in March 2020, the *Reader* lost nearly 2/3rd or 63 percent of its advertising and it has only slowly built back.

On the revenue side, the *Reader* is now less than 65 percent dependent on advertising as a whole, and within that advertising category, print is less than 44 percent of that total. Which means we have gone from 95 percent dependent on print ads to under one-third or 30 percent in three years. In addition, other revenue categories are now responsible for about one-third or 38 percent of our income. This includes foundation grants, memberships, large donors, events, merchandise, and other income.
INCOME 2021

- Advertising: $1,286,337
- Foundations/Grants: $664,689
- Individual Donations: $450,467
- Special Events: $90,663
- Miscellaneous: $24,463
- Merchandise Sales: $14,557

TOTAL 2021 = $2,531,176

PROJECTED INCOME 2022

- Advertising: $1,820,000
- Foundations/Grants: $700,000
- Individual Donations: $445,000
- Special Events: $175,000
- Miscellaneous: $25,000
- Merchandise Sales: $10,000

TOTAL 2022 = $3,175,000

EXPENSES 2021

- Payroll & Benefits: $1,756,496
- Production: $476,963
- Development & Events: $167,200
- Technology: $123,964
- Professional & Consultants: $102,844
- Insurance: $50,168
- Marketing: $44,949
- Other Business: $31,859

TOTAL = $2,754,443

PROJECTED EXPENSES 2022

- Payroll & Benefits: $2,432,000
- Production: $292,000
- Development & Events: $138,000
- Professional & Consultants: $114,000
- Other Business: $57,900
- Insurance: $50,000
- Technology: $48,000
- Marketing: $36,400

TOTAL = $3,168,300
Beyond our individual accomplishments, we know collaboration makes us all stronger. So we are fortunate to have great partnerships with City Bureau, ProPublica Illinois, Borderless Magazine, The Triibe, Better Government Association, Invisible Institute, and many more. We are also part of the Solving for Chicago collaboration launched by the Local Media Association.

The Reader knows that the media ecosystem in Chicago is vibrant and diverse, but it needs uplifting—and more resources. In 2019, we piloted a new project to bring together community and ethnic media to advocate for more resources (foundation and government), and to work on joint editorial collaborations.

This work of the Chicago Independent Media Alliance (CIMA) is funded in part by partnership with the City University of New York Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism Center for Community Media, the Democracy Fund, and the Field Foundation.

These are just a few of our Reader partners so far:

- The Builders Initiative
- Chicago Community Trust
- Carol Oppenheim & Jerome Lamet Charitable Fund
- City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events
- CUNY Center for Community Media
- Democracy Fund
- The Donnelley Foundation
- Driehaus Foundation
- Facebook Accelerator Program—Local Media Association
- The Joseph and Bessie Feinberg Foundation
- The Field Foundation
- Fund for Investigative Journalism
- James P. and Brenda S. Grusecki Family Foundation
- Illinois Humanities
- Institute for Nonprofit News
- Joyce Foundation
- Local Media Foundation
- MacArthur Foundation
- The Elizabeth Morse Charitable Trust
- Nathan Cummings Foundation
- Craig Newmark Philanthropies
- Polk Bros Foundation
- Solutions Journalism Network
- Square One Foundation
- The Darrell R Windle Charitable Fund
We launched the Chicago Reader Century Circle to shore up the annual budget and build a bridge to the future. The fund seeks to raise donations over the next three years, from individuals and foundations giving either one-time or multi-year pledges.

We are looking for one- to three-year pledges as part of our Chicago Reader Century Circle. It is aggressive, aspirational—and attainable. But of course it is also flexible, and any amount will help our mission.

This resilience fund will make sure the Chicago Reader survives the current multi-threats of a pandemic and economic downturn, and other obstacles that surely will confront the media ecosystem.

**Mission: Possible**

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**What We Can Do Together**

The accomplishments listed in this brochure have been achieved prior to pivoting to a nonprofit newsroom. Imagine what we can do now—with your support.

- Now operating as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit
- Diversifying revenue
- Growth of small and larger individual donors
- Growth of grants
- Keeping costs streamlined
- Adding investigative journalism funding
- Growing the strength of community media overall through the Chicago Independent Media Alliance, a project of RICJ
- Continuing to diversify the staff, readers, vendors, and supporter base
In the context of a national decline in local news, there is a profound need for free, quality journalism in the Chicago region. In 2019, the Chicago Defender, which was founded in 1905, had to stop its print editions, while the Latinx newspaper Hoy closed its doors entirely. COVID-19 had an additional profound effect, forcing the Reader to go biweekly, and other media to make significant changes. We are adapting, and our online presence continues to grow, but we need additional support to navigate this new media landscape now and into the future.

This need for access to community-focused, locally produced journalism is even more severe in under-resourced neighborhoods on the south and west sides of Chicago, areas not well covered by large news outlets. The University of Texas at Austin’s Center for Media Engagement’s report “Chicago News Landscape” demonstrates the stark difference in quality reporting for the south and west sides of Chicago compared to downtown and the north side.

As we move into our second half century, we want to ensure the entire city of Chicago has access to free alternative reporting for another 50 years—and beyond. With your help in launching the Chicago Reader Century Circle we will give Chicago 100 years of the Reader. All contributions to the Century Circle are tax deductible under the Reader Institute for Community Journalism, Inc.
We are seeking members of the Century Circle who are the city’s civic, cultural, business, and philanthropic leaders. You will work together with the Reader Institute for Community Journalism leadership and board to raise funds and help create a stable future for community journalism.

Century Circle members will help raise funds through the levels here:

**All the levels also come with the following perks:**

- Name listed by level on the *Chicago Reader* website
- Name listed by level in *Chicago Reader* newspaper annually
More details available at chicagoreader.com/century
or contact:

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