

REPORTING ON
URBAN PLANNING
IN YOUR DETROIT
NEIGHBORHOOD

COMMUNITY JOURNALISM PLAYBOOK



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WINTER 2024

INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAYBOOK

The best, most equitable and community-responsive urban planning is inseparable from local journalism. A cornerstone of democracy, local news outlets promote information access and provide a public platform for the sharing of and deep listening to community voices while holding government officials accountable. By documenting a city's history and supporting neighbors and community leaders who are envisioning a city's future, local journalism promotes civic engagement, and helps to curate a sense of belonging, connection, and identity to residents of a locality.¹⁻⁴ Voiced expression of lived experience, accountability, and vision: Urban planners need these features to be able to listen to, design with, and create opportunities collectively with communities.

However, access to local news – especially news written by and for a community – is rapidly declining. As of 2019, newspapers have lost over \$35 billion in ad revenue and approximately 47% of newsroom staff in just fifteen years.⁵ Further, over 1,800 newspapers have shut their doors, “leaving more than three million people with no newspaper at all, and more than at least a thousand have become ‘ghost newspapers,’ with little original reporting.”⁶ Of the national and local newsrooms that have persisted, many have been bought out by corporate media conglomerates with no stake in the communities they are serving, and the cutbacks of resources, publication schedules, and reporting staff has led any leftover reporting to overlook complex, place-based stories.⁷ Communities across the United States are being left without critical information around development, infrastructure, public health, education, and the environment, and have lost an opportunity to learn about and participate meaningfully in the dialogue happening around these issues – all of which are directly related to urban planning.

Despite these figures, cities like Detroit are filled with qualified storytellers with on-the-ground perspectives and decades of lived experience who can fill this gap: community members. Citizen journalism, also known as collaborative media and participatory journalism, can help to generate the benefits and knowledge of participatory planning and can become a tool for encouraging community engagement and capacity building at an individual level.⁸ **The Community Journalism Playbook: Reporting on Urban Planning in Your Neighborhood (Detroit)** is intended to support students, writers, activists, non-profits, and everyday Detroiters in amplifying the stories they hold around the places they know. The Playbook includes a Crash Course on citizen journalism about urban-planning related topics, an introduction to the different planning bodies in Detroit, explanatory resources around key planning topics in Detroit, as well as a library of Detroit's existing community journalism resources. No professional journalism experience is required to navigate through this tool – all that is required is curiosity and a commitment to contribute in new ways to the narrative and future development of your city.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sincere gratitude is extended to the countless individuals and organizations that generously contributed their time, lived experience, and professional expertise to support this project and to advance place-based opportunities for community storytelling and journalism. The following individuals and organizations played a significant role in shaping the content and structure of the educational materials developed for the Community Journalism Playbook: Reporting on Urban Planning in Your Neighborhood (Detroit):

- Nina Ignaczak, *Planet Detroit* (Professional Project Client)
- Dr. Robert Goodspeed, Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning (Professional Project Faculty Supervisor)
- Dr. David Porter, Detroit River Story Lab (Research Supervisor)
- Kate Abbey-Lambertz, *Outlier Media*
- Jena Brooker, *Bridge Detroit*
- Rukiya “Ru” Colvin, *The Solutionaries Collective*
- Samuel Coons, City of Detroit
- Khalil Logan, City of Detroit
- *Riverwise Magazine*

Additional support was also provided by numerous unnamed Detroit-based urban planners and journalists. Their time and insight was invaluable to this work.

Finally, deep appreciation is felt for the educators, mentors, elders, and friends who continually remind us of the power of the written word.

METHODOLOGY



The Community Journalism Playbook: Reporting on Urban Planning in Your Neighborhood (Detroit) project was carried out in Winter/Spring 2024 and built on an ongoing partnership between the Detroit River Story Lab and local news outlets, including *Planet Detroit*, to develop the journalism writing capacities of interdisciplinary students and community members in the face of disinvestment in local news.

From January 2023 through May 2024, the Detroit River Story Lab piloted the “Pitch Partnership”, which launched the first in a series of self-contained Canvas modules designed to support students in interdisciplinary U-M courses in learning how to translate in-class research into pitches for local area news outlets. The adaptable module takes students through a series of instructional content and activities covering the essential steps involved in developing a compelling journalistic pitch. The Story Lab has supported four U-M instructors in incorporating our new pitch module in their courses and select student pitches have been sent to editors at local newsrooms like *Planet Detroit* and *Bridge Detroit* for development into long form narrative journalism pieces.

Building off of the learnings and success of these student-facing journalism resources, the driving idea behind this community-facing Playbook is (1) to better understand the unique connection between hyperlocal journalism and urban planning; and (2) to use journalism training as a means to transfer power to Detroiters by expanding the diversity of voices narrating and informing public discourse around hyperlocal urban planning problems, solutions, and futures.

The methodological approach to developing this Playbook is documented briefly in this section, and more fully in Appendix C.

1

INTERVIEWING DETROIT'S URBAN PLANNERS & JOURNALISTS

Gathering knowledge from Detroit-based planners and journalists was integral to the early shaping of this work. 45-minute Zoom and phone interviews were conducted with a self-selected group of these professionals from January to March 2024.

All interviews were transcribed and anonymized. These transcription files were then broken up by each interview question and all responses were coded for key ideas and recurring themes that would inform the content and development of the Playbook.

2

PROJECT SCOPING

This collective interview data affirmed the purpose of this project and the value of community journalists in telling urban planning stories about the places they call home. After coding and analyzing the interview data, the identified resource needs were

assessed and adapted for feasibility in terms of the time and resources available for this Professional Project. The final project scope was narrowed to encapsulate the contents of this Playbook.

3

EDUCATIONAL CONSULTING & COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

Comprehensive research was conducted on the content, design, and pedagogical approach of existing journalistic curriculums. Throughout the Detroit River Story Lab's Pitch Partnership pilot, a series of partner conversations were facilitated across

academia and journalism to inform the development and implementation of the Pitch Partnership's student-facing pitch modules, and consequently, this Playbook's journalism training resources.

4

DRAFT WRITING, RESOURCE COMPILATION & REVISION

Over the course of several weeks, a draft Playbook was written using a combination of urban planning and journalism research, existing Detroit-based planning and journalism resources, and original interview data. All interviewees, project clients, and

project supervisors were given the opportunity to review and provide feedback on a detailed outline and/or the full draft of the Playbook. This feedback was reviewed and carefully implemented into the final document as it currently stands.

HOW TO USE THE PLAYBOOK

Whether you are a seasoned activist, a keeper of community stories, a member of a Citizen Journalist training program looking to get into an urban planning beat, or simply a curious community member seeking to play a role in the future of your neighborhood, this Playbook is for you. In this Playbook, you will learn the basics of journalistic writing and discover opportunities to channel your lived experiences with urban planning into local, public-facing stories. These stories can help you to foster connection, understanding, and collaboration between diverse stakeholders in your community, and can help shape your community's future.

The Playbook is intended to be a free educational resource that can be navigated digitally or in the form of a hard copy by a wide range of users, including but not limited to:



LOCAL NEWS ORGANIZATIONS & COMMUNITY JOURNALISTS

The Playbook can be used to reduce educational barriers for aspiring journalists and to expand the organization's base of local freelance writers, while supporting existing journalists in writing about complex urban planning issues. The Playbook can be distributed and promoted to writers and readers.



NONPROFITS, BLOCK CLUBS, & COMMUNITY GROUPS

The Playbook can serve as a skill-building opportunity for community members seeking to find new, creative ways to advocate for and celebrate their community. The Playbook's tools can be presented at meetings, or offered as a standalone resource to members through regular communications.



CLASSROOMS

Educators can use the Playbook to inspire students to translate in-class research and writing about urban planning issues into public-facing stories. Sections of this Playbook can be incorporated into lesson-plans, or offered as a standalone resource to students.

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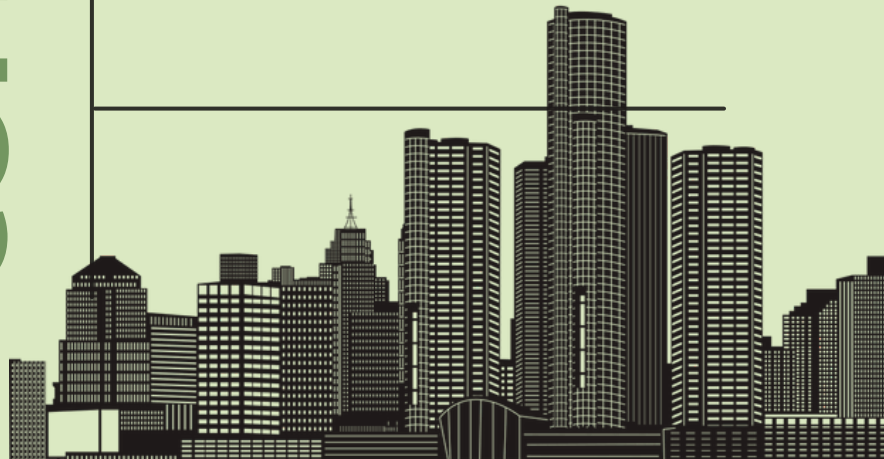
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REPORTING ON
URBAN PLANNING
IN YOUR DETROIT
NEIGHBORHOOD

01. CRASH COURSE: WRITING ABOUT URBAN PLANNING IN YOUR COMMUNITY

URBAN PLANNING
BASICS, STORY
RESEARCH, PITCHING
A STORY,
INTERVIEWING, &
STORY FOCUS



URBAN PLANNING BASICS

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE FIELD
AND PROFESSION OF URBAN
PLANNING



WHAT IS URBAN PLANNING?

“Urban planning” is a term to encompass the wide range of political, creative, and technical processes that guide the physical design and development of places where we live, work, play, and eat. While the core of urban planning work involves decision making around how we use and navigate land and how we develop buildings and infrastructure, this work is actually much more complex and interdisciplinary. Urban planning responds to a community’s history while envisioning a community’s future, and contributes directly and indirectly to the economic, physical, and social well-being of a community.

WHAT COUNTS AS AN URBAN PLANNING ISSUE?

In Detroit, urban planning issues can include:

- **The History of Land Use Decisions in Detroit**
 - E.g. Urban Renewal
 - E.g. I-375
 - E.g. Detroit's history with the automotive industry and its facilities
- **Plans for a City's Development and/or Revitalization**
 - E.g. Master Plans, Parks and Recreation Plans, Downtown Development Plans
 - E.g. Implementation and impacts of Strategic Neighborhood Plans
- **Land Use, Land Conservation, and Zoning**
 - E.g. The Joe Louis Greenway Plan
 - E.g. I-375 Reconnecting Communities Project
 - E.g. Vacant Land and the Detroit Land Bank Authority's 5 Year Plan
 - E.g. Land Value Tax Plan
- **Environmental and Sustainability Planning**
 - E.g. Detroit's Climate Action Strategy
- **Environmental Justice Concerns**
 - E.g. The development of Concrete Crushing facilities and other polluting industries
- **Economic Development Planning**
 - E.g. Renaissance Zones
 - E.g. Tax Increment Financing (TIF) Districts
- **Housing Development and Affordability Planning**
 - E.g. Detroit's Housing Affordability Crisis
- **Transportation and Mobility Planning**
 - E.g. The Gordie Howe International Bridge Project
- **Utilities and Energy Planning**
 - E.g. Detroit's Solar Neighborhood Initiative
- **Community Engagement and Community Benefits**
 - E.g. Implementation and impacts of Community Benefits Agreements
- ...among other issues

As you can tell from this list, most social, environmental, or economic issues that affect the day-to-day life and well-being of Detroiters as well as the long-term vision of neighborhoods are in some way connected to urban planning. At its best, urban planning is about people.

However, while urban planning is theoretically centered on people and the places where we live, work, play, and eat, it is inevitably also about power. Urban planners from the 20th century and beyond have wielded their decision making power to cause significant trauma to Detroit. Harmful urban projects like urban renewal and the Federal Highway Act tore apart the fabric of historic neighborhoods like Black Bottom;⁹⁻¹⁰ discriminatory land use and housing policies, zoning ordinances, and investment strategies have been used historically to enact racial segregation and legally enable state violence in Black communities.¹¹ These historical decisions have contemporary impacts that are still felt tangibly by Detroiters, and the field of planning lags behind in addressing them. Now more than ever, community members' stories are essential to shaping the new era of justice-centered and community-led planning.

WHY SHOULD I WRITE ABOUT URBAN PLANNING ISSUES IF I AM NOT AN URBAN PLANNER?



Community members deserve and have the collective power to co-lead the social, environmental, and economic decision making happening in and around their city. In fact, many Detroiters are actively engaged in urban planning processes through service on a public board or commission, grassroots organizing, negotiations of community benefits agreements, attendance to and comments at public meetings, voting, among other tactics; these efforts have immense value in helping to influence key decisions in the City, and can be celebrated and supplemented by storytelling.

As a student, resident, elder, activist, or community leader writing about urban planning, you have the unique opportunity to amplify the experiences, opinions, and ideas of your family, friends and neighbors who are living, working, fighting, and thriving in Detroit while becoming a trusted source of information for others in the community. Given your familiarity, lived experience, and stake in the community you are writing about, you have the potential to capture a more accurate and nuanced perspective on complicated planning-related issues than would be possible in stories written by writers from elsewhere, or by urban planners coming from a birds eye view.

Further, by writing about urban planning issues specifically, you can open doors for more extensive public engagement with and leadership accountability around decisions that directly affect your community members. Stories need to be told about the lived experience of these issues, the presence or lack of community engagement processes, benefits, and impacts of ongoing urban planning processes, and alternative community-led visions for Detroit's future within and outside of these projects.

**READY TO TRY IT
OUT? LET'S GO.**

STORY RESEARCH



COMING UP WITH A STORY IDEA ABOUT URBAN PLANNING ISSUES IN YOUR COMMUNITY WILL START WITH SOME LISTENING, RESEARCHING AND REFLECTING! WHETHER YOU HAVE A PORTFOLIO OF STORYTELLING EXPERIENCE OR ARE COMPLETELY NEW TO JOURNALISTIC WRITING, THIS SECTION WILL PROVIDE YOU WITH A BASIC APPROACH TO LOCAL URBAN PLANNING REPORTING.

BASIC COMPONENTS OF JOURNALISTIC WRITING

According to the American Press Association, journalism is the activity of gathering, assessing, creating, and presenting news and information accurately and ethically. A free, democratic society depends on community members having reliable, accurate information put in a meaningful context.¹² Journalistic writing seeks to use facts, observations, interviews, and diverse sources of knowledge—or seeing and hearing—to illuminate a truth. Its key purpose is to help build awareness around issues and help us learn about important topics or concepts that we and/or our communities are being impacted by.

Historically, journalists have been considered “objective”, or impartial, communicators who lack a stake in the issues they are writing about.

Today, the more nuanced view is that journalists are not free from personal bias or emotion, and journalistic writing can inevitably communicate a specific point of view based on the positionality— or unique identities— of the writer or the publishing outlet.¹³ Journalists should work to actively acknowledge and challenge these biases within their work to the best of their ability.

Still, quality journalistic writing is quite different from personal storytelling, recounting a personal experience, or lobbying for an idea. In theory, journalistic writing adheres to principles of ethics, and should incorporate additional context, multiple witnesses or perspectives, and transparent evidence gathered outside of a personal experience.

KEY PRINCIPLES OF JOURNALISTIC WRITING¹⁴



NEWSWORTHINESS

To be considered 'news', journalistic writing must be interesting, important, or impactful enough that people will want to read about it.



CONTEXT

Journalistic writing must provide the reader with a full picture of where the story itself is situated, including the who/what/when/where and the why/how. For example:

- WHO is involved in/impacted by the story, and what are their perspectives?
- WHAT is the central problem/issue?
- WHEN is this issue happening?
- WHERE is this issue occurring/impacting?
- WHY is this issue occurring? Why does it matter?
- HOW is this issue happening? How to address it?

Typically, journalistic writing is presented in an 'inverted pyramid' format, where the most important and newsworthy context is presented first, with additional details provided afterwards.



FACTUALITY

Every piece of information included in journalistic writing should come from a reputable source (including interviews, observations, documents, etc.), rather than the opinions or feelings of the writer. Opinions or feelings of sources can and should be included – but you must attribute all opinions to specific sources, and explain them as such.



BALANCE

Unlike opinion writing, which may seek to communicate a single, key point of view, journalistic writing should seek to incorporate as many 'sides' to a story as possible, from all of the perspectives and stakeholders involved within an issue. We do know that 'sides' of a story are not always equally matched in terms of size, power or resources. Balanced writing should communicate these dynamics.



CLARITY

Journalistic writing should seek to break down complex issues in a way that the average reader, even those living outside of a community or without a specific knowledge background, can understand. Short sentences and simple vocabulary help readers follow along. Any jargon or local lingo should be clearly defined.

LISTEN AND ASK



WHAT DOES YOUR COMMUNITY KNOW ABOUT URBAN PLANNING ISSUES?

The best way to identify an urban planning story in your community is to start with what and who you know. Take some time to reflect on what you know to be true about your community.

For example:

- *What types of land use do you see around you?*
- *What is the narrative of your community?*
- *What do you love about your neighborhood, or want to change about it?*
- *What patterns do you see around your community's experience?*
- *What has changed about your neighborhood across time, for better or for worse?*

After doing some individual reflection, it is time to turn outward. Simply stated, talk to your neighbors, elders, and community leaders about local successes and challenges, what they are (not) seeing and (not) experiencing in their neighborhood, and the stories that they believe are undertold about the place they call home.

Understanding the priorities of a community also requires that you embed yourself in that community; you can do so by attending neighborhood group or Block Club meetings, frequenting local businesses, or volunteering. The goal with community storytelling should be to serve and honor, rather than extract from, the community, which requires you to listen before you write.

READ AND RESEARCH



WHAT STORIES ARE ALREADY IN THE NEWS?

Take time to read the local news coverage based in your community, specifically on the topic that you are interested in writing more about. This news may come in the form of local news papers, local TV news or radio channels, community or church bulletins, among other sources. In addition to potentially finding or honing a story idea, this practice will help you get a sense of the stories that matter to people and publications (i.e. what is 'newsworthy'), the key sources of data and research around a topic, as well as the prominent writers and opinions around your area of interest.

When it comes to writing about urban planning issues, it is worthwhile to also take a close look at recent elections and/or policy decisions that have tangible impacts for communities at different scales. Not only can this inform your story content or angle, but studying political dynamics can also help you better contextualize the needs, priorities and perspectives of your community.

As you are reviewing the available news:

- Make a note of topics that appear to recur over time, as this topic area is clearly relevant to your community. It may also be helpful to read Letters to the Editor, Op-Eds, or other reader submissions to get a sense of what specific issues people are passionate about.
- Keep track of shocking, compelling, or odd statistics that you see in the news or other research, and jot down any questions that are raised for you. These collected data points can be important starts or pieces of evidence for stories.
- Be aware of any gaps in coverage or missing perspectives in news coverage about your community; newsrooms – particularly local newsrooms – are often understaffed and under-resourced, making it difficult to cover everything of importance. Ask yourself: *What are the stories being told? What do these stories get right, and what do they miss? What voices or perspectives are included or excluded from this story?*

READ AND RESEARCH



WHAT IS YOUR COMMUNITY POSTING ABOUT ONLINE?

If you have access to the internet and/or social media, when considering writing a story about urban planning issues in your community, it may help to scour trends and “Hot Topics” being posted about within and beyond your community. Trending people, places, events, or conversations can help inspire a story idea that will attract lots of readership in your community, which is a huge plus for any publication. Consider spending some time investigating:

- **Community Facebook or NextDoor groups**
 - Community web pages can offer insight into day-to-day issues that community members care about. These pages can help point you in the direction of upcoming events or resources that can help you better engage and storytell with your community, and can help you identify individuals who might be interested in sharing knowledge with you around a community matter.
- **Social Media trends and comments**
 - Check out popular hashtags and trending posts and videos on X (formerly known as Twitter), Instagram, and TikTok to get a sense of what people in and around your community are talking about and watching, and what the dominant and less-heard perspectives on these issues are. The comments section of these posts can also serve as a temperature check on the opinions of different audiences around the issue. Social media is also a helpful way to witness new social movements gaining momentum, and to track these movements back to their source.
- **Google Trends**
 - Google Trends is a subset of the Google Search engine that allows you to see what people are most searching for, and where and when they are doing so. Checking this data can help you hone in on topics or issues that are important to a specific community or audience, or that people need more information on.

READ AND RESEARCH



WHAT INFORMATION IS PUBLICLY AVAILABLE TO YOU?

An important step in your research process involves digging into governmental documentation around urban planning issues that matter to your community – or even attending some meetings about them. While this can feel overwhelming, the following links guide you through existing Detroit-based docs and meeting schedules:

- [City Council Agendas and Documents](#): The City Clerk’s Legislative Information Portal provides online access to all of Detroit City Council’s Agenda & Documents through an interactive calendar.
 - [Detroit Documents Page](#): Every single document uploaded to the City government website is collected in this searchable repository.
- [Detroit’s Open Data Portal](#): A free data repository offering public access to valuable data and information concerning City gov. operations and service delivery. Includes datasets and visualizations across urban planning issues, including Zoning districts, Neighborhood Plans, DDOT plans, Land Use scenarios, and more.
- [Detroit Documenters](#): Supported by Outlier Media, the Detroit Documenters program is a branch of the [Documenters Network](#) that trains and pays Detroiters to attend local public meetings and monitor elected officials, in collaboration with local journalists. Notes and tweets created at the meetings are made publicly available, for use by residents and journalists. Detroit Documenters has trained more than 400 people since the site started in 2018 with support from Citizen Detroit and WDET. About 70 Documenters regularly take assignments, and certification training are held regularly throughout the year.
 - Read the work of Detroit Documenters [here](#)
 - Sign up to become a Documenter [here](#)
- [SoapBox Detroit](#): A running calendar of all of Detroit’s public meetings, as well as a directory for all City Departments and key documents such as the City Charter, Ordinances, and more.

READ AND RESEARCH

HOW CAN YOU GAIN DEEPER CONTEXT ABOUT URBAN PLANNING ISSUES?

Even after hearing from community-members and exploring existing storytelling, you will likely need to do a bit more digging to fit a particular idea into the community's context at large. Because urban planning involves land use and the design of communities, stories about urban planning issues will be place-based, or rooted in a specific location in a community. The who/what/when/where and why/how context of place-based stories should help readers understand the community across time. When preparing to write about urban planning issues specifically, you should spend time reading and researching about the following topics:

Sociocultural, environmental, political, and/or economic history of a place: Communities do not come to be in a vacuum; they are shaped across time by the visions, decisions, and policies created by individuals and institutions, from the local to the global scale. Communicating about contemporary urban planning challenges involves understanding how and why this community was shaped. When thinking historically about a place, consider researching the following:

- When was this community established, and by whom?
- How have the demographics of this community changed over time?
- How has the built environment of this community changed over time?
- Has this community experienced population/economic growth or decline in the past several decades?
- What were the major economic drivers/key industries here over time?
- What have been the major political priorities in and around this community over the past several decades?
- Did racial segregation policies/theories including racially restrictive covenants, redlining, or urban renewal impact this community?
- How has this community been impacted by environmental, economic and social crises (the 2008 Housing Crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, bankruptcies, etc.)?
- How has this community organized for change/resisted power across time?



People(s) of a place: Urban planning shapes the places where people live and has significant implications for a community's economic, social, and physical well-being. For this reason, people should be absolutely central to every story about urban planning. When planning to write a piece of community journalism, consider:

- What are the social, economic, and political demographics of this community?
- What are the strengths of this community? What do community members love and value about the place they call home?
- What are the key priorities and challenges of this community?
 - Have community members been impacted by aspects of their environment? Consider impacts to physical and mental health, economic well-being, and/or community cohesion.
- Who are the key community leaders and elders in this community? Are Neighborhood Groups or Block Clubs active in this community?
- Who does/will benefit from a particular urban planning issue? Who is/will be negatively impacted by an urban planning issue?



Physical features of a place: Urban planning seeks to regulate land use and design the physical landscapes and built environment of a community. The physical features of a place—both the 'natural' and the man-made—will guide this development. Consider the following questions when researching a place:

- Where on the map is this community located?
- Where is this community in proximity to:
 - Major roadways
 - Industrial/manufacturing facilities
 - Grocery stores, pharmacies, and other essential retail spaces
 - Farms/agricultural centers/community gardens
 - Job centers or Downtown areas
 - Public and active transportation networks (i.e. bus or train systems, bike lanes, sidewalks, etc.)
 - Large cities
 - Tribal and Indigenous Lands
- Is this community situated near any notable natural features (i.e. bodies of water, land forms, mineral resources, ecosystems, etc.)?
- What are the average weather patterns of this place? Does this place regularly experience any climate disasters (i.e. hurricanes, tornados, extreme heat, etc.)?
- Does this community experience significant air, water, or soil pollution? What are the sources of this pollution?



Plans, institutions or decision-making bodies governing the present and future of a place:

- What are the key plans guiding development in this community (i.e. Master Plans, Strategic Neighborhood Plans, Downtown Development Plans, Parks and Recreation Plans, etc.)?
 - Who is responsible for the design and implementation of these plans?
 - How are community members being engaged around the design and implementation of these plans?
 - Are there any projects going on to support these plans?
- What governing bodies make planning and development decisions and policies for this community?
- What community and activist groups are actively involved in planning and development decisions and policies for this community?



Sociocultural, environmental, political, and/or economic uses/values of a place:

- What land uses are prevalent in this community (i.e. preserved land, residential, educational, commercial, industrial, etc.)?
- What are key gathering spaces in this community?
- What are places of historical, political, or cultural significance within this community?
- What are the key economic drivers in this community?
- In what ways are community members using spaces creatively?



The (competing) visions for the future of a place:

- What are the key controversies around land use in this community?
- What do community members wish to see in or envision for their neighborhoods?
- How will climate change impact this community, and how is this community preparing to become more resilient?



Completing this process of reflecting, listening and researching should provide you with a topic(s) that you'd like to write more about to serve your community.

KEY TERMS GLOSSARY



STILL WONDERING WHAT YOU MIGHT WRITE ABOUT? WHEN ASKED ABOUT THE MOST UNDERTOLD STORIES IN DETROIT, LOCAL PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTS RESPONDED WITH IDEAS COVERING HOUSING, LAND USE AND DEVELOPMENT, TAXES AND FINANCING, AND PLANS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE CITY.

VOICES ON THE GROUND ARE NECESSARY TO THESE PLANNING ISSUES; YOU MIGHT CONSIDER HOW THESE ISSUES ARE IMPACTING YOUR OWN NEIGHBORHOOD OR COMMUNITY. BELOW, FIND KEY TERMS, DEFINITIONS, AND DETROIT-BASED BACKGROUND INFORMATION AROUND THE HOTTEST, MOST IMPORTANT PLANNING STORIES THAT NEED TO BE TOLD IN 2024 AND BEYOND. THESE CAN HELP SERVE AS AN ENTRY POINT FOR YOUR STORIES!

HOT PLANNING TOPICS IN DETROIT: SEE APPENDIX A

AFFORDABLE
HOUSING

AREA MEDIAN
INCOME (AMI)

BROWNFIELDS

COMMUNITY
BENEFIT
AGREEMENTS (CBA)

DOWNTOWN
DEVELOPMENT
AUTHORITIES (DDA)

LAND BANKS

LAND VALUE TAX

TAX INCREMENT
FINANCING (TIF) OR
TAX CAPTURE

PITCHING A STORY



YOU'VE GOT SOME RESEARCH DONE AND A HAVE A SOLID STORY IDEA. NOW, YOU MAY BE LOOKING FOR SOMEWHERE TO PUBLISH AND AMPLIFY YOUR STORY.

ADAPTED FROM THE DETROIT RIVER STORY LAB'S PITCH PARTNERSHIP, THIS SECTION WILL TEACH YOU THE BASICS OF PITCHING AND GUIDE YOU IN TRANSLATING YOUR COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE, RESEARCH, AND WRITING PROJECTS INTO LOCAL NEWSROOM-READY PITCHES.

WHAT IS A PITCH?

A pitch, or story pitch, is a short form of communication that persuasively explains a story idea for a newspaper, magazine, or other media outlet. Writing a good pitch is the first step in getting your piece published, and ideally, getting an outlet to pay you for your work (although, this is not always the case, especially with smaller, lesser-resourced outlets). A pitch is written from a writer or journalist to an editor, publisher, or agent at a publication or publishing company, radio station, or media outlet. Pitches are typically sent by email, but on rare occasions may be sent through the mail. In no more than about 300 words, or two to three paragraphs, pitches offer a short

preview of a proposed story and its unique angle or perspective, as well as an explanation as to why you are the perfect writer for the piece.

The goal of a pitch is to convince the editor that your proposed story idea will align with their content and audience as well as their overarching vision for their publication, site, or platform. For this reason, writing a successful pitch requires some background research on your proposed news outlets and the content that has already been published on these sites.

WHERE SHOULD I TRY TO PUBLISH MY STORY?

Before you pitch, do your research! Conduct some research on a publication that you'd like to publish your story in. In order to effectively pitch to a local news outlet, you must familiarize yourself with the outlet. Spend some time reading through recent articles and different series or columns published in the newspaper or magazine. You might check out the bios of the writers or staff members to get a sense of the types of voices, tones, or expertise that are aligned with this outlet and, importantly, whether or not this outlet accepts pitches from freelance or contributing writers. Take note of the audience(s) that they typically provide content for, and be sure to take a look at other pieces that have been written on the same topic as your proposed story. Think to yourself: *What angle did these writers take on the topic? How can your story offer a different approach or perspective?* The more you read, the better your pitch will be. Taking a look at any social media channels associated with your intended publication can also help you get a sense of their voice and audience.

You should also make note of the editor or staff member who oversees your area of interest, and jot down their email address. It is always more effective to email an editor by name. However, general submission emails work, too.

Spend some time scouring the different columns and articles published in your outlet, and jot down the following information:

Name of your intended outlet/publication
Type of outlet/publication (e.g. digital/print/both)
Link to outlet/publication and their social media channels
Content, locations, or areas of interest typically covered
Voice and style of the outlet/publication
Target Audience of the outlet/publication
Does this outlet/publication accept pitches from freelancers? (Yes/No/Unsure)
What column or area of the outlet/publication do you want to pitch to?
What is the name of the editor you will be pitching to?

HOW DO I START BUILDING TOWARDS A PITCH?

Before you write a pitch about a story in your community, remember that you will need to have a compelling story in mind and the basic context mapped out. It is easy to assume that great writers come up with great story ideas on their own, out of the blue. In reality, as mentioned in previous sections, good story ideas are the result of community engagement and immersion, careful observations, reading, research, and critical thinking around the story angle and outline. This baseline of research and thinking will help you supplement your lived experience with diverse forms of community knowledge around a topic, and will introduce you to any new developments, controversies, or gaps within the area. It will also give you the confidence, knowledge-base, and a basic level of authority with which you will write the story later on.

All editors scan pitches for a set of key characteristics; After doing the legwork to research and narrow your story idea, you are in great shape to ensure that key, stand-out qualities are exemplified in your pitch



**READY TO TRY IT
OUT? LET'S GO.**

QUALITIES OF A GOOD PITCH



WELL-RESEARCHED

First, it should be clear to editors that you are familiar with their publication. Reference the publication you are pitching to, adding the names of specific columns or series if possible, and show how your story idea fits in well with their existing content. Your pitch should not include a story idea that is identical to something that has already been published in this publication. Further, your pitch should show that your story idea is grounded in high-quality research and community knowledge, and that you have a working understanding of the key facts and issues around the topic.



SPECIFIC

By this point, your story idea should be clearly scoped and appropriately narrowed, and communicated as such. Editors won't always have time to workshop story angles with you, and ideas that come across as overly broad, lacking direction, or just generally vague (like 'overviews' into a large topic) will likely be unsuccessful in their eyes.



RELEVANT, TIMELY, & IMPACTFUL

A story should address issues that are of relevance to current events or a trending conversation, or offer a fresh perspective around a previous or historical issue. Keep in mind that even if you have a timely idea, editors are not looking for stories that have already been written, especially if they have already been written in this publication. In your pitch, you'll want to show exactly why the audiences of this publication should care about your proposed piece now (or by the time you expect to publish the piece). You can show relevance and by connecting the story idea to recent news, current trends, and so forth. Your pitch should also illustrate for the editor what the urgency, outcomes, or benefits of telling this story might be, and for whom.

- Try jotting down some bullet points as to why this story must be told now, and what the intended outcomes of this story will be. Among other outcomes, you might consider:
 - Public education/civic engagement benefits
 - The elevation of marginalized voices, and/or other contributions to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion
-

QUALITIES OF A GOOD PITCH (CONT.)

ORIGINAL



Keep in mind that even if you have a timely idea, editors are not looking for stories that have already been written, especially if they have already been written in this publication. Your pitch should offering a fresh, unique approach to a topic of importance. Try jotting down some bullet points answering the following questions:

- What does your story idea and angle offer that hasn't yet been covered in this publication?
- What new voices are you elevating?
- What gap will your story idea fill?

AUTHORITATIVE



Your pitch is partially marketing your story idea, and partially offering yourself as its writer. Ensure that your pitch explains why you are the best person to write this piece. This might include briefly noting any expertise or (lived) experience you have in the topic area or in the community, contacts with whom you plan to interview or work with, and/or sources of data that you have access to. You should also include your plan of action for completing the piece, with a clear timeline as to when you expect to finalize the piece. To showcase your writing, research, and reporting skills, link to or attach writing samples or a portfolio (if you have them).

BRIEF



Be sure that the key elements of your story and its importance appear very early in the pitch. In other words, get to the point, and skip the filler language whenever possible. Remember, editors are parsing through dozens, if not hundreds of pitches per day. Your pitch should be no more than 300 words (more on formatting later in this section!)

CRAFTING THE “VOICE” OF YOUR PITCH

Before writing a pitch, it is important to have a sense of its intended voice and tone, which will substantially change based on the publication that you are pitching to. Become familiar with the tone and style of the pieces typically published in each outlet. After reviewing these writing samples, ask yourself the following:

- Is the writing typical to the publication more formal or informal (i.e using jokes or local slang)?
- What is the balance between research, reporting and quotes, and narrative description?
- Are pieces typically written in the first or third person?
- Do pieces tend to have any particular political leanings or biases?

You might also take a look at the mission statement or ‘About Us’ page of a publication to get a sense of the way in which they speak about their work and the words they use to envision their impact on readership. While completing this reading and analysis, you may find that your writing voice is incompatible with that of a specific publication; this is okay. You can simply seek out a different outlet. It is best to remain authentic to your writing voice.

FORMATTING YOUR PITCH

Many, but not all, publications will have clear instructions as to when and how they accept pitches from writers, their preferred pitch content and word count, as well as what type of stories they are looking for. Some publications will even share what qualities they associate with a successful pitch. It is important to follow these instructions carefully, not only to demonstrate professionalism and attention to detail, but also to ensure that your proposed story and pitch are both in alignment with what these editors are looking for.

Explore the links below for examples of Pitch Guidelines:

- [The Ann Arbor Independent Submission Instructions](#)
- [The Michigan Daily Op-Ed Submission Guidelines](#)
- [Grist Pitch Instructions](#)
- [How to Pitch Stories to Eater Detroit](#)
- [The New York Times Opinion Guest Essays](#)

Pitch or submission guidelines can typically be found on the Staff or Contact Us webpage, but you may need to do some digging. On occasion, outlets will make a “Call for Pitches/Submissions”, where they identify a specific topic area that they are soliciting story ideas on. A Google Search can also help you find these resources, if they exist (e.g. search “pitching to [publication name]”; “[publication name] call for pitches”).

While it is always best practice to research and follow all pitch guidelines posted by your intended outlet, it may be the case that these guidelines are not publicly available. If you do not see pitch or submission guidelines anywhere on your outlet’s site, consider writing an email to the editor or editorial team to ask if they are accepting outside or freelance pitches, and if so, for their preferred formatting.

SAMPLE PITCH

IN SITUATIONS WHERE YOU ARE LACKING PUBLICATION-SPECIFIC PITCH GUIDELINES, YOU CAN FOLLOW THIS BASIC TEMPLATE WHEN PITCHING A LONG-FORM JOURNALISTIC PIECE OR ESSAY:

Dear [NAME OF EDITOR],

[50-100 words offering an attention-grabbing introduction to your story idea]

- It is important to quickly and creatively catch the Editor's attention before leading them into your story idea. To do so, you might open with a sentence that offers:
- A vivid description of a person, place, or phenomena
- A recent piece of shocking, exciting, or controversial news
- An interesting or impactful statistic, trend or event
- In 1-3 sentences, tell the editor (1) what your story idea is, its unique perspective, and why it is relevant and exciting; (2) the type of piece you are pitching, (3) what column you believe this piece is best suited to

[50-100 words explaining why this story matters to their publication's audience]

- Some questions to potentially respond to in this section include:
- How does this piece fit in with and build onto pieces that have recently been published by this publication? Or, how does this story fill a gap in this publication's coverage?
- Why would this publication's audience be interested in this story now?
- What impact will this story have, specifically on this particular audience?

[50-100 words explaining what makes you uniquely qualified to tell this story, and your plan for doing so]

- Some questions to potentially respond to in this section include:
- What academic, professional, or lived experience and/or identities do you have that allows you to have the authority to tell this story?
- What research have you done or will you be doing to inform this story?
- If possible, be specific about who you will interview, where you will travel, what sources of information or data you will be engaging with, etc.
- Do you have access to or relationships with specific sources, communities or knowledge that other writers do not?
- If you have them, include links to other writing samples you have on similar topics or in similar styles. These may be published or unpublished.

[Short sentence estimating a realistic timeline for you to finish researching, reporting, and writing this piece]

- Editors will likely need to re-pitch your pitched story to their editorial team, and a timeline helps to give them a sense of when this piece will be ready for editing and publication

[Single wrap-up sentence]

- You can tailor this to the voice of the publication or vibe of the pitch, but this final line should be something to the effect of: "Please let me know if you are interested in chatting more about this piece."

Sincerely,

[Your Name]

[Signature, Contact information, Website/portfolio if applicable]

SENDING YOUR PITCH

Almost done! It is time to send your story pitch to your publication. Here are the final steps you need to take.

Craft Your Subject Line: Remember, many editors are reviewing dozens, if not hundreds, of pitches per day. For this reason, your subject line should be creative and attention grabbing while hinting to the editor what you would like to write about and why it is newsworthy.

Things to do in your Subject Line	Things to avoid in your subject line
<p>Think of your subject line as the opportunity to pitch a potential headline. Review the headlines of previously published pieces that are similar to the piece you are pitching; these headlines will serve as great inspiration for the style and length of your subject line.</p>	<p>Avoid a vague or generic subject line. For example, if you are pitching a story about housing affordability in your neighborhood, you might avoid a vague subject line that says "Hi! Story Pitch from New Author" and instead, try something like this: "Here's Why the New Luxury Housing Development Will Harm My Neighborhood"</p>
<p>Ten words or 60 characters is a good general rule to ensure that the subject line does not get cut off in the editor's inbox.</p>	<p>Avoid a subject line that is too long or overpacked with information.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep in mind that generic phrases like "Excited to get in touch regarding..." or "Journalist looking to write about..." eat up your limited subject line word count without giving the editor any useful information.
<p>Align the voice and tone of your subject line to that which is typical to the publication.</p>	<p>Avoid visually overwhelming your editor with symbols, emojis, or words in all caps. Keep it clean and professional.</p>

SENDING YOUR PITCH

Properly submit your pitch: Publications with pitch submission guidelines often offer clear steps to submitting a pitch, including who or where to send your pitch. If publications do not have comprehensive instructions, note that most publications that accept pitches tend to do so by email. If possible, make a note of the editor or staff member who oversees your intended column or area of interest, and email your pitch directly to them. It is always more effective to email an editor by name. However, general submission emails work, too.

ACCEPTANCE/REJECTION OF YOUR PITCH

Hearing back from an outlet can take some time, depending on the size of the outlet, their publication schedule, and the time-sensitive nature of your piece. The timeline can span anywhere from a few days to a few weeks. If you are itching for a response, you can follow up on your pitch a maximum of one time, typically 7 to 10 days later. This follow up message should be a quick, gentle reminder that gets your pitch back up to the top of an editor's inbox – not a total re-pitch of your story idea.

In the meantime, as you wait to hear back, it is not a good idea to submit the same idea to multiple outlets at once due to the risk of overlap in acceptance. If you want to continue freelance writing beyond this piece, you'll want to avoid having to turn down any acceptance offers; this will annoy editors who spent their time reviewing and responding to your pitch, and it will make it less likely for your pitches to be accepted by their publications in the future.

However, if you have multiple story ideas that can be broken into multiple pieces of writing (even if it is the same topic area with a different angle), it is totally acceptable to pitch different story ideas to different places at the same time, as long as each story idea is only under consideration at one publication at a time.



If you get rejected...

- You may hear back from the editor presenting you with the news. In rare occasions, editors will explain why the piece was rejected and offer pointers on how the story can be honed or reframed. It is more likely, however, that you hear nothing at all.
- As a freelance writer, you can reasonably expect to have your story ideas rejected quite a bit. This is part of the world of freelancing – don't get discouraged. If you still believe your story is strong, you might try tweaking your pitch to send to a different outlet.

If you get accepted...

- Congratulations! This is typically the exception, not the rule, of freelance writing. An editor will follow up with you by email communicating their interest in the piece, and they will map out information regarding:
 - Any tweaks or requirements to the scope or angle of the piece
 - The required word count and formatting
 - Your anticipated writing timeline and deadline
 - Compensation (if applicable)
 - Any contract or legal agreements
 - Once logistics are set, you can move forward with writing your piece with these new guidelines.
-

LET'S KEEP WORKING!

INTERVIEWING



NOW THAT YOU HAVE A CONFIRMED STORY IDEA, YOU SHOULD BEGIN TO THINK ABOUT INTERVIEWING, OR GUIDED DISCUSSIONS WITH PEOPLE TO GATHER INFORMATION, OPINIONS, OR EXPERIENCES THAT ARE CENTRAL TO THE STORY YOU HOPE TO WRITE.

PLANNING INTERVIEWS: WHO SHOULD I TALK TO?

The practice of interviewing is core to the profession of journalism, and information gathered from interviews will likely make up the bulk of your writing. Your interviewees will differ based on the topic area of your story and the amount of information you need to gather. On average, journalistic articles have at least 2 interviews incorporated into their story, and different viewpoints around an issue are represented in the context of gathered community and institutional knowledge.

When deciding on who to invite to an interview, consider which aspects of an interviewee's experiences or opinions will likely be most informative and compelling to your audience.

For urban planning stories, you might revisit your research and reflections about the places and topics you are writing about to inform your choice of interviewees.

When making a list of potential interviewees, try to do the following:

- **Seek out key community voices.**
 - Who do you know who has been interested in or involved in this issue?
 - Who are the key community leaders and elders in this community? Are Neighborhood Groups or Block Clubs active in this community?
 - Who does/will benefit from this particular urban planning issue? Who is/will be negatively impacted by this urban planning issue?
 - What community and activist groups are actively involved in planning and development decisions and policies for this community?

- **Gather information and perspectives from external stakeholders.**
 - You'll want to have discussions with people directly involved with a specific planning issue, or who have an expert knowledge about the urban planning issues you're addressing. This might include urban planners, city officials, community leaders, activists, developers, or scholars. Consider:
 - What are the key organizations involved in this planning issue, and who are their representatives?
 - What political leaders, governing bodies, or private parties (i.e. developers or NGOs) make planning and development decisions and policies for this community?



DRAFTING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: WHAT SHOULD I ASK?

It is a best practice to draft a set of interview questions before talking to a source. When drafting interview questions about urban planning issues and people’s relationships to/with them, you’ll want to come up with some questions that will provide insight into complex planning processes, the status of plans or projects and their the broader social, economic, and environmental implications, as well as the impact of planning issues on communities. Above all, remember your story has the potential to elevate and publicly document your community’s experience with a planning issue, and provide necessary information to engage your community about the decisions that affect them in the short and long term. This goal of centering the community should govern your interview questions.

Depending on your source and what you hope to get out of the interview, you will ask a mix of **Open-Ended Questions**, which serve to encourage your interviewee to be more descriptive, and to elaborate on their unique thoughts and experiences, and **Focused Questions**, which serve to get specific answers or explanations about a planning issue that you have been unable to find elsewhere.

Examples of Open Ended Questions	Examples of Focused Questions
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is your opinion on the I-375 Reconnecting Communities Project?• If you had the chance, how might you change the plans for the I-375 Reconnecting Communities Project?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the goals of the I-375 Reconnecting Communities Project?• How many community members have been engaged by the City in the I-375 Reconnecting Communities Project?

The number of and depth of the questions you draft should correspond to the established length of the interview. A 10-15 minute interview may cover 3-4 questions. A 30-minute interview may cover 10 questions. Try to prioritize the most important questions first, if the interview needs to get cut short.

For examples of interview questions for different types of urban planning stories, please refer to Section 2: Plug & Play Approaches to Urban Planning Stories.

INTERVIEWING ETHICS

Note that there are some inherent power dynamics between a journalist and an interviewee. An interviewee must vulnerably share their knowledge and experience with a journalist, who then decides exactly how this information will be included in a story. For this reason, you must make a commitment to respecting the dignity, privacy, and autonomy of your interviewees while seeking the truth and accurately sharing it back out to the community.

Before you dive into interviewing, there are some ethical considerations to make, including:

Background Research: Research your interviewee and their background, so you know what questions to ask. Being well-informed shows respect for the interviewee and helps you ask relevant questions with answers that you could not find elsewhere.

Informed Consent: Always inform your interview subjects about the purpose of the interview, how the information will be used, and who you are. Never misrepresent your intentions or who you are to get an interview. Make sure they agree to (1) allowing their names to be attached to their quotes in your story (2) allowing the information they share with you to be published and (3) that they agree to be recorded.

Sensitivity: Be aware that some questions may be sensitive or triggering, especially around urban planning issues that have caused trauma or significant harm to an individual or their community. Approach such topics with empathy and care. Don't pry into personal matters that have no relevance to the story unless it is clearly related to the story, and if the interviewee has agreed to speak about it. Interviewee well-being should always take precedence over the story.



Transparency: If an interviewee asks for anonymity – or do not want their name to be included in the story – try to ask questions to understand why this may be the case. Ideally, journalistic stories should be attributable with names for all sources, but sometimes privacy concerns or potential harms/retribution may outweigh the desire for attribution.

Deep Listening: Give interviewees a fair and honest chance to express their views and experiences, even if they differ from your own. Practice active listening, wherein you do not interrupt them when they are talking, and you make an effort to truly understand what they are saying without judgment. This will help you when you sit down to write, as a deep understanding of someone's experience will help to ensure you do not take their words out of context in a way that changes the meaning of what they said. If you are ever unsure about what an interviewee said or meant, you can and should follow-up with them before publishing.

FINAL PRE-INTERVIEW STEPS

Before conducting your interview, complete the following 'last minute' steps:

- **Ensure that you have something to record the conversation with, if you gain the consent to record from your interviewee.** Depending on whether your interview will take place in person, over the phone, or over a video meeting, possible recording devices could be a phone (e.g. Voice Memos App), a laptop (e.g. Voice Recorder or Photo Booth), or Zoom.
- **Grab something to take notes with (a pen and paper, a document on a laptop, etc.).** Even though you will be recording the conversation, you'll want a chance to jot down "interview notes" which include your ideas, impressions, or additional questions or things to follow up on.
- **Try to find a quiet place to take the interview, especially if you'll be recording.** A loud environment can make the recordings difficult to understand when you return to them later. If you do not have a quiet place at home, work, or school, consider conducting the interview at your public library.
- **Review your interview questions, to refresh your memory.** But remember, while having a set of predetermined questions is a great practice, be prepared to adapt based on how the interview unfolds. You should be ready to explore any interesting tangents or unexpected topics that might arise.

I'VE COMPLETED MY INTERVIEW! WHAT DO I DO NOW?

Congrats! As a next step, most journalists like to transcribe their interviews, or convert recorded speech from your audio or video recording to a written record of exactly how it was said, word for word. There are softwares that you can use to complete these transcriptions, but note that these can be costly. It might be worth checking with your public library, community college, or university to see if any transcription software is available to you free of charge.

Although time consuming, many journalists transcribe their interviews manually to become reacquainted with the conversation, using a computer. This involves playing back the recorded interview and typing up the words into a document as they come. As you transcribe your interview, you should highlight key information that is central to the story you are interested in telling, or any quotes that illuminate a compelling aspect of the story you are writing.

STORY FOCUS



AT THIS POINT, YOU HAVE GATHERED IMPORTANT INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR COMMUNITY'S CONCERNS, VALUES AND PRIORITIES. IT'S TIME TO TURN YOUR WORK INTO A COMPLETE STORY!

NARROWING YOUR STORY IDEA

While it may be tempting to try to address every single point brought up to you in your reflections, conversations, and research, if you fail to take time to put a frame around your idea, a single story can either go in too many different directions, or remain too general to truly add a new perspective around an issue.

Placing some bounds on your thinking can help you to narrow things down into story-sized chunks. Consider how to best serve your community through storytelling by asking the following questions:

- What patterns do you see across all of your reflecting, conversations, and research? Are certain experiences or ideas coming up again and again across conversations with your community members?
- What are the most pressing or time-sensitive issues that need to be amplified in your community (i.e. an impending development; health concerns, etc.)?
- What story ideas have the potential to create the most change in your community?
- Have community leaders specifically requested help in telling a story?

CHOOSING A STORY ANGLE

After you land on a big-picture topic or story idea that you'd like to write about, you will need to decide on a story angle. A **story angle**, sometimes called a slant, is the narrowed lens through which you will be approaching the story idea. An angle usually encapsulates a specific category and sub-topic of an issue, and includes a specific and original viewpoint or perspective that will carry throughout the entire piece. An angle can be based on things like a specific community or neighborhood, audience, or opinion.

When deciding on a story angle, it is helpful to first parse a big topic-area or story idea into as many categories as you can think of. For example, "Housing in Detroit" is too big of a topic to try to cover in a single story. You might brainstorm to begin to break the topic into the following categories:

- Affordable housing development in my community
- Rental housing market growth in my community
- Residents leading housing redevelopment in my community
- Reimagining vacant houses in my community
- The impacts of the land value tax in my community
-and so on



From a list of categories like the one above, you'll need to pick a sub-topic and an interesting facet of that sub-topic to hone in on. When thinking further about your story angle, remember to spend some time identifying the who/what/when/where of your story. For example:

- **WHO** is involved in/impacted by the story, and what are their perspectives?
- **WHAT** is the central problem/issue?
- **WHEN** did this issue happen?
- **WHERE** is this issue occurring/impacting?



Remember, your story will likely change over time as you continue on through your writing process, conduct more formal interviews and research, and potentially collaborate with an editor. However, setting your story angle and some basic bounds to your writing in advance will help you have a more focused approach.

CREATING AN OUTLINE

While everyone's writing process will differ, a best practice used by journalists is to create an outline, or a supportive document that organizes all of the topics and information you would like to cover in your story.

Typically created with a few short headings and bullet points, an outline may help you visualize the flow of your story as well as the placement of key research and quotes/interview data. Here's a sample outline from Southern Connecticut State University:

I. Lead sentence

- Grab and hook your reader right away with a vivid, compelling description.

II. Introduction

- Which facts and figures will ground your story? Where and when is this story happening?

III. Opening quotation

- Who are the people involved and what they are thinking/experiencing?

IV. Main body

- What is at the heart of your story?

V. Closing quotation

- Find a quote that summarizes the point of the article in a few words.

VI. Conclusion/Where to Find Additional Info

Remember, journalistic writing is typically presented in an 'inverted pyramid' format, where the most important and newsworthy context is presented first, with additional details provided afterwards. The necessary basic context includes:

- **WHO** is involved in/impacted by the story, and what are their perspectives?
- **WHAT** is the central problem/issue?
- **WHEN** is this issue happening?
- **WHERE** is this issue occurring/impacting?

Following the basic context, stories typically move to the following information:

- **WHY** is this issue occurring? Why does it matter?
- **HOW** is this issue happening? How to address it? How to get involved?

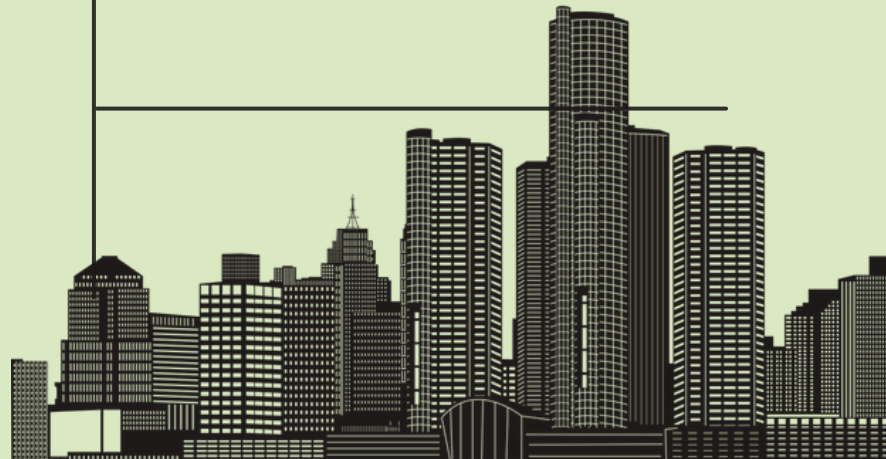


FOR MORE INSPIRATION
AROUND YOUR STORY
OUTLINE, ADVANCE TO THE
NEXT SECTION.

REPORTING ON
URBAN PLANNING
IN YOUR DETROIT
NEIGHBORHOOD

02. PLUG & PLAY APPROACHES TO URBAN PLANNING STORIES

**MOCK STORY
SCENARIOS,
INTERVIEW
QUESTIONS,
OUTLINES,
& PUBLISHED
EXAMPLES**



WRITE ABOUT A NEW DEVELOPMENT IN YOUR COMMUNITY



IS A NEW DEVELOPMENT PROPOSED IN YOUR COMMUNITY? SHARE YOUR COMMUNITY'S PERSPECTIVE – FOR OR AGAINST THE PROJECT – THROUGH A STORY.

HERE'S WHO YOU MIGHT INTERVIEW

Neighbor(s) living nearby the development

Identify a neighbor who lives nearby the development and/or has voiced concerns/approval over the development.

Neighborhood Leaders/Activists

Identify a community member who has played a key role in organizing and activism in your neighborhood.

Planning and Development Department

Identify a media representative from the PDD who works with or oversees projects within your District.

Developer (if applicable/feasible)

Identify who the Developer/Company behind the project is, and try to find a representative who is willing to offer their perspective.

Check "Who's Who? Cheat Sheet" in Section 3 & review Documenters Notes for more ideas of folks involved in the development!

HERE'S WHAT YOU MIGHT ASK

Interviewing a Neighbor(s) nearby the development

1. What is your full name?
2. How long have you lived in this community?
3. In what ways are you involved in this community? What groups/organizations are you a part of?
4. Where do you live in proximity to the proposed development?
5. What are your thoughts on the new proposed development? In what ways do you think it will benefit the community? In what ways might it negatively impact the community?
6. Did you participate in any public engagement around the new development? If so, can you tell me about your participation? If you did not participate, can you share why you did not do so?
7. What do you like about the proposed development? What changes would you recommend for the development?
8. If you and your community had full control over the land used for this development, what would you do with it?
9. Is there anyone else I should talk to about the proposed development?

Interviewing a Neighborhood Leader/Activist

1. What is your full name?
2. How long have you lived in this community?
3. In what ways are you involved in this community? What groups/organizations are you a part of?
4. Where do you live in proximity to the proposed development?
5. What are your thoughts on the new proposed development? In what ways do you think it will benefit the community? In what ways might it negatively impact the community?
6. Did you participate in any public engagement around the new development? If so, can you tell me about your participation? If you did not participate, can you share why you did not do so?
7. What do you like about the proposed development? What changes would you recommend for the development?
8. If you and your community had full control over the land used for this development, what would you do with it?
9. Is there anyone else I should talk to about the proposed development?

HERE'S WHAT YOU MIGHT ASK (CONT.)

Interviewing the Planning & Development Department (PDD)

1. What is your full name and role at the PDD?
2. [Introduce the proposed development] Are you aware of this proposed development? In what ways was the PDD involved in this development project, if at all?
3. What is the current stage of this development project? What has already happened, and what is the next step?
4. What are your thoughts on the new proposed development? In what ways do you think it will benefit the community? In what ways might it negatively impact the community?
5. Has the PDD engaged with the community around this new development? In what ways?
6. What are the upcoming opportunities for community members to voice their concerns/support for this project?
7. Is there anyone else I should talk to about the proposed development?

Interviewing the Developer

1. What is your full name and role with this development company?
2. Tell us more about this development project and its goals.
3. Why was this community chosen for this development?
4. Did your company consult with community groups prior to submitting its site plan?
5. How do you anticipate this project will benefit the community positively? Are there any anticipated impacts?
6. How are you incorporating community feedback into this development?

**REMEMBER TO CONSULT THE
INTERVIEWING PORTION IN SECTION 1 OF
THIS PLAYBOOK FOR ADDITIONAL TIPS!**

HERE'S A MOCK STORY OUTLINE (BUILD UP FROM HERE!)

- A rich description or retelling of the history/value of this land, prior to the development
- A brief summary of the new development proposed
 - a. What is the proposed development?
 - b. When was it proposed? What stage of development is it in?
 - c. Where is this development proposed? Who does this land matter to, and how?
 - d. Who (what developer/department) is leading this development? How did they engage with communities, if at all?
- A description of the impact of the development, from diverse or contending perspectives
 - a. What do developers/the City believe will be the impact of this development (positive or negative)? What evidence/experience do they have to inform this view?
 - b. What do nearby residents, activists, non-profits, etc. believe will be the impact of this development (positive or negative)? What evidence/experience do they have to inform this view?
- A description of what is currently being done to support/fight back against this development
 - a. Who (groups/individuals) are advocating for/speaking out against/organizing around this development, and in what ways?
 - b. What do City Council members and other City officials have to say on the development? How are they advocating for/speaking out against the development?
- Additional details for how readers can learn more or get involved

HERE ARE SOME PUBLISHED STORIES ABOUT COMMUNITY RESPONSES TO NEW DEVELOPMENTS

- [The factory's long shadow](#) (*Planet Detroit*, December 2023)
- [Parts of Detroit Could Be Radically Transformed By City Solar Plan](#) (*Planet Detroit*, January 2024)
- ['Highway by another name': I-375 redesign plan disappoints many Detroiters](#) (*Outlier Media*, October 2023)

WRITE ABOUT AN ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE IN YOUR COMMUNITY



IS YOUR COMMUNITY CONCERNED ABOUT AN ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUE, SUCH AS POLLUTION, HEALTH IMPACTS FROM A CURRENT OR FUTURE DEVELOPMENT, OR CLIMATE HAZARDS? DRAW ATTENTION TO THE PROBLEM AND ADVOCATE FOR YOUR COMMUNITY'S WELL-BEING USING THE POWER OF STORYTELLING.

HERE'S WHO YOU MIGHT INTERVIEW

Neighbor(s) living nearby the environmental injustice

Identify a neighbor who lives nearby, has voiced concerns over, or has been personally impacted by the environmental injustice.

Neighborhood Leaders/Activists

Identify a community member who has played a key role in organizing and activism in your neighborhood.

Buildings, Safety Engineering, and Environmental Department Rep

Identify a media representative from BSEED who works with this specific concern or oversees concerns within your District.

District City Council Member

Identify the current Council Member for your District.

Source of Environmental Injustice, if applicable/feasible

You might have an idea as to who/what is causing this environmental injustice, such as a specific company/organization, facility, etc. If you are aware of a source of the problem, try to find a representative who would be willing to offer their perspective.

Check "Who's Who? Cheat Sheet" in Section 3 & review Documenters Notes for more ideas of folks involved in the issue!

HERE'S WHAT YOU MIGHT ASK

Interviewing a Neighbor(s) nearby/impacted by the environmental injustice

1. What is your full name?
2. How long have you lived in this community?
3. In what ways are you involved in this community? What groups/organizations are you a part of?
4. What are your concerns about [environmental concern]? How have you been impacted (i.e. physical and mental health impacts, financial impacts, community and quality of life impacts, etc.)?
5. When did these concerns begin?
6. What do you understand to be the source of these concerns?
7. Have you done anything to try to bring attention to or solve this environmental issue (i.e. calling a City department, attending public meetings, etc.)? What have been the outcomes of these efforts?
8. What do you and your community wish to happen to address these concerns?
9. Is there anyone else I should talk to about [environmental concern]?

Interviewing a Neighborhood Leader/Activist

1. What is your full name?
2. How long have you lived in this community?
3. In what ways are you involved in this community? What groups/organizations are you a part of?
4. What are your concerns about [environmental concern]? How have you been impacted?
5. When did these concerns begin?
6. What do you understand to be the source of these concerns?
7. Have you done anything to try to bring attention to or solve this environmental issue (i.e. calling a City department, attending public meetings, etc.)? What have been the outcomes of these efforts?
8. What do you and your community wish to happen to address these concerns?
9. Is there anyone else I should talk to about [environmental concern]?

HERE'S WHAT YOU MIGHT ASK (CONT.)

Interviewing a BSEED Rep

1. What is your full name and role at BSEED?
2. Are you aware of the [environmental concerns] raised at [this location] on [this date]?
3. What are the known impacts of [this environmental concern] on communities?
4. What/who do you think is causing [this environmental concern]?
5. What regulations or compliance mechanisms are put in place to handle [this environmental concern]? What are the consequences of noncompliance?
6. What should community members do to (1) keep themselves safe, and (2) advocate for the [environmental concern] to be ameliorated?
7. Is there anyone else I should talk to about [environmental concern]?

Interviewing a District City Council Member

1. What is your full name and role?
2. Are you aware of [environmental concern] in your district? Have community members contacted you about [environmental concern]?
3. If so, what do you understand to be the source of this issue?
4. Has City Council done anything to help address [environmental concern] or to support those who have been impacted?
5. What should community members do to (1) keep themselves safe, and (2) advocate for the [environmental concern] to be ameliorated?
6. Is there anyone else I should talk to about [environmental concern]?

Interviewing a source of the environmental injustice, if feasible/applicable

1. What is your full name and job title?
2. How long have you been in this role?
3. What is the mission of your company/organization? What does your company/organization do?
4. Are there any adverse environmental impacts to your operations?
5. Are you aware of the [environmental issue] in this community?
6. Have community members contacted you about [environmental concern]?
7. Have you done anything to help address [environmental concern] or to support those who have been impacted?

HERE'S A MOCK STORY OUTLINE (BUILD UP FROM HERE!)

- A rich, compelling description or retelling of someone experiencing/being impacted by the environmental injustice
- A brief summary of the environmental injustice at hand
 - What is the environmental concern?
 - When did this environmental concern begin?
 - Where is this environmental concern causing harm?
 - Who (groups/individuals) is being impacted, and in what ways?
- A description of the source of this environmental issue (in other words, why it is occurring)
 - Who/what is the suspected source of this environmental concern?
 - How did representatives from the suspected source of this environmental concern respond to questions?
 - What are the environmental compliance measures in place? Have these compliance measures been broken?
- A description of what is currently being done to address this environmental injustice
 - What municipal, state, or federal enforcement mechanisms (regulatory, legal, or otherwise) have been employed to spur action?
 - Who (groups/individuals) are speaking out against or organizing around this environmental concern, and in what ways?
 - What do City Council members and other City officials have to say on the issue? How are they addressing this issue?
- Additional details for how readers can learn more or get involved

HERE ARE SOME PUBLISHED STORIES ABOUT COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICES

- [Runny eyes, dry throats: Detroiters want compensation for Stellantis pollution](#) (*Planet Detroit/Bridge Detroit*, January 2024)
- [Weary of waiting for a truck route ordinance, Southwest Detroit residents ask city officials to enforce existing traffic laws](#) (*Planet Detroit*, August 2022)

WRITE ABOUT A POSITIVE COMMUNITY PROJECT



HAS YOUR COMMUNITY COME TOGETHER TO CREATIVELY SOLVE A PROBLEM?
CONTRIBUTE TO POSITIVE, SOLUTIONS-ORIENTED NARRATIVE BUILDING BY
WRITING ABOUT IT.

HERE'S WHO YOU MIGHT INTERVIEW

Project Leader

Identify a community member who has played a key role in organizing and implementing the project.

Involved Neighbor or Community Member

Identify a community member who has participated or benefited from this project.

Department of Neighborhoods/District Business Liaison

Identify a representative from the Department of Neighborhoods who works with or oversees initiatives within the community.

Collaborators from City Departments, Private Firms, or NGOs

Identify a representative from the City, local businesses, or non-profits who was involved in this project.

Check "Who's Who? Cheat Sheet" in Section 3 & review Documenters Notes for more ideas of folks involved in the project!

HERE'S WHAT YOU MIGHT ASK

Interviewing a Project Leader

1. What is your full name?
2. How long have you lived in this community?
3. In what ways are you involved in this community? What groups/organizations are you a part of?
4. Tell me more about your vision for this project.
5. How did the idea for this project come to be? Why did you pursue this project?
6. Who (groups/individuals) came together to create the project/solution? Did you work with any City departments, private firms, or non-profits for this project?
7. What steps did you take to pursue this project?
8. Did you experience any challenges?
9. What has the impact of this project been so far? What are you most proud about regarding this project?
10. What is next for this project?
11. How can community members learn more or become involved in this project?
12. Is there anyone else that you recommend I should talk to?

Interviewing an involved community member or neighbor

1. What is your full name?
2. How long have you lived in this community?
3. In what ways are you involved in this community? What groups/organizations are you a part of?
4. How are you involved in this project? How did you learn about it?
5. What was your experience like collaborating with [project leader], [City department, private, or non-profit collaborators], etc.?
6. How has the project impacted your life and/or community?
7. What are you most proud about regarding this project?
8. What is next for this project?
9. How can community members learn more or become involved in this project?
10. Is there anyone else that you recommend I should talk to?

HERE'S WHAT YOU MIGHT ASK (CONT.)

Interviewing a Department of Neighborhoods/District Business Liaison

1. What is your full name and role?
2. [Introduce the project] Are you aware of this project? In what ways were you involved in this project, if at all?
3. Do you have any comment about the impacts of this project?
4. How can community members start similar projects in their neighborhoods?

Interviewing a Rep from any involved City Dept., private firm, or NGO

1. What is your full name and role?
2. When did you become involved in this project? What role did you play?
3. Can you tell me more about the [community-City/Private partner/NGO] partnership that made this project happen?
4. Do you have any comment about the impacts of this project?
5. Is there anyone else that you recommend I should talk to?

HERE'S A MOCK STORY OUTLINE (BUILD UP FROM HERE!)

- A vivid, catchy description of what someone might see/experience if they came across this project/solution
- A brief summary of the community project/solution
 - What is the project/solution?
 - Why did this project occur? What problem is it addressing?
 - Where is the project/solution located?
 - Who (groups/individuals) came together to create the project/solution?
- A description of how the community went about solving this project
 - What steps did they take?
 - Did the community experience any challenges? If so, how did they overcome these challenges?
 - Which, if any, City Departments or local non-profits did they work with? Share about this collaboration.
- A description of the impacts of the project so far, and where the project is headed next
- Additional details for how readers can learn more or get involved

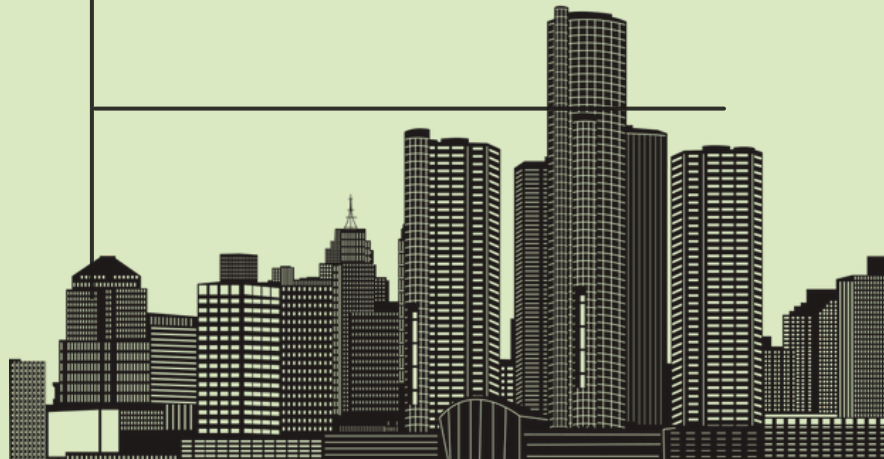
HERE ARE SOME PUBLISHED STORIES ABOUT POSITIVE COMMUNITY PROJECTS

- [A \\$1700 duplex from the Land Bank is now one of the most energy efficient homes in Detroit](#) (*Planet Detroit*, March 2024)
- [How Opal Grove Games is fostering a third place for Black gamers in Detroit](#) (*Outlier Media*, February 2024)
- [Capuchin Soup Kitchen's Urban Garden celebrates its 25th Anniversary](#) (*Detroit Free Press*, October 2023)

REPORTING ON
URBAN PLANNING
IN YOUR DETROIT
NEIGHBORHOOD

03. WHO'S WHO? DETROIT PLANNING BODIES CHEAT SHEET

**ORGANIZATIONAL
MISSION,
RESPONSIBILITIES, &
ACCOUNTABILITY
RESOURCES OF KEY
URBAN PLANNING
BODIES**



KEY PLANNING BODIES IN DETROIT

UNTANGLING URBAN PLANNING
DECISION MAKING



WHO'S WHO? CHEAT SHEET

Urban planning decision making is extremely complex, and on the surface it may be unclear the bodies involved or the exact processes being followed for any given project. When you are approaching an urban planning story, use this section as a starting point to untangling this web of activity. The Who's Who? Cheat Sheet includes information about:

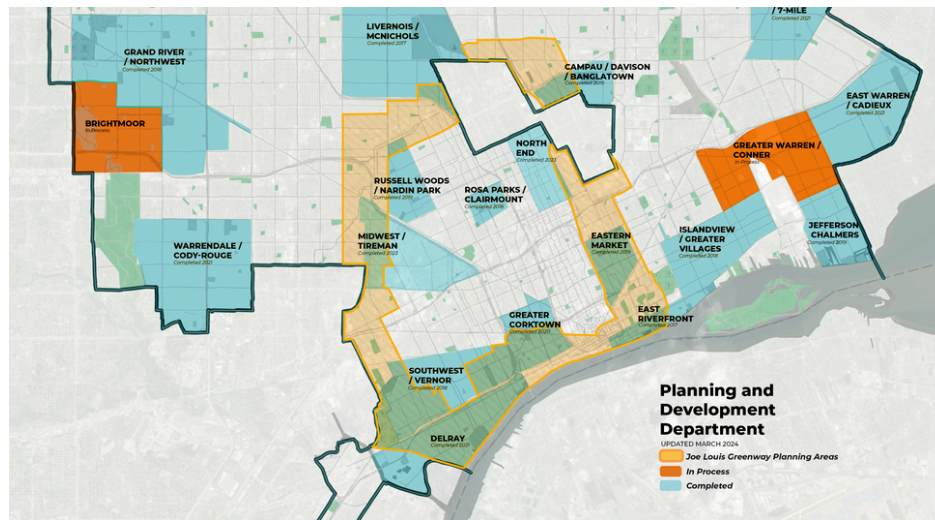
- The City Planning Commission
- The Planning and Development Department
- The Housing and Revitalization Department
- The Buildings, Safety Engineering, and Environmental Department (BSEED)
- The Detroit Department of Transportation
- The Department of Neighborhoods
- The Detroit Land Bank Authority (DLBA)
- The Detroit Brownfield Redevelopment Authority (DBRA)
- The Detroit Building Authority (DBA)
- The Detroit Downtown Development Authority (DDA)
- The Detroit Housing Commission
- The Historic District Commission



LINK: CITY PLANNING COMMISSION

- **Mission:** The City Planning Commission provides recommendations to the City Council on the physical, social and economic development of the City including the Five-Year Capital Agenda, Master Plan, and other proposals and ordinances for the regulation of development and land use, as required by the City Charter.
- **Key Urban Planning Responsibilities:**
 - Reviewing and providing recommendations around the Mayor’s proposed Master Plan of Policies for social, economic and physical development, including:
 - The five-year Capital Agenda and Annual Budget
 - Development of renewal projects
 - Proposals for community development and neighborhood conservation
 - Proposals for acquisitions and disposition of public real property,
 - Proposed Zoning Ordinance amendments
 - Processing and evaluating all proposed amendments to the Zoning Ordinance; holding the state-required public hearing and accepting public comment; and undertaking design review of buildings and signs in designated areas.
 - (Jointly with the Housing and Revitalization Department) Reviewing and recommending proposals for the Neighborhood Opportunity Fund
- **Funding Source:** The City Planning Commission’s activities are funded by City Tax dollars.
- **Accountability & Transparency:** The City Planning Commission consists of nine (9) members who are appointed by the City Council to three-year terms. Members serve without pay and must be residents of Detroit.
 - **Meeting Information:** The City Planning Commission’s meetings are posted on their website [here](#). Meeting agendas and minutes can also be found on their website.
 - **[Detroit Documenters Notes on the City Planning Commission](#)**

DETROIT PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT



LINK: [PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT](#)

- **Mission:** The City of Detroit’s Planning and Development Department (PDD) aims to build a city secure in its future, grounded in its roots and hopeful in its present state. The vision of PDD’s mission is a healthy and beautiful Detroit, built on inclusionary growth, economic opportunity, and an atmosphere of trust.
- **Key Urban Planning Responsibilities:**
 - Updating and supporting the implementation of the Master Plan
 - Engaging with the community and supporting high-quality design, development and zoning innovation within Detroit
 - Implementing and engaging the community around the Neighborhood Framework Plan
 - Facilitating the community engagement processes behind Community Benefit Ordinances
 - Facilitating the development of Land Based Projects (including those that use land for urban agriculture, gardening, beautification and other productive uses, whether for profit or as a community based activity)
 - Supporting the implementation of various Citywide Initiatives, studies, and plans, including the Historic District Commission, the Greater Downtown Area Bicycle Plan, the Joe Lewis Greenway Neighborhood Planning Study, and more.
- **Funding Source:** The Planning and Development Department’s activities are funded by City Tax dollars.
- **Accountability & Transparency:** The Planning and Development Department is accountable to the City Council and Mayor.
 - **Meeting Information:** All Planning and Development Department meetings are posted on the city-wide calendar [here](#).
 - [Detroit Documenters Notes on the Planning and Development Department](#)

DETROIT HOUSING AND REVITALIZATION DEPARTMENT



LINK: [HOUSING AND REVITALIZATION DEPARTMENT](#)

- **Mission:** The Housing and Revitalization Department sustains and grows neighborhoods that are inclusive of quality affordable housing opportunities for all, and economic opportunity through management of federal housing, economic, and community development funding, steering local housing policy, and maintaining and creating mixed-income and mixed-use housing opportunities through transformational developments by leveraging public and private partnerships.
- **Key Urban Planning Responsibilities:**
 - Developing affordable housing and neighborhoods with diverse housing options
 - Connect private developers to public financing instruments, entitlements approvals, and publicly-owned property to further the development of transformational quality mixed-use, mixed-income housing in Detroit
 - Facilitating Neighborhood Beautification programs
 - Facilitating the dispersal of disaster recovery funds and resources
 - Administering Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding to communities in need
- **Funding Source:** The Housing and Revitalization Department activities are funded by City Tax dollars.
- **Accountability & Transparency:** The Housing and Revitalization Department is accountable to the City Council and Mayor.
 - **Meeting Information:** Meetings overseen by the Housing and Revitalization Department are curated in [this calendar](#).
 - [Detroit Documenters Notes on the Housing and Revitalization Department](#)

BUILDINGS, SAFETY ENGINEERING, AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEPARTMENT



LINK: [BUILDINGS, SAFETY ENGINEERING, AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEPARTMENT](#)

- **Mission:** The mission of the Buildings, Safety Engineering, and Environmental Department (BSEED) is to provide for the safety, health and welfare of the general public as it maintains buildings and their environments in an efficient, cost effective, user friendly and professional manner.
- **Key Urban Planning Responsibilities:**
 - Enforcing construction, property maintenance, environmental compliance and zoning codes
 - Conserving and protecting the natural resources (water, air, and land resources) of the City of Detroit in the interests of the health, safety and welfare of the people, to promote improved social and economic conditions, and to protect limited environmental resources for the future benefit of Detroit residents
 - Supporting development and construction requests and inspections
 - Facilitating business licensing and permits
 - Facilitating rental certificates and complaints
- **Funding Source:** BSEED activities are funded by City Tax dollars.
- **Accountability & Transparency:** BSEED is accountable to the City Council and Mayor.
 - **Meeting Information:** Meetings overseen by BSEED are curated in [this city-wide calendar](#).
 - [Detroit Documenters Notes on BSEED](#)

DETROIT DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION



LINK: [DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION](#)

- **Mission:** The Detroit Department of Transportation (DDOT) is the largest public transit provider in Michigan that serves the City of Detroit, surrounding suburbs, and neighboring cities, including Highland Park and Hamtramck. DDOT prides itself on providing reliable, clean, safe, and efficient service.
- **Key Urban Planning Responsibilities:**
 - Providing public transit options (i.e. bus service) for Detroiters and visitors
 - *Note that the Detroit People Mover is managed by the [Detroit Transportation Corporation](#)
 - Providing paratransit services for Detroiters with special mobility needs
- **Funding Source:** The Department of Transportation activities are funded by City Tax dollars.
- **Accountability & Transparency:** The Department of Transportation is accountable to the City Council and Mayor.
 - **Meeting Information:** The Department of Transportation offers regular public-input meetings, which are posted on [this webpage](#).
 - [Detroit Documenters Notes on the Department of Transportation](#)

DETROIT DEPARTMENT OF NEIGHBORHOODS



LINK: [DEPARTMENT OF NEIGHBORHOODS](#)

- **Mission:** The Department of Neighborhoods seeks to improve the quality of life in every District by directly connecting the City of Detroit with block clubs, community groups, businesses, faith and school leaders, and residents, while combating blight and enhancing neighborhoods.
- **Key Urban Planning Responsibilities:**
 - Creating and engaging with Block Clubs
 - Supporting neighborhood beautification, clean-up, and blight reduction initiatives
 - Supporting neighborhood businesses
- **Funding Source:** The Department of Neighborhoods activities are funded by City Tax dollars
- **Accountability & Transparency:** The Department of Neighborhoods is accountable to the City Council and Mayor
 - **Meeting Information:** Each district's meeting schedules/Zoom links are [posted here](#).
 - [Detroit Documenters Notes on the Department of Neighborhoods](#)



LINK: [DETROIT LAND BANK AUTHORITY](#)

- **Mission:** The Detroit Land Bank Authority’s mission is to return the city’s blighted and vacant properties to productive use.
- **Key Urban Planning Responsibilities:**
 - Facilitating accessible home-ownership programs
 - Auctioning vacant land or blighted homes for renovation and ensuring owner compliance
 - Creating Community-owned spaces with Community Groups or Block Clubs
- **Funding Source:** The Detroit Land Bank Authority is funded by a mixture of sources, including:
 - The donation or sale of properties
 - Federal, State, or private foundation grants
 - Fundraising by the DLBA CDC
 - Investments
 - Loans
- **Accountability & Transparency:** The Detroit Land Bank Authority is accountable to its Board of Directors. The majority of the Board of Directors are appointed by the City’s Mayor and are confirmed by the City Council. The Board of Directors approves the DLBA’s annual budget.
 - **Meeting Information:** Detroit Land Bank Authority meeting schedules are [posted here](#).
 - [Detroit Documenters Notes on the Detroit Land Bank Authority](#)



LINK: [DETROIT BUILDING AUTHORITY](#)

- **Mission:** The Detroit Building Authority (DBA) is responsible for managing large scale capital construction projects and space planning of city-owned facilities, and a portfolio of commercial real estate properties.
- **Key Urban Planning Responsibilities:**
 - Acquire, furnish, equip, own, improve, operate, and maintain city facilities, including parking lots and structures
- **Funding Source:** The Detroit Building Authority's activities are funded by City Tax dollars
- **Accountability & Transparency:** The DBA is overseen by the The Detroit Building Authority Commission, which is appointed by and accountable to the City Council and Mayor
 - **Meeting Information:** The Detroit Building Authority's meetings are posted [here](#).
 - [Detroit Documenters Notes on DBA](#)

DETROIT BROWNFIELD REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY



LINK: [DETROIT BROWNFIELD REDEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY](#)

- **Mission:** The City of Detroit Brownfield Redevelopment Authority (DBRA) was established to promote the revitalization of environmentally distressed and blighted areas within the boundaries of the City of Detroit.
- **Key Urban Planning Responsibilities:**
 - Redeveloping Detroit’s brownfields
 - Offering development **[incentives and reimbursements](#)** for the revitalization of environmentally distressed areas
- **Funding Source:**
 - **[Tax Increment Financing \(TIF\)](#)** capture to reimburse for both environmental and non environmental eligible activities conducted on an eligible property as part of an approved Brownfield redevelopment plan
- **Accountability & Transparency:** The DBRA is governed by its Board of Directors, who receive input from the DBRA Community Advisory Committee (the “DBRA-CAC”). DBRA Board members are appointed by the mayor subject to the consent of City Council.
 - **Meeting Information:** The DBRA’s meetings can be found posted at the bottom of **[this webpage](#)**, or on the Detroit Economic Development Corporation’s events **[calendar](#)**.
 - **[Detroit Documenters Notes on DBRA](#)**



LINK: [DETROIT DOWNTOWN DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY](#)

- **Mission:** The Downtown Development Authority (DDA) supports private investments and business growth through loans, sponsorships and grants, capital improvements to public infrastructure and additional programs designed to increase economic activity.
- **Key Urban Planning Responsibilities:**
 - Facilitate capital improvements to public infrastructure
 - Supports private investments and business growth in downtown areas through loans, sponsorships and grants
- **Funding Source:** Funding for DDA programs comes from a number of sources such as grants, contracts, interest on loans and captured tax increments – increases in property taxes that result from new investments – on approved developments. Property owners within the DDA district pay a 1 mill property tax to fund the basic operation of the DDA.
- **Accountability & Transparency:** The DDA is governed by its Board of Directors who are appointed by the Mayor subject to the consent of Detroit City Council.
 - **Meeting Information:** The DDA’s Board of Directors meetings are listed at the bottom of [this webpage](#).
 - [Detroit Documenters Notes on the Detroit Downtown Development Authority](#)



LINK: [DETROIT HOUSING COMMISSION](#)

- **Mission:** The Detroit Housing Commission’s (DHC) mission has been to provide safe, decent, and affordable housing for the low and moderate-income people that we serve. DHC is the largest owner of rental housing in the City of Detroit (“City”), providing approximately 4,000 housing units for seniors and families.
- **Key Urban Planning Responsibilities:**
 - Developing affordable housing units
 - Operating a Low-Income Public Housing Program
 - Operating a Housing Choice Voucher Program (“Section 8”) through it’s Assisted Housing Department
- **Funding Source:** The Detroit Housing Commission’s activities are funded by City Tax dollars
- **Accountability & Transparency:** Under the Michigan Housing Facilities Act, the Detroit Housing Commission is governed by a five member Board of Commissioners (“Board”). At least one of the Board members must be a resident of public or subsidized housing. The Mayor of the City of Detroit appointed a five member board in accordance with Michigan Law. The Commission now operates as a standard performer governed by the five member board.
 - **Meeting Information:** Meetings for the Detroit Housing Commission are posted on [this calendar](#).
 - [Detroit Documenters Notes on the Detroit Housing Commission](#)

DETROIT HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION



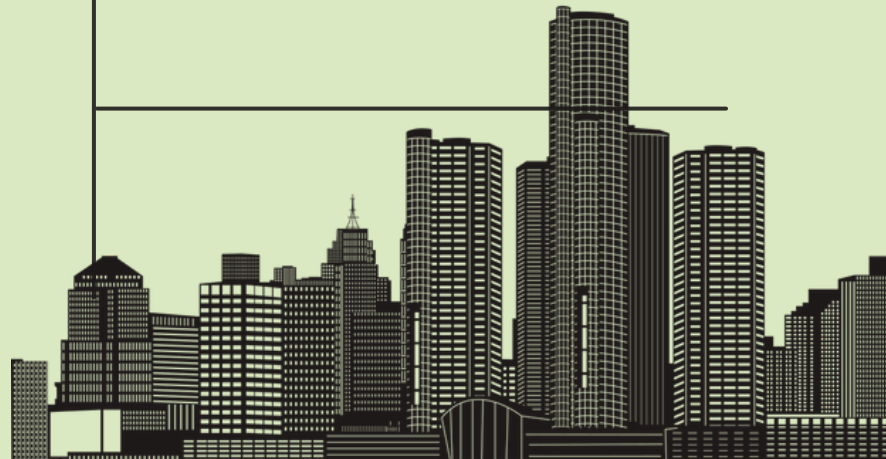
LINK: [DETROIT HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION](#)

- **Mission:** The Detroit Historic District Commission's purpose (HDC) is to ensure the preservation of historically and culturally significant areas of the City which are designated by City Council as [Local Historic Districts](#).
- **Key Urban Planning Responsibilities:**
 - Reviewing and supporting the preservation of landmark buildings or neighborhoods in Detroit
 - Ensuring that changes proposed and applied for in historic districts preserve important historic characteristics and are compatible with the historic building
- **Funding Source:** The Historic District Commission's activities are funded by City Tax dollars
- **Accountability & Transparency:** The Commission is staffed by the City of Detroit Planning and Development Department. Appointed by and accountable to the Mayor, the Commission is composed of seven Detroit residents.
 - **Meeting Information:** Meetings for the Historic District Commission are posted at the bottom of [this webpage](#).
 - [Detroit Documenters Notes on the Historic District Commission](#)

REPORTING ON
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04. DETROIT-BASED JOURNALISM RESOURCES, DATA & TOOLS

NEWSLETTERS, DATA
REPOSITORIES,
INTERACTIVE TOOLS,
& TRAINING
PROGRAMS



URBAN PLANNING RESOURCES FOR COMMUNITY JOURNALISTS



HUNGRY FOR MORE?

There are numerous efforts in and around Detroit to support public information access around local planning initiatives and to bolster community journalism and storytelling. A number of innovative tools have been developed by Detroiters, for Detroiters to facilitate engagement with and accountability around public planning processes. Ranging from full-fledged training programs to interactive datasets, the resources included in this section serve to better equip journalists and residents to participate in the vision and narrative of their community.

RECOMMENDED DETROIT URBAN PLANNING NEWSLETTERS

- **Malachi's City Council Notebook**: Written by *Bridge Detroit* journalist Malachi Barrett, this regular newsletter offers digestible weekly highlights from every single City Council meeting.
- **Detroit Documenters Newsletter**: Curated by community journalists, this newsletter offers a summary of the public meeting notes from the week.
- **SoapBox Detroit**: A running calendar of all of Detroit's public meetings, as well as a directory for all City Departments and key documents such as the City Charter, Ordinances, and more.
- **The Dig**: A weekly newsletter from Outlier Media that highlights stories around housing, real estate development, and Detroiters' interactions with and perspectives around the built environment.
- **Urbanize Detroit Newsletter**: A weekly newsletter documenting key commercial real estate news in Detroit, with neighborhood specific reporting.
- **Detroit Future City Newsletter**: Curated by non-profit Detroit Future City, this monthly newsletter offers updates on the implementation of the Detroit Strategic Framework as well as data and reports surrounding other economic and development happenings.
- **City of Detroit Planning and Development Department Newsletter**: Multiple newsletters are distributed each year as well as regular press releases about local planning happenings.
- **Planet Detroit Weekly News Roundup**: A weekly newsletter highlighting *Planet Detroit's* best health, climate change, and environment news reporting

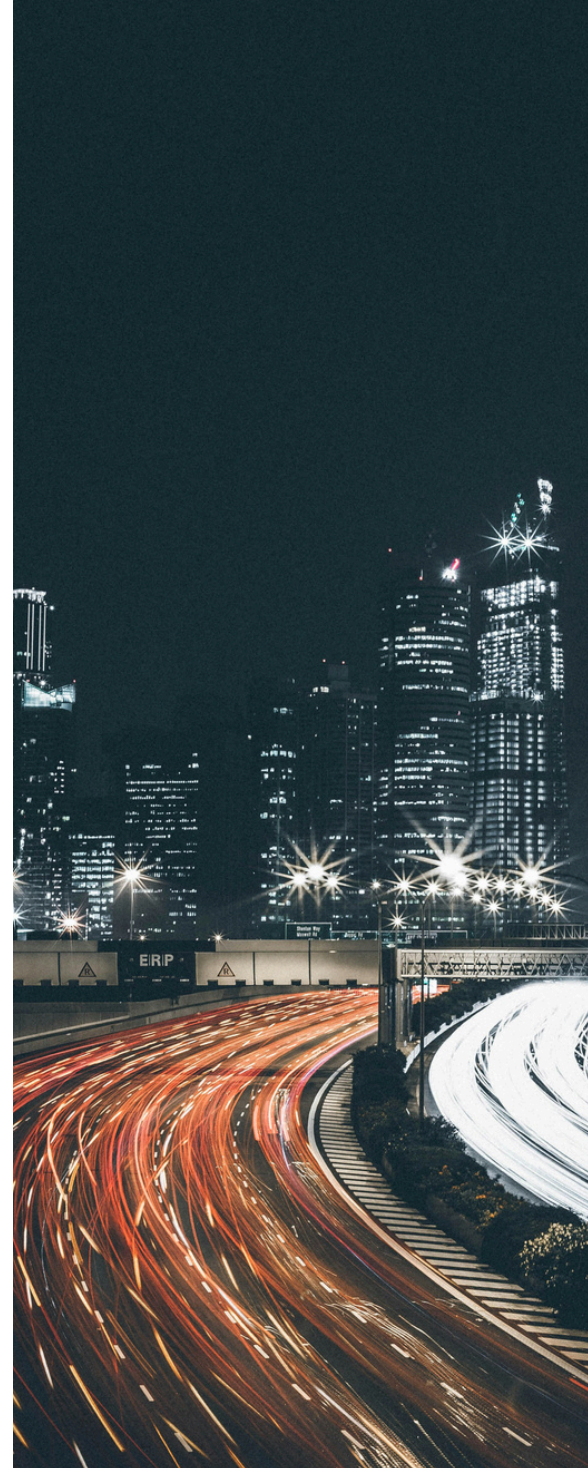
DETROIT DATA REPOSITORIES

- **City Council Agendas and Documents:** The City Clerk's Legislative Information Portal provides online access to all of Detroit City Council's Agenda & Documents through an interactive calendar.
 - **Detroit Documents Page:** Every single document uploaded to the City government website is collected in this searchable repository.
- **Detroit's Open Data Portal:** A free data repository offering public access to valuable data and information concerning City government operations and service delivery. Includes datasets and visualizations across urban planning issues, including Zoning districts, Neighborhood Plans, DDOT plans, Land Use scenarios, and more.
- **Detroit Historical Society:** In its online collections, the Detroit Historical society hosts over 250,000 artifacts representing over 300 years of Detroit's unique history, and is currently engaged in collecting oral histories across Detroit's neighborhoods.
- **City Clerk's Archives and Records:** The Detroit City Clerk's Archives and Records Management Division makes City Council records accessible to citizens and employees for research and inspection. Such records include City Council proceedings, City Charter, Ordinances, and more. An appointment is necessary for obtaining/reviewing copies of archived records.



INTERACTIVE DATASETS AND TOOLS

- **Data Driven Detroit Toolbox:** The worker-owned cooperative Data Driven Detroit (also known as D3) collects, analyzes, interprets, and visualizes high-quality, place-based data to improve public data accessibility and to help inform decision-making processes. In addition to providing a centralized public repository for Detroit's socioeconomic data, D3 also supports journalists' data requests.
 - **Housing Information Portal:** Data and resources supporting key topics around housing in Detroit
 - **Turning the Corner:** Qualitative and quantitative data collection around neighborhood change and community vulnerability to displacement
 - **City Council Districts:** Interactive map of City Council District boundaries
- **Detroit Development Tracker:** Originally developed by *Detour Detroit*, the Detroit Development Tracker is an early-stage interactive mapping tool seeking to track the location and progress of all real estate development projects in Detroit. Users can explore and contribute to additional details around the development, including the property and developer details, the plan for the use and aesthetic of the development, as well as any related news around the development.
- **City of Detroit Parcel Viewer:** Hosted by the City of Detroit, this interactive map allows users to search all property parcels within the City. Clicking on a parcel immediately delivers users with a wide range of information, including the owner/taxpayer of the parcel, the property class and use, the tax status and value of the property, and more.



COMMUNITY JOURNALISM & STORYTELLING TRAINING RESOURCES

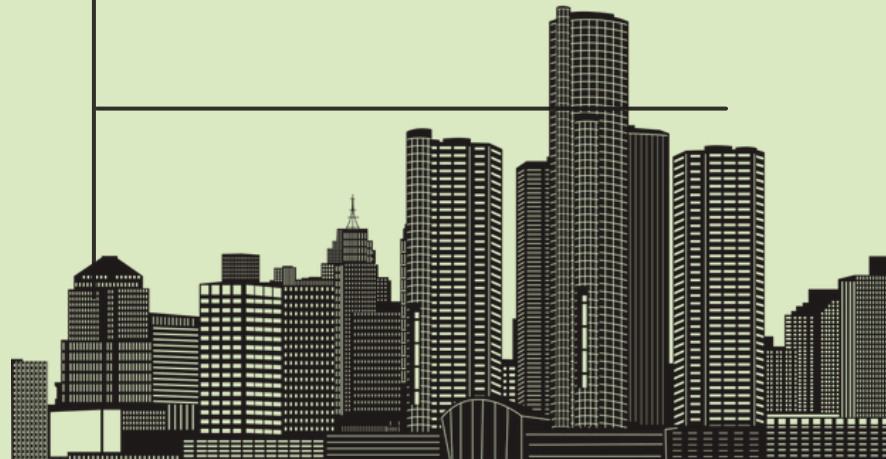
Community members looking for more formal journalism training beyond these introductory resources can explore the following opportunities:

- **[Detroit Documenters](#)**: Supported by Outlier Media, the Detroit Documenters program is a branch of the **[Documenters Network](#)** that trains and pays Detroiters to attend local public meetings and monitor elected officials, in collaboration with local journalists. Notes and tweets created at the meetings are made publicly available, for use by residents and journalists. Detroit Documenters has trained more than 400 people since the site started in 2018 with support from Citizen Detroit and WDET. About 70 Documenters regularly take assignments, and certification training are held regularly throughout the year.
 - Read the work of Detroit Documenters here: **<https://detroit.documenters.org/reporting/>**
 - Sign up to become a Documenter here: **<https://detroit.documenters.org/become-a-documenter/>**
- **[Planet Detroit Neighborhood Reporting Lab](#)**: In partnership with the Detroit Writer’s Room, the Planet Detroit Neighborhood Reporting Lab offers up to 20 Detroiters comprehensive training and mentoring on the reporting process, from identifying a story to honing an angle to research and interviews to crafting your story. Participants who complete and publish a story around health and the environment in their neighborhoods will be offered a \$300 stipend. No experience is required. Classes run on Zoom for 6–weeks in Feb/March.
 - Read the work of published Neighborhood Reporters here: **<https://planetdetroit.org/deep-dive/neighborhood-reporters/>**
- **[The Detroit Writing Room](#)**: Founded in 2019, the Detroit Writing Room is an inspirational space in the heart of Detroit for people to work, write and connect with a community of writers and creatives. The space offers coaching, workshops, and community–building around all types of creative writing, including fiction, non–fiction, podcasts, social media, and more. Photography support is also available. Summer journalism and photojournalism camps are regularly offered for Detroit high school students.
 - Explore the services offered by the Detroit Writing Room here: **<https://www.detroitwritingroom.com/services>**

REPORTING ON
URBAN PLANNING
IN YOUR DETROIT
NEIGHBORHOOD

05. APPENDICES

**KEY TERMS
GLOSSARY,
DEVELOPMENT
FLOW CHARTS, &
FULL PLAYBOOK
METHODOLOGY**



APPENDIX A: KEY TERMS GLOSSARY



Still wondering what you might write about? When asked about the most undertold stories in Detroit, local professional journalists responded with ideas covering housing, land use and development, taxes and financing, and plans for the future of the City.

Voices on the ground are necessary to these planning issues; You might consider how these issues are impacting your own neighborhood or community. Below, find key terms, definitions, and Detroit-based background information around the hottest, most important planning stories that need to be told in 2024 and beyond. These can help serve as an entry point for your stories!

HOT PLANNING TOPICS IN DETROIT

AFFORDABLE
HOUSING

AREA MEDIAN
INCOME (AMI)

BROWNFIELDS

COMMUNITY
BENEFIT
AGREEMENTS (CBA)

DOWNTOWN
DEVELOPMENT
AUTHORITIES (DDA)

LAND BANKS

LAND VALUE TAX

TAX INCREMENT
FINANCING (TIF) OR
TAX CAPTURE

APPENDIX A: HOT PLANNING TOPICS IN DETROIT

Term & Definition	Explainers & Detroit-based Context
<p>Affordable Housing: Housing is considered affordable when your housing costs do not exceed 30% of your household’s monthly income. For renters, these costs include rent and basic utilities (electric, gas and water).¹⁵</p> <p>There are two basic types of affordable rental housing in Detroit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Naturally occurring</u>: This type of housing is not government regulated, but is considered affordable to households at market rate because costs amount to less than 30% of their monthly income. • <u>Regulated</u>: This type of housing is subsidized by government programs to ensure that low-income households do not pay more than 30% of their income on rent, or that rents are restricted at a level that is affordable for low-income households. There are two broad categories of regulated affordable housing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Public Housing: Owned and operated by <u>Detroit Housing Commission</u>. ◦ Other regulated housing: Privately owned, but offer affordable rents for low-income tenants. Eligibility requirements vary with each program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Glossary of Terms to Affordable Housing (U.S. HUD) • Detroit Example: Housing Opportunities For Every Detroiter: Affordable Housing Tour (City of Detroit) • Detroit Example: Affordable Housing Map (City of Detroit) • Detroit Example: Detroit Desperately Seeks an Affordable Housing Plan (<i>Outlier Media</i>)

APPENDIX A: HOT PLANNING TOPICS IN DETROIT

Term & Definition	Explainers & Detroit-based Context
<p>Area Median Income (AMI): A key metric in affordable housing, Area median income is defined as the midpoint of a specific area’s income distribution, meaning that half of the households in a region earn more than the median and half earn less than the median. A household’s income is calculated by its gross income, which is the total income received before taxes and other payroll deductions.</p> <p>This metric is calculated on an annual basis by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, using data from the U.S. Census American Community Survey.¹⁶ In addition to calculating AMI, HUD defines and calculates different levels of AMI for geographic areas across the country by household size:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low-income households earn less than 80% of the AMI • Very low-income households earn less than 50% of the AMI • Extremely low-income households earn less than 30% of AMI <p>These parameters help HUD identify households that are eligible for certain housing assistance programs administered at the federal and local level.¹⁷</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is Area Median Income? (Planetizen Planopedia) • What is Area Median Income (AMI)? (HUD Loans) • Detroit Example: Affordable Housing in Detroit - Understanding Income Restrictions (City of Detroit) • Detroit Example: Who is Eligible for Affordable Housing? (City of Detroit) • Detroit Example: How Rent Is Decided For Detroit’s Affordable Housing (Bridge Detroit)

APPENDIX A: HOT PLANNING TOPICS IN DETROIT

Term & Definition	Explainers & Detroit-based Context
<p>Brownfield: A brownfield is a property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant.¹⁸ Communities often engage in brownfield redevelopment, which involves the cleanup and safe reuse of previously developed and contaminated properties helps to address contamination in the environment, minimize urban sprawl, and revitalize communities through investment, increased tax base, and job creation.¹⁹</p> <p><u>The Detroit Brownfield Redevelopment Authority</u> was established to promote the revitalization of environmentally distressed and blighted areas within the boundaries of the City of Detroit, and negotiate with developers to offer tax incentives to help fund the redevelopment. As of early 2024, the DBRA has facilitated the approval of over 250 plans for Brownfield redevelopment including residential, mixed-use, retail, industrial, office and commercial uses.²⁰ Brownfield redevelopment is accomplished through collaboration, partnerships, compliance assistance and mechanisms of enforcement. The Buildings, Safety Engineering, and Environmental Departments– Environmental Affairs Department (BSEED–EA) actively collaborates with the EPA and the Michigan Department of Environmental, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE), Brownfield Redevelopment Programs as well as private entities and local agencies.²¹</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brownfields Overview and Definition (U.S. EPA) • Housing Policy Library: Brownfields Overview (Local Housing Solutions) • Detroit Example: Brownfield Redevelopment Examples in Detroit (U.S. EPA) • Detroit Example: Detroit Brownfield Redevelopment Authority (Detroit Economic Growth Corporation)

APPENDIX A: HOT PLANNING TOPICS IN DETROIT

Term & Definition	Explainers & Detroit-based Context
<p>Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs): Legally binding contracts negotiated between coalitions of community-based organizations and developers that shape how local development projects contribute to improving the quality of life of nearby residents. When implemented effectively, CBA processes shift power more evenly to ensure the residents most impacted by development projects have a say in the priorities for the new investments.²²</p> <p>Detroit has a Community Benefits Ordinance, which is a law that requires developers of projects of \$75M+ in value or receives \$1M+ in tax abatements or city land sale/transfers to proactively engage with the community to identify community benefits and address potential negative impacts of certain development projects.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Benefit Agreement (The Urban Institute) • Community Benefit Agreements: What Is it, Who Implements It, and Where Is It Working? (All In Cities) • Detroit Example: Community Benefits Ordinance (City of Detroit) • Detroit Example: Fighting for Equity in Development: The Story of Detroit’s Community Benefits Ordinance (Building Movement Project) • Detroit Example: Community Benefits Proposal for \$3B Touted As Biggest Ever in Detroit (<i>Detroit Free Press</i>) • Detroit Example: Community Benefits Proposal for \$3B Touted As Biggest Ever in Detroit (<i>Detroit Free Press</i>)

APPENDIX A: HOT PLANNING TOPICS IN DETROIT

Term & Definition	Explainers & Detroit-based Context
<p>Downtown Development Authorities (DDA): A decision making body enabled by the state designed to help revitalize and be a catalyst in the (re)development of a community’s central downtown district. The DDA provides for a variety of funding options, including millage and tax increment financing, for public improvements in the central downtown district.²³</p> <p><u>Detroit’s DDA</u> supports private investments and business growth through loans, sponsorships and grants, capital improvements to public infrastructure and additional programs designed to increase economic activity. Funding for DDA programs comes from a number of sources such as grants, contracts, interest on loans and captured tax increments – increases in property taxes that result from new investments – on approved developments. Property owners within the DDA district pay a 1 mill property tax to fund the basic operation of the DDA.²⁴</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overview of Downtown Development Authorities and their Usage of TIF (Michigan Economic Development Corporation) • Fact Sheet: Economic Development Tools—Downtown Development Authority (Michigan Municipal League) • Detroit Example: Parking lot owners get an upgrade courtesy of the Downtown Development Authority (Outlier Media) • Detroit Example: NFL Draft Spurs Development Projects in Downtown Detroit (ClickOnDetroit)

APPENDIX A: HOT PLANNING TOPICS IN DETROIT

Term & Definition	Explainers & Detroit-based Context
<p>Land Bank: Land banks are public authorities or non-profit organizations created to acquire, hold, manage, and sometimes redevelop property in order to return these properties to productive use to meet community goals, such as increasing affordable housing or stabilizing property values.²⁵</p> <p><u>The Detroit Land Bank Authority's</u> mission is to return the city's blighted and vacant properties to productive use. Their main initiatives include facilitating accessible home-ownership programs, auctioning vacant land or blighted homes for renovation and ensuring owner compliance, and creating Community-owned spaces with Community Groups or Block Clubs.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing Policy Library: Informational Briefing on the Functioning of Land Banks (Local Housing Solutions) • Land Banks: Revitalizing Blighted Communities (University of Michigan) • Detroit Example: Detroit Land Bank Authority Explainer: 10 Things to Know About Detroit's Largest Landowner (<i>Outlier Media</i>) • Detroit Example: The Detroit Land Bank and Its Many Controversies, Explained (<i>Curbed Detroit</i>)

APPENDIX A: HOT PLANNING TOPICS IN DETROIT

Term & Definition	Explainers & Detroit-based Context
<p>Land Value Tax: A land value tax is an alternative to the typical property tax system, and it administers a levy on the value of unimproved land. It disregards the value of any buildings or improvements, such that the basis of property taxes are solely on the assessed value of land.</p> <p>In cities, towns and counties that use land value taxation, the owner of a vacant lot would owe the same amount of property taxes as the owner of an adjoining identically sized lot that includes a four-story apartment building.²⁶ In this way, the land value tax is intended to encourage the development of underutilized parcels and to make improvements that increase their returns without having to worry about the tax consequences, while discouraging speculative land investment. The land value tax is well suited to established cities and smaller growing cities where there is a need to build new mixed-use infill projects, but high taxes on improvements discourage new development.²⁷</p> <p>Detroit is currently experimenting with a Land Value Tax Plan to replace certain taxes on property improvements (including homes, buildings and other structures).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing Policy Library: Land Value Taxation (Local Housing Solutions) • Land Value Tax Fact Sheet (U.S. DOT) • Detroit Example: The Detroit Land Value Tax Plan (City of Detroit) • Detroit Example: Detroit’s Land Value Tax Plan, Explained (<i>Bridge Detroit</i>) • Detroit Example: Detroit, MI – A Case Study on Taxing Land Instead of Property (Bipartisan Policy Center)

APPENDIX A: HOT PLANNING TOPICS IN DETROIT

Term & Definition	Explainers & Detroit-based Context
<p>Tax Increment Financing (TIF) or Tax Capture: A geographically targeted economic development tool, intended to help finance development projects that would be too costly without subsidy. It captures the increase in property taxes, and sometimes other taxes, resulting from new development, and diverts that revenue to subsidize that development. Here’s the basic idea: A city designates a small geographic area to be redeveloped (a “TIF district”), usually at the request of a corporation or a developer. When that redevelopment happens, property values will go up, and therefore property taxes will be higher. When that happens, the property tax will be broken into two streams. The first stream, tied to the old property value before redevelopment—the so-called “base value”—will continue to go where it always went: schools, roads, parks, fire, sanitation, police etc. But all of the increase in property taxes tied to the increase in value—the so-called “tax increment”—will not go to public services. Instead, it will be diverted to subsidize the TIF district.²⁸</p> <p>Authorities that use “tax capture” in Detroit include the Downtown Development Authority (DDA); the Detroit Brownfield Redevelopment Authority (DBRA); the Local Development Finance Authority (LDFA); and the Eight Mile Woodward Corridor Improvement Authority (EMWCIA)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequently Asked Questions About Tax Increment Financing (Good Jobs First) • WTF is TIF? (<i>Detroit Metro Times</i>) • Overview of Downtown Development Authorities and their Usage of TIF (Michigan Economic Development Corporation) • Detroit Example: Detroit’s Use of Tax Incentives Unlikely to End Soon (<i>Bridge Detroit</i>) • Detroit Example: Future of Health Transformational Brownfield Redevelopment Plan (City of Detroit)

APPENDIX B: PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT FLOW CHARTS



A complex web of bureaucratic processes and decision making bodies guide planning and development in municipalities. However, this web is often obscured or completely inaccessible to community members.

Below, find a series of flow charts and resources documenting the decision making trees and approval processes that guide urban planning in Detroit. You can use these resources to track the current status or next steps of a development project, or to inform your list of interviewees. These resources were developed and shared by the Detroit Department of Planning and Development and the Department of Buildings, Safety Engineering, & Environmental (BSEED).

RESOURCES

"PATHWAY TO PERMIT": PROJECT REVIEW & PERMITTING PROCESS
INCLUDES INFORMATION ABOUT THE ZONING & PERMIT PORTAL, PRELIMINARY
PLAN REVIEW, DESIGN REVIEW, & ONLINE PERMITTING PROCESS

[GOOGLE DRIVE LINK HERE](#)

HIGH LEVEL DEVELOPMENT PROCESS
FLOW CHART DOCUMENTING BASIC STEPS OF THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS,
WITHOUT DETAIL

[GOOGLE DRIVE LINK HERE](#)

COMPREHENSIVE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS
FLOW CHART DOCUMENTING EACH STEP OF THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS IN ITS
ENTIRETY FOR UNIQUE CONTEXTS, INCLUDING ALL STEPS FOR APPROVALS/DENIALS
AND WHAT/WHO IS INVOLVED IN EACH CASE

[GOOGLE DRIVE LINK HERE](#)

APPENDIX C: FULL METHODOLOGY



The Community Journalism Playbook: Reporting on Urban Planning in Your Neighborhood (Detroit) project was carried out in Winter/Spring 2024 and built on an ongoing partnership between the Detroit River Story Lab and local news outlets, including *Planet Detroit*, to develop the journalism writing capacities of interdisciplinary students and community members in the face of disinvestment in local news.

From January 2023 through May 2024, the Detroit River Story Lab piloted the “Pitch Partnership”, which launched the first in a series of self-contained Canvas modules designed to support students in interdisciplinary U-M courses in learning how to translate in-class research into pitches for local area news outlets. The adaptable module takes students through a series of instructional content and activities covering the essential steps involved in developing a compelling journalistic pitch. The Story Lab has supported four U-M instructors in incorporating our new pitch module in their courses and select student pitches have been sent to editors at local newsrooms like *Planet Detroit* and *Bridge Detroit* for development into long form narrative journalism pieces.

Building off of the learnings and success of these student-facing journalism resources, the driving idea behind this community-facing Playbook is (1) to better understand the unique connection between hyperlocal journalism and urban planning; and (2) to use journalism training as a means to transfer power to Detroiters by expanding the diversity of voices narrating and informing public discourse around hyperlocal urban planning problems, solutions, and futures.

The methodological approach to developing this Playbook is documented fully in this section.

INTERVIEWS WITH DETROIT PLANNERS AND JOURNALISTS

The knowledge of Detroit-based urban planners and journalists was integral to shaping the content and development of the Playbook. To begin gathering the knowledge of journalists, I compiled a list of all Detroit-area independent and not-for-profit news outlets, and carefully identified journalists at each outlet who had a defined urban development beat or regularly contributed original reporting about urban planning-adjacent issues. Emails were sent to each journalist briefly documenting the purpose of the project and inviting them to a short interview to inform the development of the content of the Playbook. Similarly, to begin gathering the knowledge of Detroit-based urban planners, I used the City of Detroit directories to identify the names of urban planners working across numerous departments, including the Planning and Development Department, the Housing and Revitalization Department, the Buildings, Safety Engineering and Environmental Department, the Department of Neighborhoods, and the Department of Transportation. I compiled a list of all available email addresses, and emails were sent to each planner briefly documenting the purpose of the project and inviting them to a short interview to inform the development of the content of the Playbook. A staff member from the Planning and Development Department also circulated the request among her colleagues.

Interviews were scheduled with all of whom responded to the invitation, making for a self-selected interview cohort. A total of eight 45-minute Zoom interviews, including five interviews with journalists and three interviews with planners, were conducted to inform the development of this Playbook. The purpose of the interviews as well as the respective sets of interview questions were sent to participants in advance. With the consent of interviewees and the promise to keep all quotes and interview materials anonymous and to share the final deliverables, these interviews were recorded. Below, find the interview questions offered to both categories of participants:

Interview Questions for Detroit-Area Planners

1. What is your organization and your title? How long have you been working in this position?
2. Why is it important for community members to have access to local planning information?/How do you typically incorporate local knowledge into engagement processes?
3. What do you see as the relationship, if any, between urban planning and local journalism?
4. Have you ever engaged with the media and/or local news outlets in your capacity as a planner? (How/why?)
5. To what extent does local journalism help people tell their stories or help you understand diverse perspectives?
6. What are the most essential planning concepts or processes that journalists or citizens publishing in the media should understand to report on planning news in Detroit?
7. Are there any key databases, maps, plans, or other resources that might be helpful for journalists or citizens publishing in the media to know about?
8. What do you think are the most important planning stories in Detroit right now? The most untold stories?

INTERVIEWS WITH DETROIT PLANNERS AND JOURNALISTS (CONT).

Interview Questions for Detroit–Area Journalists

1. What is your affiliated organization(s) and your title? How long have you been working in this position?
2. What do you see as the relationship, if any, between urban planning and local journalism?
3. Why is it important for community members to have access to stories about local planning (i.e. land use decisions, housing affordability and development, infrastructure, transportation, etc.)?
4. Do you think it is important for community members to have ownership over these planning stories, or have the power to tell their own local planning stories?
5. What resources would be most useful for a community–journalist reporting on local planning issues in Detroit? (for example, the Detroit Development Tracker)
6. What are the most essential planning concepts or processes that community–journalists should understand to report on local planning news in Detroit?
7. What do you think are the most important planning stories in Detroit right now? The most undertold stories?
8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

CODING AND DATA ANALYSIS

All interviews were transcribed and anonymized. These transcription files were then broken up by each interview question and all responses were coded for key ideas and recurring themes that would inform the content and development of the Playbook. Notable themes and ideas are documented in this section.

CODING AND DATA ANALYSIS (CONT.)

Connection Between Urban Planning and Journalism

All interviews sought to find interconnections between the work, mission, and needs of urban planners and journalists in Detroit. Throughout these conversations, the following key themes emerged:

- **Opportunities to Elevate, Center, and Animate Community Knowledge:** Urban planners should seek out opportunities to capture the place based histories, lived experience and diverse perspectives of residents to inform planning priorities; however, they may not always have the capacity or the local trust to gather this knowledge. Journalism can help planners holistically understand the places and people they are planning for and with, across space and time. Further, journalism can return power to communities who have not, historically or in modern times, had an equal voice in what happens in their neighborhoods. Some interview quotes demonstrating this point include:
 - *“Planning and development has such an unequal power balance for something that has such an impact on Detroiters, and journalism is one of many but one clear pathway towards, if not leveling, making that power differential and some of the pathways clear for residents ... Despite the power imbalance [between developers, hidden political processes, and community members], if you have information, you can upend the outcome of how you might expect things would turn out [in a project]. And so having information is the only way that people can know that they have an opportunity to share their take, lobby their official, whatever it may be.”* (Detroit–Area Journalist)
 - *“[Local journalism] helps empower [community members] to have a say in the decision making processes before it's too late. Urban planning processes can be really long, drawn out and boring, and I think it helps to have local journalists that are tracking all of these meetings and little things in these years–long processes to keep reminding the community about what decisions are being made, and how that process works, and how they can have a say.”* (Detroit–Area Journalist)
 - *“I think good journalism is essential to me doing my job better. If I'm not informed correctly, I'll walk into neighborhoods where I don't know the whole story. So a lot of that does come from from good journalism.”* (Detroit–Area Planner)
 - *“There are some good Detroit journalism organizations that are good at finding ... stories that illustrate points of tension or points of conflict [across planning projects], and I think those are helpful for us because we need to make sure our work is informed [of contemporary opinions and experiences] and informed of Detroit histories ... journalists are an important part of capturing and educating others around that history ... In some cases, a journalist can go and talk to someone who has that knowledge and what that person is willing to share with a journalist, they're not necessarily willing to share with a City worker.”* (Detroit–Area Planner)

CODING AND DATA ANALYSIS (CONT.)

- **Community Engagement and Outreach:** Urban planners must find effective forms of communication to educate and engage community members around opportunities to, for example, weigh in on ongoing planning projects or to apply for a microgrant. Journalism can help to facilitate this information sharing, communication and participation around planning issues, outside of typical planning engagement strategies (e.g. public meetings, collaborative planning charrettes, etc.) that may not be accessible to all community members impacted by an issue or project. Some interview quotes demonstrating this point include:
 - *"In the context of Detroit, first and foremost, I think local journalism can be one of our most useful forms of outreach."* (Detroit–Area Planner)
 - *"It is important [for community members to have access to local planning stories] because it impacts their daily lives. ... It's important to be able to not only relate to readers who are experiencing issues like the housing affordability crisis, but also to translate to readers what a housing affordability crisis looks like. It is easy to throw around numbers, for example, around area median income, but they don't really mean anything if you don't explain it to people ... It's all about context setting and ... breaking down some of the jargon."* (Detroit–Area Journalist)
 - *"I see the relationship between [urban planning and journalism] being like that connector piece to residents, who may not have the time or capacity in another sense to attend meetings that are related to planning efforts, or you know, whether it's a matter of attending the meetings, or just having a more condensed understanding of what's happening without having to read through technical documents."* (Detroit–Area Journalist)
- **Transparency and Accountability:** Urban planners should promote transparency of plans and projects to the communities that will be impacted by them; Good journalism can improve the accessibility of such information and data, and help to hold urban planners accountable to the well-being of the communities they serve, and truly assess the impacts of plans and projects. Some interview quotes demonstrating this point include:
 - *"It is important [for community members to have access to stories about local planning] because it adds the transparency that you, a lot of times, don't get from local government who are enabling such projects ... It allows people to make better, informed decisions. When the City or planners are hosting community meetings, and it is not clear whether or not these meetings are happening in ways that are truly equitable, [local planning journalism] is important because it provides people the information in a time-sensitive way, and as a result they can organize around their Block Club, their neighborhood groups ... to show up to these meetings informed and able to advocate for themselves however they may need to."* (Detroit–Area Planner)

CODING AND DATA ANALYSIS (CONT.)

- *"Local journalism is really important for urban planning because agencies will say that they've done public outreach, and then there will be 15 or 30 people at a meeting. It's important for journalists to be there to question how they're doing that outreach and to hold them accountable, and to just get the word out, because a lot of people don't hear about stuff until there is a news article."* (Detroit–Area Journalist)
- *"There's certainly also an element of accountability when it comes to local journalism and planning in Detroit ... some of the better journalists will take us to task and they'll be trying to understand how residents interface with our program, and ... the stumbling blocks that we've tried to work through ... And we read the news about our own our own programs, and it flags something for us."* (Detroit–Area Planner)
- **Crafting Positive Community Narratives:** Urban planners regularly contribute to small-scale community projects that enhance the aesthetics of and quality of life within neighborhoods, but do not always have the capacity or resources to tell these stories. Journalists can help to fill this gap and support the celebration of planning successes in communities, thereby promoting a positive narrative within the City. Some interview quotes demonstrating this point include:
 - *"A lot of times as a planner, I'm very immersed in my work and troubleshooting issues, making sure that our progress and milestones are met, and engaging and talking with people all the time. So sometimes just being able to communicate successes, communicating progress, communicating achievements and benchmarks and all that great stuff gets lost, because that requires a special niche role ... I think just having some dedicated capacity to storytelling ... serves both as a way to get the information out, celebrate success, but also evaluation. It helps us to understand if what we're doing is still being received."* (Detroit–Area Planner)
 - *"I think we're very familiar with what isn't working, but...we're way less informed about what [planning projects] are going well, and what is happening that we're enjoying, and what we want to see more of, or celebrating those successes because they don't have a PR person, or because they may not be tech or internet savvy. [Planning projects] don't always have a mechanism in which to share their progress and their successes."* (Detroit–Area Planner)

CODING AND DATA ANALYSIS (CONT.)

Urban Planning Journalism: Identified Resource Needs

All interviewed planners and journalists shared ideas as to what might be most useful to include in this Playbook to support community members in telling urban planning stories. Ideas included:

- Accessible educational materials/training curriculums
- Resources distinguishing between different planning bodies' responsibilities (i.e. org charts and power mapping)
- Flow charts demystifying the planning process
- Compilation of existing planning reporting and data depositories
- Resources clarifying complex planning jargon (particularly around key planning issues in Detroit)

PROJECT SCOPING

This collective interview data affirmed the purpose of this project and the value of community journalists in telling urban planning stories about the places they call home. After coding and analyzing the interview data, the identified resource needs were assessed and adapted for feasibility in terms of the time and resources available for this Professional Project. The final project scope was narrowed to encapsulate the contents of this Playbook.

EDUCATIONAL CONSULTING AND COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

Prior to writing this Playbook, comprehensive research was conducted on the content, design, and pedagogical approach of existing journalistic curriculums. Throughout the [Detroit River Story Lab's](#) Pitch Partnership pilot, I facilitated conversations with campus partners to seek best practices and gather feedback around the development of journalistic curriculums. This series of conversations included cross-disciplinary faculty members, journalists, the Wallace House Center for Journalists, the Ginsberg Center, the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching, and local journalism organizations including *Planet Detroit* and *Bridge Detroit*. This series of educational consulting and feedback acquisition informed the pedagogical approach, module content, and final implementation of the Pitch Partnership's student-facing pitch modules, and consequently, this Playbook's journalism training resources.

DRAFT WRITING, RESOURCE COMPILATION, AND REVISION

Over the course of several weeks, the draft Playbook was written using a combination of journalism curriculum research, online educational resources, and interview data. In addition to the original research and written content represented in the Playbook, a portion of the Playbook's materials includes a compilation of existing Detroit-based planning resources (i.e. glossary of key planning terms; planning-related datasets; depositories for planning-related meeting minutes) and journalism resources (e.g. high quality planning journalism; existing planning newsletters; information about community-journalism training programs). Significant time was spent researching, collecting, and organizing these resources to ensure clarity and ease of access to readers of this Playbook.

All interviewees, project clients, and project supervisors were given the opportunity to review and provide feedback on a detailed outline and/or the full draft of the Playbook. This feedback was reviewed and carefully implemented into the final document.

IMPLEMENTATION: SHARING THE PLAYBOOK

Upon its completion, this Playbook is intended to be shared publicly with educators and students, activists, writers, local nonprofits, and community-led news organizations. Hands-on community workshops will be offered upon request to aspiring journalists looking to implement the information outlined in this Playbook. Further, the Detroit River Story Lab intends to publicize this resource on its website and share it widely with its partner Detroit-based storytelling organizations.

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