



# ILLINOIS' ECONOMIC FUTURE GROWING TOGETHER

**2025 Annual Luncheon**  
September 18, 2025

**Hilton Chicago Continental Room**  
720 S. Michigan Ave. | Chicago IL 60605 | 10:30 am – 1:30 pm

## ***Our Speakers***



### **Don Thompson, Founder & CEO, Cleveland Avenue**

Don Thompson is the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Cleveland Avenue, LLC, a Chicago-based investment firm he co-founded in 2015 with his wife and business partner, Liz Thompson. Cleveland Avenue specializes in investing in lifestyle consumer brands and high-growth companies that are transforming large, dynamic markets. Under Thompson's leadership, the firm has become a catalyst for innovation, value creation, and inclusive economic growth.

Thompson brings over 25 years of transformational leadership experience to Cleveland Avenue. Prior to founding the firm, he served as President and CEO of McDonald's Corporation, where he led one of the world's most recognized brands through a period of global transformation. During his tenure, he held numerous leadership roles across operations, engineering, and strategy, ultimately becoming one of the first African American CEOs of a Fortune 500 company.

Alongside Cleveland Avenue, the Thompsons established The Cleveland Avenue Foundation for Education (The CAFE), a philanthropic organization dedicated to advancing educational equity and leadership development. The foundation supports students and professionals from underrepresented communities, helping them navigate pathways from the classroom to the boardroom.

Thompson combines technical expertise, global business leadership, and a deep commitment to mentorship in his investment approach. With a background in electrical engineering and a track record of scaling complex organizations, he actively supports entrepreneurs by combining analytical rigor with a passion for customer-centric innovation. His investment philosophy is rooted in building diverse, high-performing teams and fostering long-term partnerships that deliver both financial and social returns.

He currently serves on the boards of Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd., The Northern Trust Corporation, and Northwestern Memorial HealthCare, and is a Trustee of The CAFE Foundation. He also contributes his expertise to the NFL Diversity Advisory Committee and is a member of the Commercial Club of Chicago, Economic Club of Chicago, and World Business Chicago. His previous board service includes McDonald's Corporation, Beyond Meat, Exelon, DocuSign and Purdue University.

Thompson holds a Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering from Purdue University and an Honorary Doctorate in Science from Excelsior College. He has been recognized with numerous honors, including the Purdue University Dreamer Award, the National Black MBA Association's Outstanding Leadership Award, and induction into the Chicago Innovation Hall of Fame.

Through Cleveland Avenue and The CAFE Foundation, Thompson continues to champion innovation, inclusive leadership, and purpose-driven investment as cornerstones of sustainable business success.



## **Lourdes Duarte, Co-anchor and Lead Investigative Reporter, WGN**

Lourdes Duarte is a four-time EMMY Award winner. She co-anchors the *WGN Evening News at 4pm* and is one of the station's lead investigative reporters. Prior to her role on the evening news, Lourdes co-anchored the top-rated WGN Morning News. She also hosts WGN's public affairs program *Adelante Chicago*.

She started her journalism career as a reporter for Telemundo Chicago. She then went on to work in news markets throughout the country including Miami, Indianapolis and Detroit. While in Indianapolis she

launched, produced and hosted the public affairs show "Hoy en Dia" which won an EMMY for its impact on the Latino community.

Lourdes has been recognized for her volunteer work and engagement with Chicago's minority communities. Her alma mater, De Paul University recognized her as one of DePaul's 14 Under 40. Most recently, the Center for Journalism Integrity and Excellence awarded her the Distinguished Alumna Award along with *New York Times* Executive Editor Dean Baquet.

When she's not at WGN-TV, Lourdes is checking off locations from her travel bucket list with trips to Europe and South America. In 2017, *Modern Brown Girl* and *Chicago Woman Magazine* published her travel essay on her one-week stay in Argentina.

She's also been a featured speaker and panelist for events and organizations throughout Chicago including the annual *Dare to Dream* Conference, *Negocios Now*, *The Miracle Center* and the *National Latino Education Institute*.

Lourdes received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Communication from DePaul University.

She lives in Chicago with her husband and daughter, Madeline.



## **Meena Beyers, Vice President of Business & Community Development, Nicor Gas**

Meena Beyers is vice president of Business and Community Development for Nicor Gas, Illinois' and Southern Company's largest natural gas distribution utility serving 2.3 million customers across northern Illinois. In this role, Meena leads growth, customer solutions, energy efficiency, economic development, external community affairs and community impact, as well as innovation and partnership strategies for customer technologies. Meena brings more than twenty years of public and private sector experience to her role.

Meena was recognized as a 2023 Crain's Chicago Business Notable Leader in Sustainability and 2024 Woman of Power by the Quad County Urban League. She serves on the boards for Metropolitan Planning Council, Chicagoland Habitat for Humanity and the Women's Energy Summit, and the Executive Advisory Council for Intersect Illinois, the state's economic development organization. She earned a bachelor's degree in urban planning and development from Ball State University and a master's degree in public service management from DePaul University. Meena lives with her husband and two children in Westmont, Illinois.



## **Maria Bocanegra, President, Peoples Gas and North Shore Gas**

Maria Bocanegra has primary responsibility for managing the daily operations, strategy and administrative activities for the two Illinois utilities, which together provide safe, reliable natural gas service to nearly 1 million customers in Chicago and 54 communities in its northern suburbs.

Most recently, she was chief legal and government relations officer for the Port of Cleveland — the first in its 55-year history. She previously served as a commissioner on the Illinois Commerce Commission,

regulating investor-owned electric, gas and water utilities in highly complex and technical matters. There, she gained national recognition in both the transportation electrification and water spaces, and served as chair of the EV Working Group and standing Committee on Water.

Her prior board service includes the University of Missouri Financial Resource Institute's Advisory Council, New Mexico State University's Public Utilities Advisory Council, the National EV Charging Initiative's Advisory Council, World Resources Institute's Electric School Bus Advisory Council as co-chair, Citizen's Utility Board (CUB) Ohio, Council of the Great Lakes Region and the Cleveland Water Alliance.

Maria currently serves on the boards of Intersect Illinois, World Business Chicago, Chicagoland Chamber of Commerce, the Civic Committee and the Illinois Utilities Business Diversity Council. Maria's prior public service includes work as an administrative law judge at the Illinois Workers' Compensation Commission and as the public member of the Labor Advisory Board for the Illinois Department of Labor. Before entering public service, Maria practiced law focused on workers' compensation, wage and hour issues, and personal injury claims.

She has been recognized by *Fortnightly's* Under 40, *Negocios Now's* 40 Under 40, *Negocios Now's* Who's Who In Hispanic Chicago, *Negocios Now's* Rising Star and by *Latino Leaders Magazine*. Her work has been featured in *Utility Dive*, *T&D World* and *Bloomberg Law News*, and by the *American*

Association of Port Authorities. She has presented/spoken before the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Department of Energy, among others.



## **Leonard “Lenny” Singh, Chairman and President, Ameren Illinois**

Leonard "Lenny" Singh is chairman and president of Ameren Illinois, where he is responsible for energy delivery to more than 1.2 million electric and more than 800,000 natural gas customers in 1,200 communities across 43,700 square miles of service territory. Prior to joining Ameren Illinois in July of 2022, Lenny held a variety of senior leadership roles across electric, natural gas and steam operations, and customer solutions in a 30-year career with Consolidated Edison Company of New York. Lenny is leading Ameren Illinois through the clean energy transition, spearheading initiatives to facilitate the adoption and development of local, renewable energy generation and promoting the long-term growth of cleaner energy. He is leading the effort to build a resilient and reliable grid capable of supporting the increased electrification of the downstate Illinois economy with a focus on equitable justice and economic development. At the same time, he is championing policies that will fortify the state's natural gas infrastructure while preparing for the sector's transition to renewable natural gas and emerging clean hydrogen technologies, critical enablers of the energy transformation process. He holds a bachelor's degree in electrical engineering from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, a master's degree in electrical engineering from Polytechnic University, and a Master of Business Administration degree from Columbia University. He completed professional certificate programs on electric and natural gas distribution at the Siemens Power Technologies International Distribution Engineering and Gas Technology Institute, and on nuclear reactor technology at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He has also completed executive education programs at Harvard, Georgetown, Cornell University ILR School, Dale Carnegie, American Management Association, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.