

A GIS and Journalism Workshop

Mapping Your Local Environment

Pilot Report

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Overview

Mapping Your Local Environment (MYLE) is a place-based movement infrastructure initiative that bridges the gap between local journalism, environmental justice (EJ) organizers, and civic engagement. It strengthens environmental justice narratives by providing Geographic Information Systems (GIS) training and open environmental data to help journalists and communities identify, document, and advocate for solutions to local environmental injustices.

MYLE addresses geographic, sectoral, and issue-based divides by equipping journalists, community advocates, and organizers in cities that are grappling with prevalent environmental justice challenges with the skills and tools to create data-driven environmental storytelling that counters misinformation, supports participatory democracy, and builds local power. MYLE builds the foundation for more informed, engaged, and resilient environmental action by strengthening narrative capacity and cross-sector collaboration.



Executive Summary

State of Local News

According to the [State of Local News 2024](#) report from Northwestern University, there are now 206 counties without any local news source and 1,561 counties with only one source, leaving almost 55 million Americans with little or no access to local news. Meanwhile, [85% of US adults](#) believe local news outlets are at least “somewhat important” to the well-being of their local community, with 44% who say local news outlets are “extremely important” or “very important.” [One-third of Americans](#) believe local news does the best job of helping solve problems in their local community and holding local leaders in politics, business, and other institutions accountable for their actions. [According to Rebuild Local News](#), a coalition of local news organizations advocating for policies that support local media, those who follow local news closely are more likely to be civically engaged in their communities.

Local Environmental Justice Coverage

[According to MIT Environmental Solutions Initiative](#), local storytelling about changes to the environment are more likely to convince readers that climate change is occurring. Similarly, [Rebuild Local News](#) cites a study that states communities with less local news coverage of pollution are more likely to have more toxic emissions. [In an article for the Columbia Journalism Review](#), Lyndsey Gilpin explored the correlation between the Atlantic Coast Pipeline and local news deserts in the states it crosses: “These places lack consistent, informative local coverage of energy, justice, and the environment because of the declining number and resources of print news outlets, shifting the balance of news sources toward expanding corporate media monopolies.”



GIS and Journalism

A Geographic Information System (GIS) is a digital tool for creating, analyzing, and visualizing spatial data to help users see patterns, relationships and trends on a map. GIS is used in urban planning, environmental conservation, transportation, public health and more. Within journalism, GIS can be used to help people uncover vulnerabilities in their communities and allow them to be proactive in finding solutions - whether that's pushing for top down policy changes or creating groundswell for community-led activism. Visualizing data through maps is an effective way to deepen a community's understanding of their surroundings - our brains are quite literally wired to understand the world geospatially.

While well resourced media outlets like Bloomberg CityLab, The Washington Post and Associated Press have dedicated resources for storytelling with maps, many local media outlets lack both the access to powerful GIS tools and the technical skills to use those tools. Several academic papers over the last two decades have shown how the complexity of GIS software, as well as budgetary concerns, may have prevented local media outlets and journalists from embracing the technology and methodology into their reporting.

That said, when local media outlets are able to use GIS, the maps generated enhance storytelling, help readers develop a place-based connection to the story, often in relation to their own location, and call attention to both problems and possible solutions within the community. For example, Detroit-based reporter Jena Brooker used GIS to call attention to the spread of blight tickets and unsold properties purchased by a single owner on the eastside of Detroit. In Virginia, several local media organizations teamed up to create a volunteer-led data collection effort and used GIS to map flood inundation from high tides.

While access and expertise remain a challenge in local media, journalists that combine GIS training and navigation of open environmental data have an opportunity to create unique, interactive, and engaging storytelling in service of solutions to local environmental injustices.



Workshop Design

Rooted Futures Lab designed two Mapping Your Local Environment pilots to provide environmental data and GIS training to local journalists and community members in Atlanta and Detroit.

Research

Ahead of the workshop design process, we conducted qualitative research to better understand the needs, priorities and experiences of journalists and community members. This research focused on environmental justice storytelling in place-based contexts, and informed key decisions about the workshop's goals, format, and content.

We engaged directly with journalists, educators, and organizers working at the intersection of environmental justice and narrative work. These conversations helped shape how the program could support and amplify locally-rooted environmental data work. All participants were compensated for their time and expertise. We recognize that the knowledge shared was grounded in years of personal and collective experience—without it, this program would not have been as grounded, relevant, or impactful.

Interviews and conversations were conducted with:

Mariann Martin (Atlanta Documenters/Canopy Atlanta)
Ms. Genia Billingsley (Canopy Atlanta)
Bakari Height (Labor Network for Sustainability)
Alex Ip (The Xylom)
Noah Kincade (Detroit Documenters/Outlier Media)
Lynelle Herndon (Detroit Documenters/Outlier Media)
Nina Ignaczak (Planet Detroit)
Alex Hill (Detroit Data)
Jena Brooker (Bridge Detroit)
Ericka Lozano-Buhl (Mixto Communications)



Learning Outcomes

The MYLE pilot workshops were designed for participants who are aware of or already engaged in combating the social and environmental challenges in their community and are seeking new tools and skills to strengthen their work through environmental data and storytelling. We structured the workshops into 2 parts to better reflect these priorities:

Part 1: Critical Mapping and Storytelling

This portion of the workshop focused on maps as a form of storytelling, examined through lecture and group discussion. Participants were introduced to real-world examples of EJ maps in order to discuss questions of power, perspective, and context in spatial storytelling.

Part 2: Applied GIS Skills for Journalism

Here, participants engaged in a hands-on workshop using Felt, a browser-based GIS platform. They were introduced to the process of locating, evaluating, and using open environmental datasets to craft their own local stories through mapping.



By the end of the pilot workshops, participants were able to:

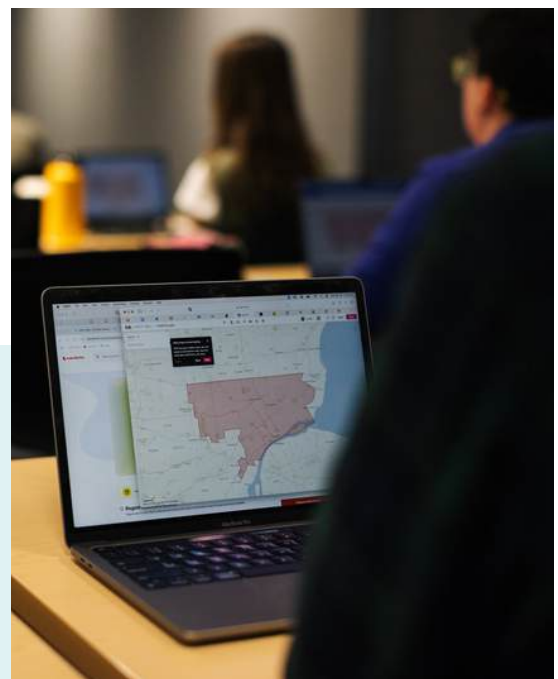
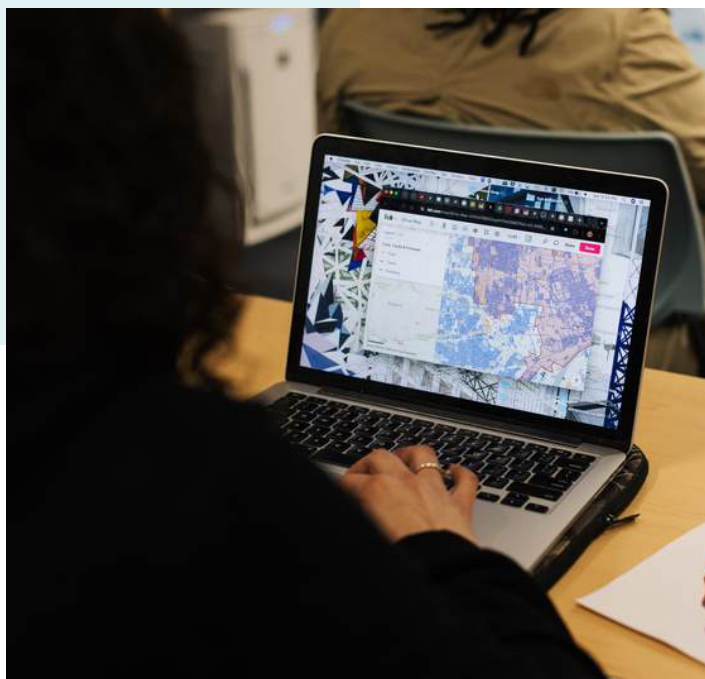
- * Understand the power dynamics of maps
- * Explain the historical/colonial context of maps
- * Recognize the perspective, context, and authority that is embedded in every map
- * Analyze different use cases for GIS in local environmental justice contexts with an emphasis on journalism, storytelling, and advocacy
- * Discover and navigate local environmental data including:
 - * Community datasets
 - * Official city/state/federal data
- * Build and publish a basic environmental map using Felt using skills like:
 - * Importing, layering and transforming data
 - * Adding elements like shapes and videos
 - * Adjusting colors and presentation styles
 - * Preparing the map for public sharing

GIS Software

For our pilots, we selected Felt as our core GIS platform. Felt is a browser based tool that allows users to edit, create, and share interactive maps without the need for software installation. It has a relatively easy user experience and design, maps are easily embeddable and easy to share, and the product is affordable, especially for non-profits.

Felt provided MYLE with a free education license for the duration of our pilot workshops, which included access for up to 100 seats for learners. Participants will retain access to the platform until the end of April 2025. After that point, they have the option to continue using the platform under Felt's standard or nonprofit pricing structures, \$250/year (nonprofit pricing) or \$200/month (regular pricing).

We are continuing to explore opportunities for subsidized access and additional educational partnerships, as well as ways to support participants in exporting their work or transitioning to other open-source platforms if needed.



Ongoing Learning

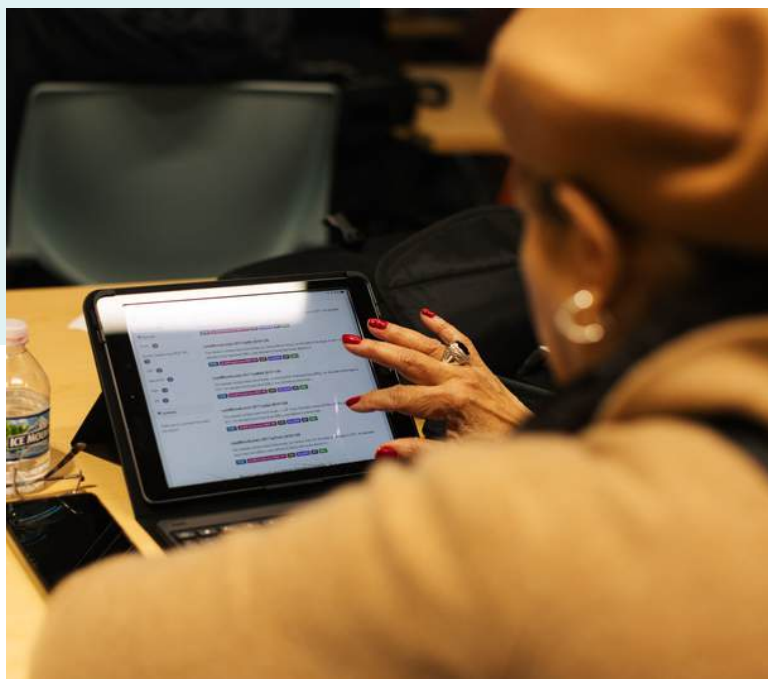
To support continued learning and exploration beyond the workshop, participants were given a document that outlines **resources for further GIS learning**, links to their local data portals and relevant data sets, and partner and contact information.

Customized versions were created for each pilot site:

[MYLE Atlanta](#)

[MYLE Detroit](#)

We emphasized that this document is intended to be a living resource that can grow with participant input and serve as an evolving hub for environmental mapping work in each city. As we continue with future cohorts/partners and locations, we plan to maintain this practice of localizing and expanding the post-workshop materials, helping participants stay connected to relevant tools, people, and data ecosystems in their own communities.



Atlanta

Details

Date: March 20, 2025; 4-7pm ET
Workshop Registrations: 23
Workshop Attendees: 11

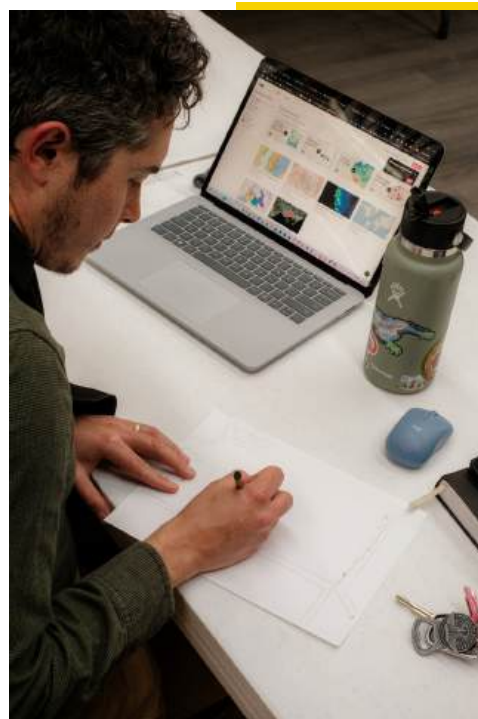
Local Partners



Documenters
Powered by Canopy Atlanta 

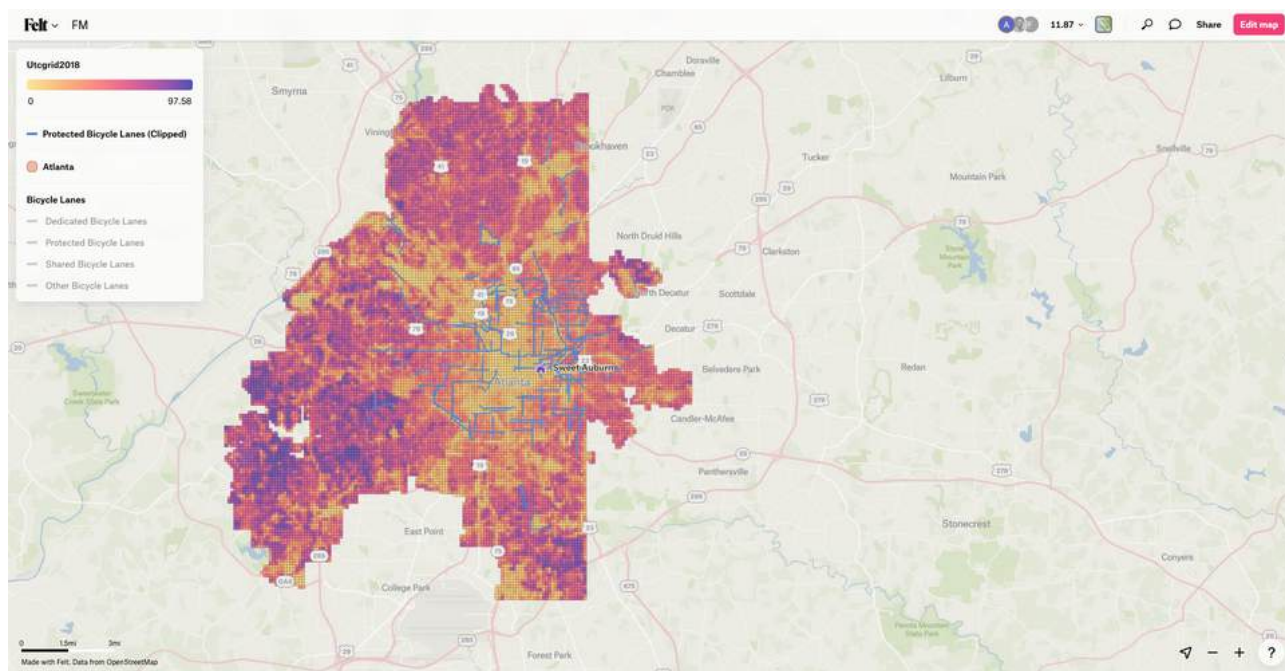
Our Atlanta workshop was held at the West Atlanta Watershed Alliance (WAWA) headquarters, a community-centered, forested space in southwest Atlanta. Hosting the event in an environmentally significant site allowed participants to physically and mentally ground themselves in nature while working with datasets tied to their immediate surroundings, including urban tree canopy cover.

Many attendees were new to WAWA, and the workshop helped forge connections between participants and this long-standing environmental justice anchor. Our partners at Canopy Atlanta and Atlanta Documenters were instrumental in shaping outreach and framing the workshop content around pressing local concerns.



Atlanta EJ Issues

Each city's workshop focused on sample datasets reflecting that place's specific environmental challenges. In Atlanta, these were selected based on conversations with journalists, advocates, and partners, as well as data availability and accessibility.



Faith M. examined the intersection of protected bike lanes with 2018 urban tree canopy data in Atlanta.

Participant Feedback

- “This was a great workshop, very informative, friendly workshop
- * leaders, good conversation within the group. It was very accessible for any level of expertise working with data.”
- * “I would extend this by an hour and have an additional session to do some hands-on work with stories we are working on.”
- “It's always good to keep myself refreshed on new software, and
- * understand how my peers are interacting with spatial data in their work. Most of all, it was refreshing to reconnect with people who care”

Detroit

Details

Date: March 29, 2025; 10-2pm ET
Workshop Registrations: 32
Workshop Attendees: 16

Local Partners



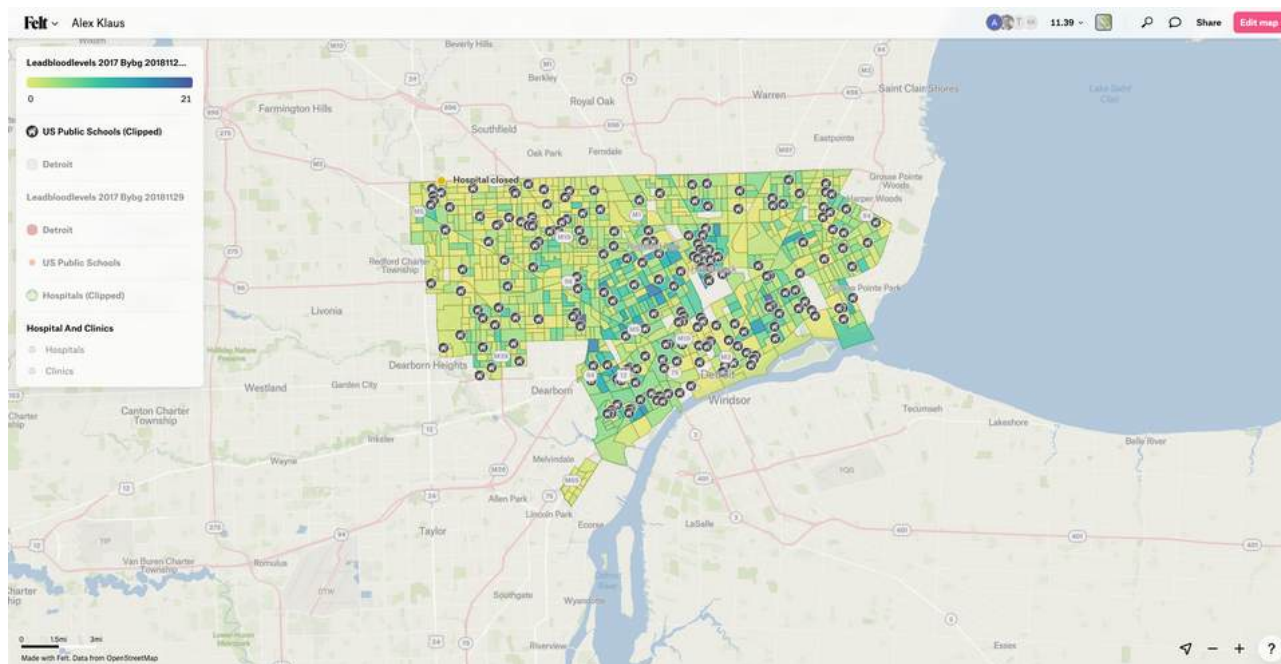
In Detroit, we collaborated with Detroit Documenters, Planet Detroit, Detroit Data, and Outlier Media to co-design a workshop aimed at local journalists and storytellers. This collaboration ensured that workshop content reflected real, place-based environmental challenges, and that outreach extended to communities already engaged in public accountability work.

We used the workshop as a space to analyze how real estate development and displacement show up on the map, and how mapping tools can clarify or complicate public understanding. After the session, we visited a site discussed in one of the sample stories and saw firsthand how the context provided by mapping changed how we understood the neighborhood's transformation.



Detroit EJ Issues

As in Atlanta, we selected Detroit datasets based on conversations with local journalists and advocates, focusing on relevance, usability, and EJ framing. Detroit's data availability was greater than Atlanta, which allowed for more flexibility in which datasets participants were able to play with.



Alex K. examined the location of Detroit public schools and their proximity to areas with high blood lead levels according to 2017 state blood lead level testing data.

Participant Feedback

- * "I think everything was great and Felt was easy enough where I didn't need help on every step which I liked!"
- * "This was a great intro to GIS. Y'all made it very user-friendly and approachable and had a very engaging presentation."
- * "Have more folks going around the room helping people w tech issues so main facilitator can continue moving things along for people not experiencing issues."

Pre-Workshop Survey

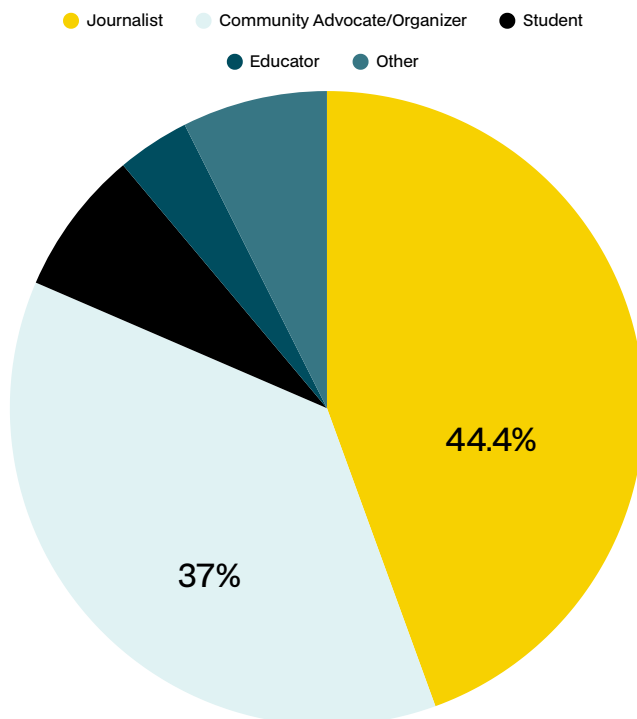
To better understand participant experiences and learning progress, we conducted pre- and post-workshop surveys for each session. These surveys helped us assess both the knowledge participants brought into the room and the effectiveness of our learning goals by the end of the workshop.

The pre-survey helped us gauge:

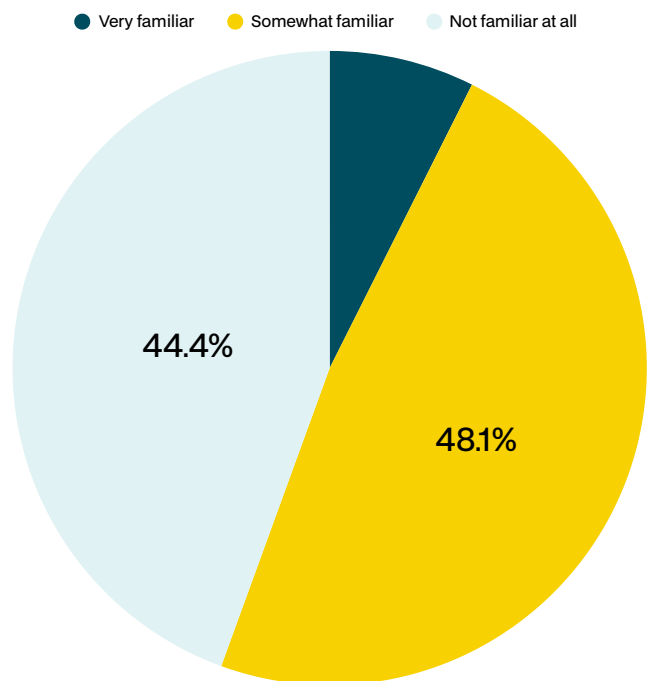
- * Participants' existing familiarity with GIS tools and concepts
- * Their comfort level working with environmental data
- * What they hoped to get out of the workshop

This information allowed facilitators to tailor explanations and demos to participants' real-time needs.

How do you identify professionally?



How familiar are you with using data and geospatial tools in your work?



Post-Workshop Survey

The post-survey asked about participants' experiences during the workshop, what they learned, and how they planned to apply those skills in their work.

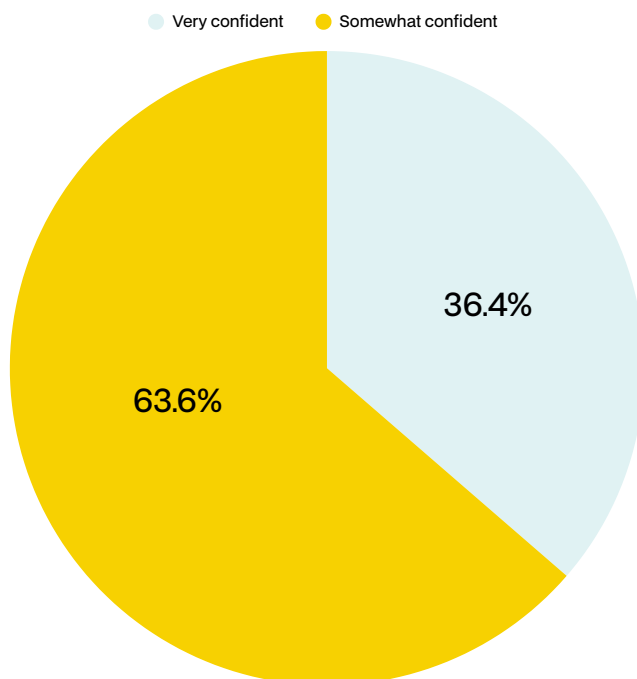
When asked "How do you plan to use the tools and resources you learned about today in your work?"

- * 60% of participants shared they plan to use the tools for community storytelling or environmental justice journalism

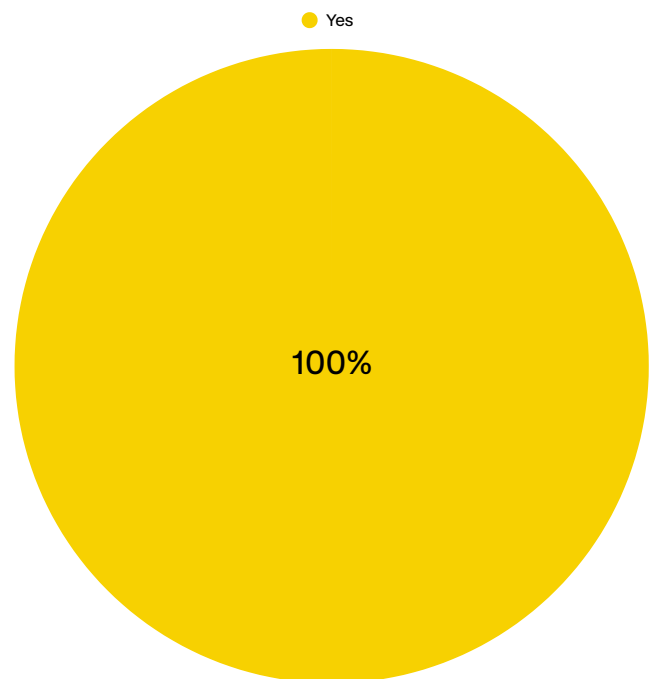
Additional responses highlighted a desire for:

- * More time for hands-on project work
- * Continued support for local data discovery
- * Follow-up workshops focused on deeper skill-building

How confident do you feel in using data and geospatial tools in your work?



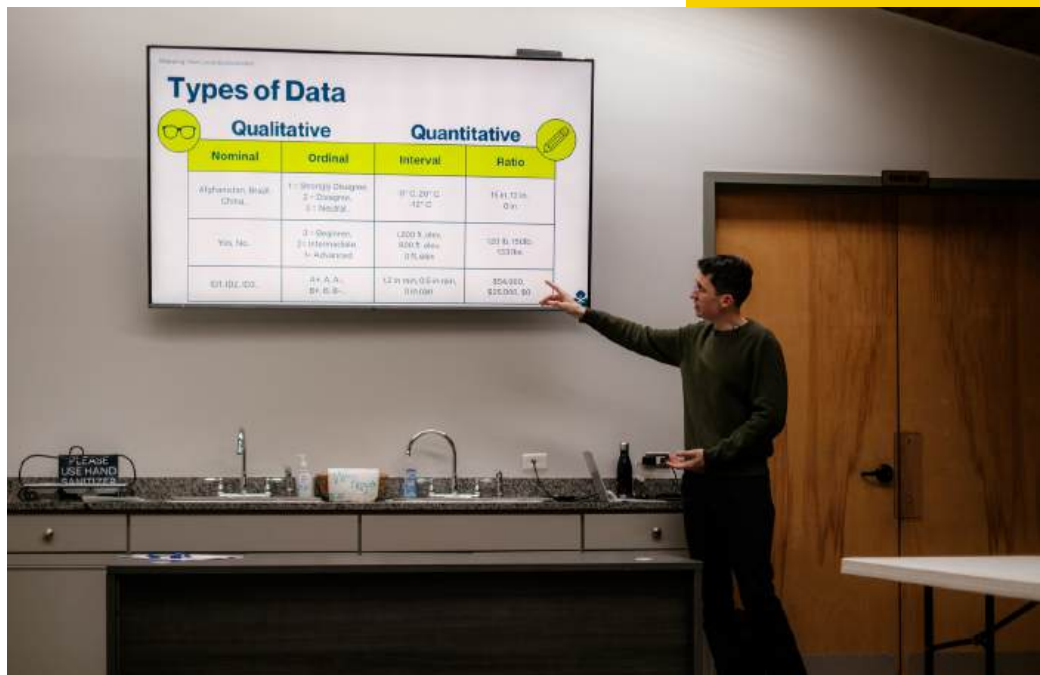
Would you recommend this workshop to your peers?



Documentation

We partnered with local photographers to visually document each workshop, capturing the energy, collaboration, and place-based context of each session. Their work highlights not just what participants created but also the environments and relationships that shaped the experience.

Photos by
Justin Trout
(Atlanta)



Photos by
Liz Barney
(Detroit)



[See all MYLE photos and videos](#)

Looking Ahead

Running these two pilot workshops was instrumental in shaping the curriculum, format, and facilitation model for MYLE. We're now using that experience, along with feedback from participants and partners, to refine and grow the program in ways that center usability, access, and local relevance.

Partnering with Documenters programs in Atlanta and Detroit gave us a strong foundation of local trust, event logistics, and outreach infrastructure. As we look to expand MYLE to additional cities, we will explore locations where Documenters already has an established presence and community ecosystem.

Participant feedback across both sites emphasized a strong desire for:

- * More hands-on time to explore datasets of personal or professional interest
- * Greater access to technical help while working in Felt
- * A longer duration to allow deeper learning and experimentation

In response, we're auditing the workshop structure to identify:

- * Which elements can be shortened, simplified, or pre-recorded
- * The ideal length for a session (e.g. 4 hours vs. 2-part model)
- * How to better distribute staff support across the room

We're also exploring modular formats to provide flexibility for different partners and participant needs.

Finally, in both Atlanta and Detroit, we see opportunities to return with more advanced or follow-up trainings, especially for participants who want to continue building technical skills or apply mapping to active projects. These ongoing relationships are essential to the long-term impact of MYLE, turning one-time workshops into sustained local capacity building. We're actively seeking new partnerships with journalism and storytelling organizations to extend MYLE's reach and embed it more deeply in the climate and environmental media ecosystem, with potential collaborators like Grist, Climate News Task Force, News Futures, Rebuild Local News, and Solutions Journalism Network.



Budget Overview

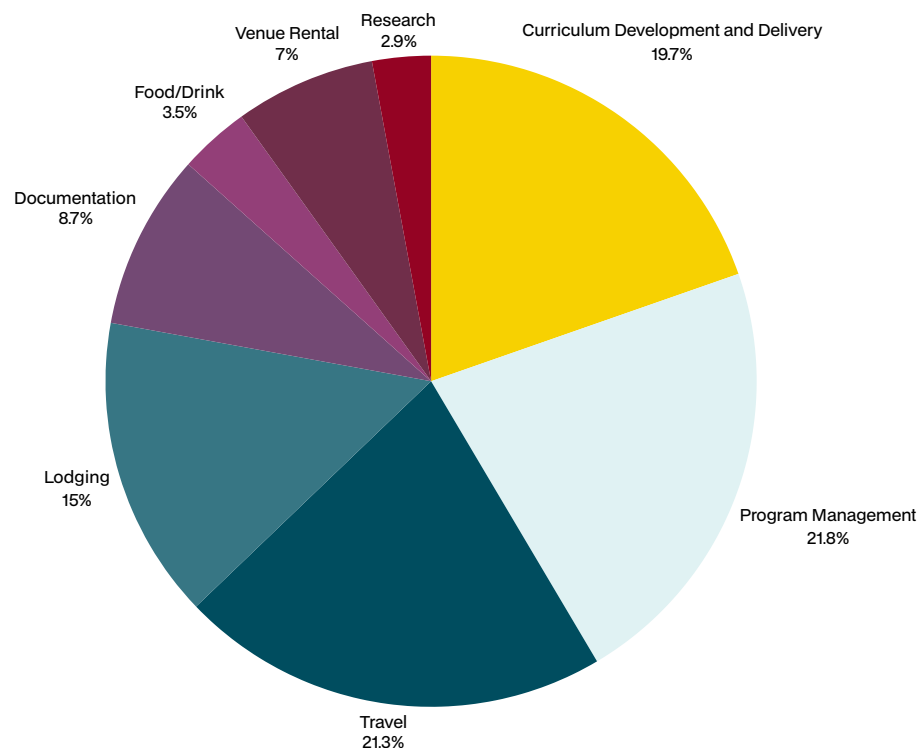
The budget below reflects total expenses incurred across both pilot workshops in Atlanta and Detroit. Our goal was to compensate collaborators fairly, provide accessible learning experiences, and lay the groundwork for a replicable, scalable model.

Some costs — such as research and curriculum development — were one-time investments that supported the creation of core materials and facilitation plans. Other expenses, including travel, facilitation, space rental, and participant materials, are likely to recur as we bring MYLE to new cities.

We anticipate that future iterations of the program will benefit from:

- * Reusable curriculum and resource templates
- * Established partnerships with local organizations
- * A clearer understanding of cost efficiencies for hybrid or modular formats

This pilot budget also helps us build a more accurate forecast for future fundraising, partnership development, and potential earned revenue models (e.g., workshops for journalists or educators).



Support

Mapping Your Local Environment (MYLE) is a program of the Rooted Futures Lab, developed in partnership with Urban Data Response and a network of regional collaborators in each pilot city.

The current pilot phase was made possible through generous support from the Tiny Fellowship (4.0) and the Shape of Cities to Come Institute.

We're deeply grateful to our local partners in Atlanta and Detroit — including West Atlanta Watershed Alliance, Canopy Atlanta, Outlier Media, and others — for helping shape this program from the ground up. Their knowledge, hospitality, and community leadership were essential to the success of each workshop.



Sources and Links

Executive Summary

- <https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/projects/state-of-local-news/2024/report/>
- <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2024/05/07/views-of-local-news/>
- <https://knightfoundation.org/articles/local-news-most-trusted-in-keeping-americans-informed-about-their-communities/>
- <https://www.rebuildlocalnews.org/research-on-local-news/>
- <https://climate.mit.edu/posts/covering-local-climate-stories/>
- <https://www.rebuildlocalnews.org/research-on-local-news/>
- https://www.cjr.org/covering_climate_now/atlantic-coast-pipeline-news-deserts.php
- <https://www.esri.com/about/newsroom/blog/how-maps-help-the-media-see-what-others-cant>
- <https://www.proquest.com/openview/abd7d230537f3d98521f4b0415e5a05e/1>
- <https://www.bridgedetroit.com/john-hantz-tree-farm-detroit-east-side-blight/>
- <https://www.esri.com/about/newsroom/blog/mapping-virginias-highest-tide>

Workshop Design

- Atlanta Resource Document:
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/16olaYNyipGITUqrgy11UUxYWmsnpg73lIWjE3XBQmPc/edit?tab=t.0>
- Detroit Resource Document:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/1FfICrp94K_lal9qUD-yNS6JU0ePmlzd9_TUCi4OCuL0/edit?tab=t.0

Documentation

- Photos and Videos:
<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1cKCKWdqukROWP8Zbo6eSSzxhbVqxVVjP?usp=sharing>





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