

THE OFFICIAL SEAL OF THE CITY OF CHICAGO: A USER'S GUIDE



The official seal of the City of Chicago is a potent emblem. It represents the authority of City government, and conveys to persons who see it that they are seeing an official communication, bearing the City's *imprimatur*. For this reason, the City Council passed an ordinance dating back to the 1930's that controls the seal's use, and the Board of Ethics has issued various advisory opinions explaining that certain uses of the seal are prohibited. This guide summarizes allowed and prohibited uses of the seal. It is not a substitute for legal advice. For confidential legal advice, please contact the Board of Ethics.

First: about the seal's symbolic meaning. The chevron/shield represents the American spirit of our city. The Native American represents the discovery of our Chicago's original site, and honors the contributions of Native Americans to our grand metropolis. The ship in full sail signifies the approach and importance of Europeans, and commerce. The sheaf of wheat signifies activity and plenty, and our city's importance as an agricultural trade center. The babe in the shell is the ancient classical symbol of the pearl, signifying Chicago as "the gem of the lakes." The motto URBS IN HORTO means "city in a garden." March 4, 1837 is the date Chicago was incorporated.

Second, here are the key prohibitions on using the City seal.

Political Use Is Prohibited

The Board of Ethics has determined that the use of the City seal by *any* person in any printed, filmed, or web-based communications to support or criticize a candidate for elected office (including websites, social media posting, stickers, printed or web-based campaign literature, signage, etc.) constitutes a *prima facie* violation of the City's Governmental Ethics Ordinance. Were the Board to make a finding of a violation, the person using the seal would be subject to fines between \$500-\$2,000 for each violation. See https://www.chicago.gov/content/dam/city/depts/ethics/general/AO_PolActvty/18036.A.1.pdf

Use on Personal Websites or Social Media

The Board of Ethics has also recognized that websites or social media sites that display the official City seal give the viewer the impression that the City itself approves the site and/or its content or the specific posting. This can mislead the public. Thus, any personal social media site or blog must avoid using the City seal altogether, and in no circumstances can the City seal be used in connection with political endorsements, electioneering communications or campaign communications.

Commercial Uses

Should the Board become aware of any commercial or private business use of the seal in advertising or other materials or websites, the Board will refer the matter to the City's Department of Law. This is because §1-8-100 of City's Municipal Code, entitled "Private use of the seal unlawful," provides:

"No person shall fraudulently forge, deface, corrupt or counterfeit the seal of the city, nor shall any person, other than the duly authorized public official, make use of said seal. Any person violating the provision of this section shall be fined not less than \$25 nor more than \$200 for each offense."

The City retains the inherent authority to determine whether its role in a partnership with a private party constitutes official action or participation by the City, such that the private party's use of the seal may be duly authorized and allowable. Thus, the Board advises any person wishing to use the seal in such a partnership with the City, for non-political purposes, to contact the Law Department.



**740 North Sedgwick, Room 500
Chicago, IL 60654
312-744-9660**

**Lori Lightfoot, Mayor
William F. Conlon, Chair**

[@ChicagoEthicsBd](http://www.cityofchicago.org/Ethics)

**steve.berlin@cityofchicago.org
Steve Berlin, Executive Director**