JUNE 2024

THE BELTLINE, POLITICS AND AI

Joy Victor and Brandeis Marshall
DataedX Group, LLC

TABLE OF CONTENTS

5% ASIAN

48% BLACK

39% WHITE

6.4M ATL METRO

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over $700 million in public and private sector funds have been invested in the Atlanta BeltLine since its inception in 2005. This urban development project has created 16 miles of new permanent trails, 315 acres of new and renewed parks and green spaces, over 396 acres of remediated brownfields, as of 2021.

John Spink / ajc.com

These gains have come at a cost, especially in terms of housing affordability and household economies in the predominantly Black neighborhoods affected by the Atlanta Beltline.

Our project examines and critiques the interlocking historical, political, and technical aspects of the city's data quality management in relation to the Atlanta Beltline, a former railroad turned mixed-use path that encircles the city. It is a "network public parks, multi-use trails, transit, and affordable housing along a historic 22-mile railroad corridor". We look to evaluate output requirements used in decision-making and policy creation in relation to the city's race and gender demographics, especially in the southwest region of the city. We intend to contextualize these aspects and showcase the hidden consequences of the Atlanta Beltline.

DataedX Group specifically wanted to identify historically Black neighborhoods in relation to the Atlanta Beltline's West End Trail Development, which has a majority Black population. We thought it would be an easy endeavor but our findings were unsettling.

Although the Atlanta Beltline work is commendable, their documentation erases the intricate enslavement history and transportation hub origins of the city. For instance, the Atlanta Beltline is divided into the North, South, East End and West End Trails.

The West End neighborhood is a historically Black area known for its vibrant community and cultural significance. In contrast, the West End Trail on the Atlanta Beltline is a pathway that runs through part of this neighborhood as well as others, serving as a recreational and transportation corridor that links different parts of the city.

The West End Trail fails to connect directly to the historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) that are located in the heart of the West End neighborhoods.

Our experiences with the city's data opaqueness surrounding the Atlanta Beltline activities has led us to center data transparency strategies, practices, and policies. We've decided to make our "inaccurate" data public on Kaggle.

A Year's Overview

INTRODUCTION

In 2023, DataedX Group researchers set out on a journey to examine the interlocking history and political aspects of the Atlanta Beltline, an urban development project based in Atlanta, Georgia. The Atlanta BeltLine project's roots can be traced back to 1999. It began as a master's thesis by Georgia Tech student Ryan Gravel, proposing the transformation of a 22-mile abandoned railroad corridor into a multi-use trail and transit system.

The Atlanta Beltline encircles the core of the downtown Atlanta area. The Eastside Trail, Westside Trail, Northside Trail, and Southside Trail, among others, are intended to collectively enhance connectivity and access across the city. It repurposes former railroad corridors into trails for walking, biking, and transit, connecting neighborhoods, promoting alternative transportation, and creating recreational space.

DataedX Group specifically wanted to identify historically Black neighborhoods in relation to the Atlanta Beltline's West End Trail Development, which has a majority Black population. We thought it would be an easy endeavor but our findings were unsettling.

The West End neighborhood is particularly important to us due to its history. The West End, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, is one of the oldest areas outside of downtown Atlanta. For generations, it has served as a bubbling hub for the Black community. 91% of West End residents identify as Black (Statistical Atlas, 2018). It is also home to four Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that continue to empower bright minds. Atlanta University, founded in 1865, was the oldest historically-Black graduate institution. Morehouse College, founded in 1867, is the only historically-Black college for men.
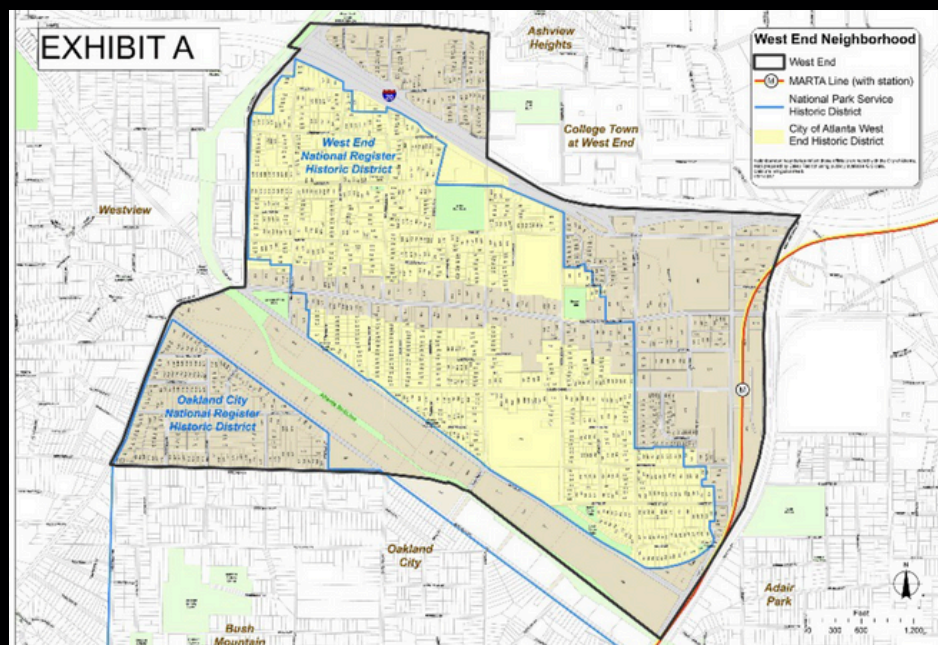
Clark College, founded in 1869, was the first historically-Black liberal arts college. Clark College and Atlanta University later merged to form Clark Atlanta University in 1988. Morris Brown College, founded in 1881, is a coeducational historically-Black liberal arts college with an emphasis on leadership, management, entrepreneurship and technology. And Spelman College, also founded in 1881, is one of two historically-Black colleges for women. The West End is the birthplace of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, a visionary leader and activist, along with being the home of other Black leaders such as Julian Bond, Xernona Clayton Brady, Maynard Jackson Jr., Alonzo Herndon, Hosea Williams and Andrew Young Jr.

The West End Trail Development, however, stretches nearly 2.5 miles – from Rose Circle Park on White Street, through Gordon White Park, and on to Westview Cemetery. Rose Circle Park, Gordon White Park and Westview Cemetery are 1.4-2.0 miles from the four HBCUs that are in the heart of the West End neighborhood.

While parts of other area institutions, Georgia Institute of Technology and Georgia State University, are located in close proximity to the Atlanta Beltline access points and benefit from also being near the public railway transit station. The urban development, as a result, expanded around Georgia Institute of Technology and Georgia State University. But the West End Trail Development has experienced loss of affordable housing, increased cost of living, cultural erosion and loss of small businesses even though it was one of the first trails completed by the Atlanta Beltline Inc. in 2016. The West End neighborhood urban development continues to struggle. For instance, the plan to revitalize The Mall West End, two blocks from four HBCUs, has failed for a third time as of October 2023 (Green, 2023). The disparities observed in our physical world cut across both socioeconomic and ethnic lines show up in our digital one.

A Year's Overview

UNEQUAL GROUND: UNVEILING DISPARITIES IN THE ATLANTA REGION

Despite the undeniable historical significance of the West End, it still faces challenges embedded in systemic racial bias. These biases manifests throughout the social, economical, political and civic landscape. Let's take car insurance disparities as an example.

Our Car Insurance demonstration explores the complexities of car insurance disparities within the Atlanta region, specifically focusing on the experiences of residents in the West End. The insights from the demonstration highlight the disproportionate cost of insurance in the West End in comparison to other metro Atlanta areas. This hinders residents in the West End from getting access to affordable and fair car insurance options.

ATLANTA DIVIDED

To kick-start conversations, the DataedX team collected car insurance data to visualize the average annual car insurance cost mainly in Fulton County Georgia. We sourced our information from websites like carinsurance.com (Car Insurance, 2023) and autoinsurance.org (Auto Insurance, 2023), where we compiled rates for a specific profile: a 25-year-old single female student with a clean driving record and over four years of continuous insurance coverage, driving a 2015 Kia Optima.

During our analysis, we noticed discrepancies in the insurance quotes; for instance, the annual rates by ZIP code from Car Insurance Comparison and Auto Insurance typically varied by $3,o00 to $4,000 yearly. To address these variations, we went the data from carinsurance.com, since it represented the average yearly insurance costs in Atlanta. Our final dataset included yearly insurance costs for forty-five ZIP codes (like 30314, 30332, 30144, 30060, and 30303) in Atlanta based on our demographic profile near major institutions like Georgia State University, Georgia Institute of Technology Spelman College and Morehouse College.

The result of this Tableau visualization shows an implicit boundary line where car insurance rates change. This implicit boundary line is the I-20 highway going west-east of Atlanta. Below the I-20 highway, where the majority of residents are Black (91% of West End residents identify as Black (Statistical Atlas, 2018).)

We found that the average yearly car insurance cost is higher in the southern areas compared to the northern areas along I-20. Specifically, the ZIP code 30459 in the south has an insurance cost of $2,556, while the ZIP code 30350 in the north, located in Fulton County, has a cost of $2,088.

$1,896

Average yearly car insurance cost for the zip code 30144 (Cobb County), a northern county in the Atlanta metropolitan region
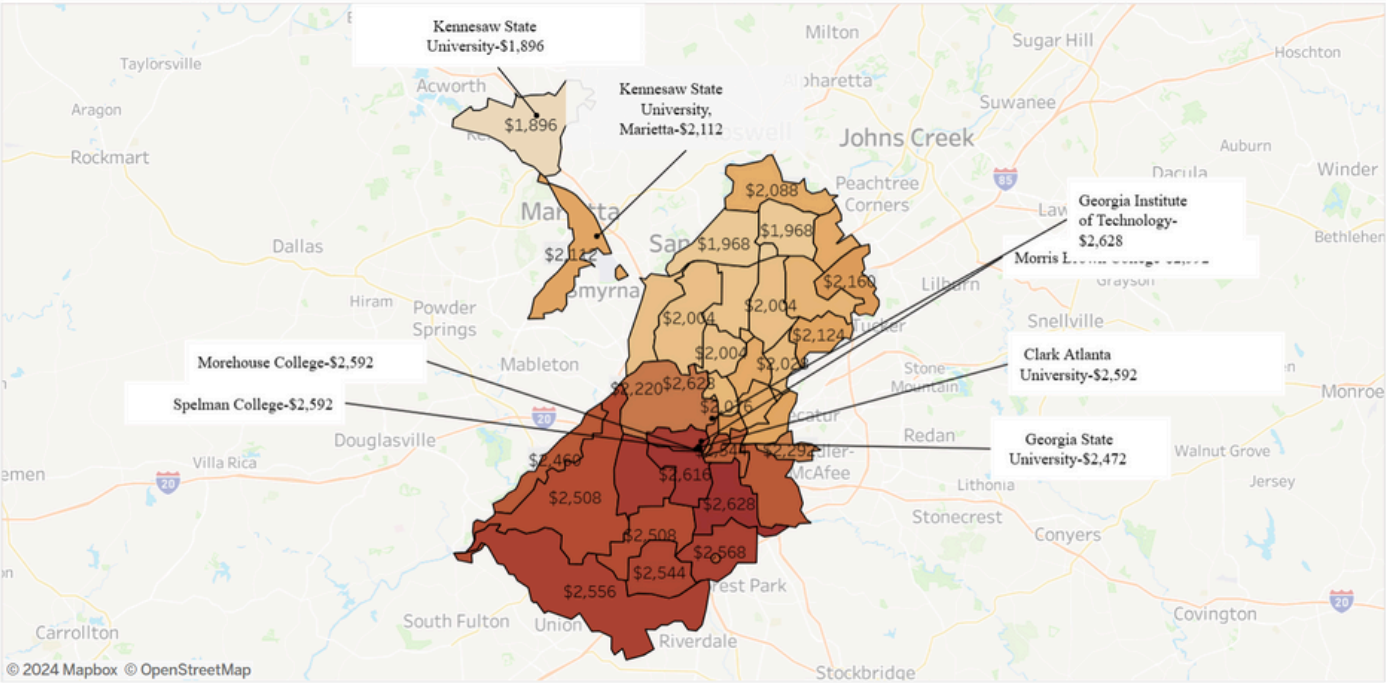
$2,088

Average yearly car insurance cost for the zip code 30350 (Fulton County), the county containing the city of Atlanta

$2,556

Average yearly car insurance cost for the zip code 30459 (Bulloch County), a southern county in the Atlanta metropolitan region

AIAI Network Kickoff | anchoring story by DataedX Group Learn

Average Annual Rates
$1,896 $2,628

Kennesaw State University-$1,896

Kennesaw State University, Marietta-$2,112

Georgia Institute of Technology-$2,628

Morehouse College-$2,592

Clark Atlanta University-$2,592

Spelman College-$2,592

Georgia State University-$2,472

$2,088
$1,968
$1,968
$2,112
$1,968
$2,160
$2,004
$2,004
$2,124
$2,004
$2,024
$2,220
$2,628
$2,016
$2,292
$1,616
$2,460
$2,508
$2,628
$2,508
$2,568
$2,544
$2,556

© 2024 Mapbox © OpenStreetMap

(DataedX Group, 2023)

This makes the southern insurance cost $468 more than the northern, which is an 18.31% increase. Additionally, the northernmost point on I-20 according to the map is in ZIP code 30144 in Cobb County, where the yearly insurance cost is $1,896. This is $660 less than the southern cost, a difference of about 25.82% (DataedX Group, 2023).

Upward of the I-20 highway, where the majority of residents are White, the average annual car insurance cost was generally lower.

Even though race nor income were asked, both are implied and embedded in the car insurance rates. If you compare this map to census data about the racial demographics of the Atlanta metro area, the algorithmic discrimination becomes plain and clear.

This is just one example of why history, culture, and context matter for the design and deployment of AI systems, but it's one with very real stakes for everyone in Atlanta. The bewildering results from the Car Insurance Project prompted us to examine the interlocking history and political aspects of the Atlanta Beltline. What secrets does the Beltline hold? How does the Beltline and its history affect AI systems?

By exploring the unique history and context of the West End, we can better understand the existing disparities and work towards a future where every community thrives and receives equitable treatment.
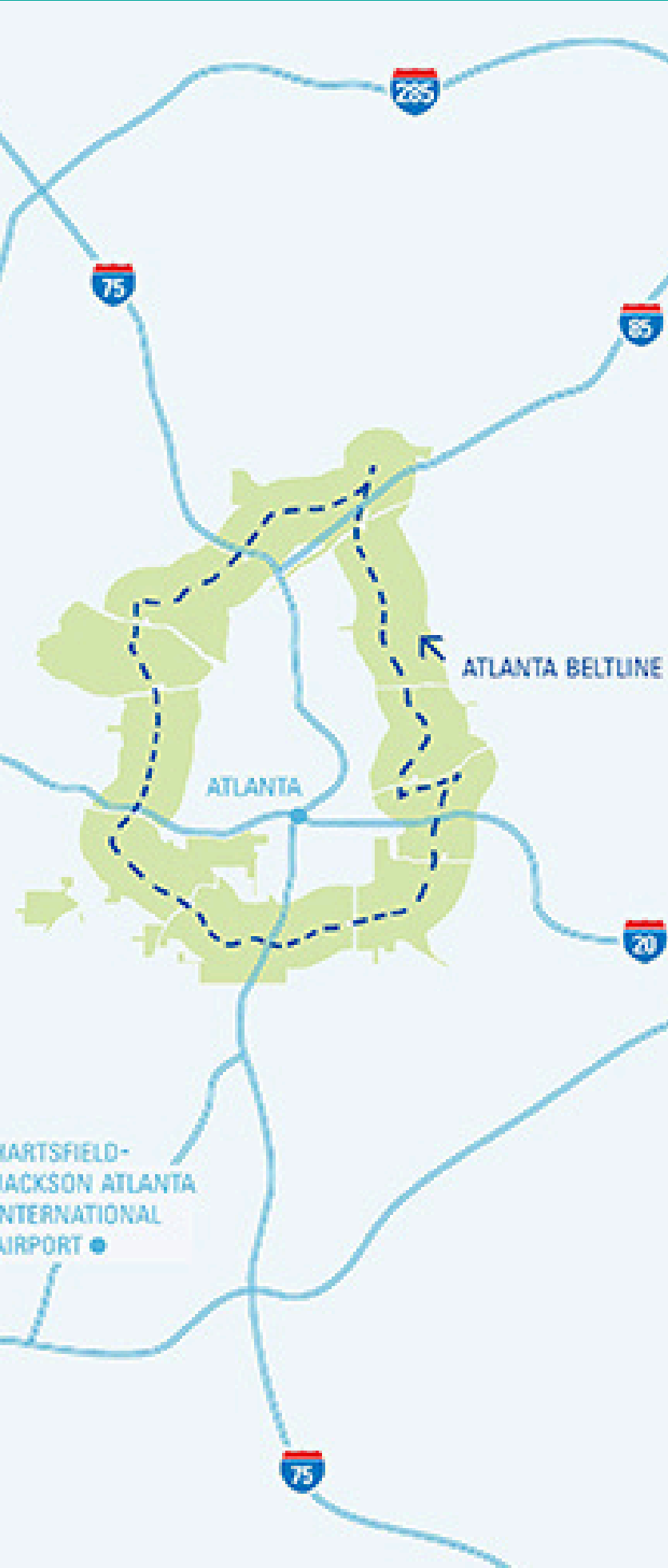
HOW THE BELTLINE FAILED US

The Atlanta Beltline project truly gained momentum in 2005 with the formation of the Atlanta BeltLine Partnership and the city council's approval of the Redevelopment Plan and the Tax Allocation District (TAD), which became the main source of funding for the project.

The project is estimated at $4.8 billion with a timeline of 25 years. It currently covers Fulton, DeKalb, and Atlanta counties. Over 50% of the 22-mile loop is complete, with various sections open to the public for walking, biking, and enjoying greenspace.

Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. (ABI) oversees all aspects of planning, developing, and execution of the Atlanta BeltLine project. (Atlanta Beltline, 2024) For several years, they have done a great job of making Atlanta a global beacon for equitable, inclusive, and sustainable life. They are also quite transparent in their process.

Although their work is commendable, their documentation of the Atlanta Beltline project started in 2005. This completely erases the intricate history of the Beltline.

Atlanta's rise as a commercial hub started in the 1830s with the construction of the Georgia Railroad, which connected the city to nearby Madison. This sparked a railway boom, attracting other lines like the Macon and Western and the West Point and Atlanta. These railroads didn't form a loop around the city but rather functioned as spokes radiating outward, facilitating trade and solidifying Atlanta's position as a major transportation center by the early 1900s.

As transportation modes evolved, the BeltLine gradually fell out of favor in the mid-20th century. With the decline of freight rail, the tracks became largely abandoned and neglected. The surrounding neighborhoods, including West End, faced economic hardship and disinvestment.
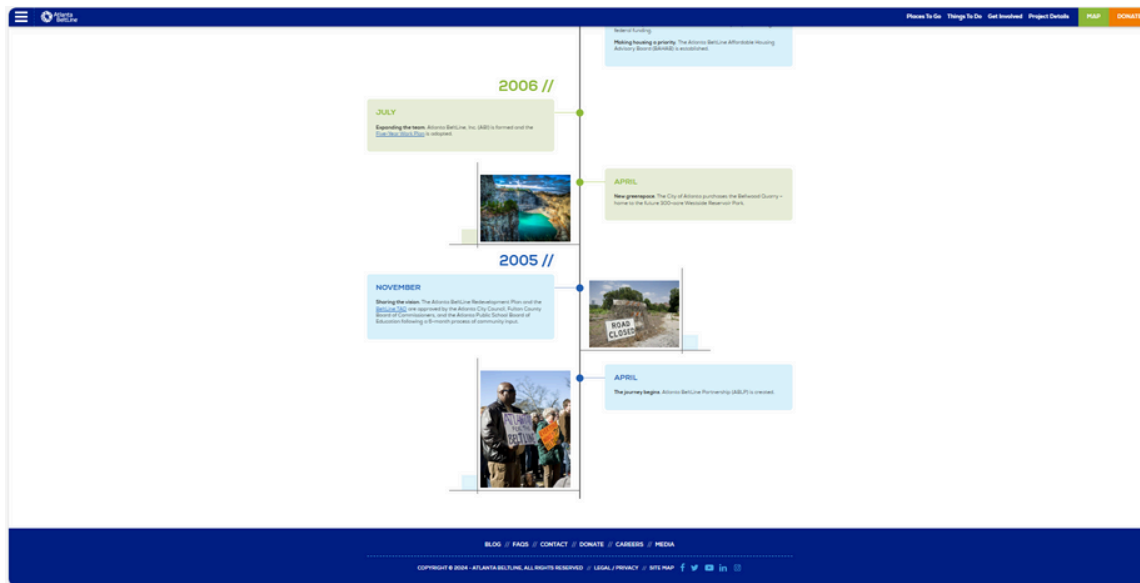
(Atlanta Beltline, 2024)

For a rail system that dates back to the 1800s, we expected ABI to have this information readily available on its website. The Atlanta Beltline is an important part of the history of Atlanta and this rich history should be preserved.

It's important to clarify the difference between the West End neighborhood and the Atlanta Beltline's West End Trail, as they are commonly confused. The West End neighborhood is a historic area known for its vibrant community and cultural significance. In contrast, the West End Trail on the Atlanta Beltline is a pathway that runs through part of this neighborhood as well as others, serving as a recreational and transportation corridor that links different parts of the city.

The West End neighborhood in Atlanta is larger and more expansive than the West End Trail, which is part of the Atlanta Beltline. This trail runs through parts of the West End neighborhood, among other areas, but does not cover the entire neighborhood. While the trail is a key feature within the neighborhood, it represents only a portion of the larger West End area, which extends beyond the boundaries of the trail itself. This distinction helps in understanding how the Beltline interacts with the local communities it passes through, integrating into the urban fabric of Atlanta while maintaining the unique identities of the neighborhoods like West End.

A Year's Overview

OUR FIRST FAILURE

Finding relevant data online proved to be unfruitful. Sending emails to ABI representatives also garnered no response. Seeing we failed to get a response after several attempts, we resorted to publicly available data. We had a crystal clear vision of the dataset we needed. We wanted a dataset containing neighborhoods the Atlanta Beltline cuts through (from the origin of the project to date), their population history, political voting districts, and congressmen representing these districts.

Although we couldn't get the dataset from a single source, we were more than happy to obtain it from multiple sources. We settled for data from the United States House of Representatives website (Georgia General Assembly, 2023), United States Postal Service (USPS, 2023), Plural (Plural Policy, 2023), ZipDataMaps (ZipDataMaps, 2023), and Keen Team Real Estate (Keen Team Real Estate, 2023) to curate our dataset.

The US House of Representatives website provides information about congressmen in the Beltline area. The United States Postal Service shares zip code information about neighborhoods affected by the Beltline. The Plural dataset maps the Beltline area to their associated congressmen. ZipDataMaps gives zip code and geospatial data about neighborhoods. The RealSource Brokers shares data on the neighborhoods in the Beltline affected regions.

This problem manifests itself in several forms. Another example is discovering that neighborhoods existed in different parts of Atlanta with the same name. This was challenging to differentiate.

These different data sources had contradictory data on their websites. For example, Adair Park is a neighborhood in the Beltline with a unique ZIP Code. ZipDataMaps shows the ZIP Code of Adair Park in the Beltline while RealSource Brokers shows Adair Park with a different ZIP code, situated far away from the Beltline.

A Year's Overview

DATA VALIDATION GONE WRONG

When data is collected from secondary sources, verifying such data becomes a top priority. This groundbreaking project must rely on credible, reliable, and citable data. After curating our dataset, we reached out to experts for guidance. These experts had in-depth information on Atlanta's history and the history of the Beltline project.

The first set of experts took a look at our dataset and gave feedback. They highlighted some neighborhoods we missed that cut through the Atlanta Beltline. We added the said neighborhoods and we got an "all clear" instruction to move ahead with the project.

Passionate to tell a story on the Beltline project with the data, we set sail. We came up with compelling data visualizations to tell the untold story of the Beltline project. Before publishing the data visualizations to the public, we presented them to a new set of experts.

Given the erasure of the geographical segregation of the metropolitan Atlanta area, identifying the historical and existing predominantly Black neighborhoods proved more challenging than anticipated. Some of the neighborhoods remained in tact while others had been reduced or experiencing gentrification.

We confirmed the following Black neighborhoods through our research:

- Ashview Heights
- Bankhead
- Capitol View
- Capitol View Manor
- Cascade Heights
- Chosewood Park
- Edgewood
- Grant Park
- Just Us
- Mozley Park
- Oakland City
- Old Fourth Ward
- Peoplestown

However, we only became aware of the following predominately Black neighborhoods by asking local Atlanta residents:

- Mechanicsville
- Summer Hill

As you can guess from the subheading above, it went wrong. One of the experts said, "Unfortunately, wherever you got this data from, it is incorrect." Those words were heartbreaking, to say the least—months of relentless hard work, down the drain. However, we took consolation in the fact that we did not publish inaccurate information.

Pubic Interest
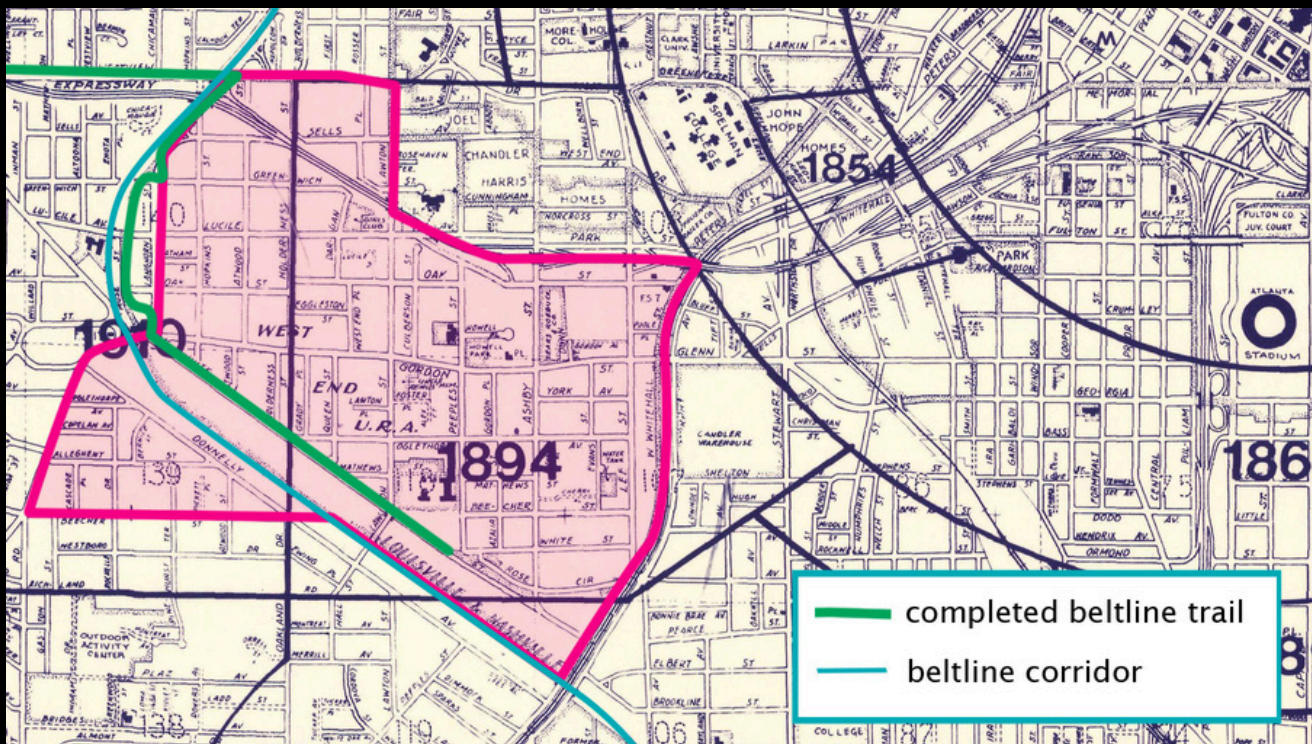
THE BELTLINE, POLITICS AND AI

Our experiences with data opaqueness has led us to center data transparency strategies, practices and policies. We're curious to uncover how decisions are and were made with respect to the West End neighborhoods along with if/how algorithms played a role in making those decisions. We're looking for data at the regional and county levels of state governments to shed light.

Though the nightmare of this failure still haunts us, we are resolved to tell the story of the interlocking history and political aspects of the Atlanta Beltline. You might be wondering what your role is in this. It's quite simple actually.

We have decided to make our "inaccurate" data public for collaborators like you to verify and contribute to the data. This data is currently publicly available on Kaggle. We urge you to look at the data and highlight any inaccuracies you notice in Kaggle's discussion room. Feel free to share credible resources or request to be a collaborator on the Kaggle dataset.

More information on how to participate is available on Kaggle. You can also reach out to any of the team members by sending an email to publicinterest@dataedx.com. We can't wait to have you as a collaborator on this project.

completed beltline trail
beltline corridor

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REPORT AUTHORS

Joy Victor is a Data Analyst and AI Ethics Wingwoman. She leads data analysis for AIAI Network's Public Interest AI project, critiquing Atlanta's data quality management. She also contributes to the Rebel Tech Newsletter, a space to evaluate tech algorithms, processes, and systems. When she's not "wingwomaning" for AI ethics, she's leading communities like AI + Tableau TUG, reading a good book, or watching anime.

Brandeis Marshall, Ph.D. is founder and CEO of DataedX Group. Under her leadership, DataedX Group helps leaders, across sectors and industries, clarify their data ethics and strategy approaches in order to align their people, processes, practices, and policies. She speaks and writes on how to move slower and build better people-first tech.

REFERENCES

1. AIAI Network. (2023). *Atlanta Interdisciplinary Artificial Intelligence Network.* https://www.aiai.network/public-interest-ai/

2. Atlanta Beltline. (2024, May). https://beltline.org/

3. Atlanta Beltline. (2024). *Atlanta Beltline Timeline*. [Image]. https://www.atlantabeltline.org

4. Auto Insurance. (2023, August 31). *Insurance Quotes Now* [Data set]. https://auto.insurancequotes-now.com/form/

5. Car Insurance. (2023, September 5). *Get Quotes* [Data set] https://getquotes.carinsurance.com

6. DataedX Group. (2023, October). *DID YOU KNOW? If you live below I-20 in Atlanta, you'll pay more for Car Insurance? The DataedX team presented* [Thumbnail with link attached] [Post]. LinkedIn. https://www.linkedin.com/posts/dataedx_did-you-know-if-you-live-below-i-20-in-atlanta-activity-7121133970804658176-GlDY/

7. Georgia General Assembly. (2023). *House of Representatives* [Data set]. https://www.legis.ga.gov/members/house

8. Green, Josh. (2023, October 16). *Plans for Mall West End redevelopment fail for third time.* https://atlanta.urbanize.city/post/mall-west-end-plans-redevelopment-fails-third-time

9. Keen Team Real Estate. (2023, November). *Atlanta Beltline Neighborhoods Map* [Data set]. https://www.realsourcebrokers.com/atlanta-beltline-neighborhoods-map/

10. Plural Policy. (2023, November). *Find your Local Legislator* [Data set]. https://pluralpolicy.com/find-your-legislator/

11. Statistical Atlas. (2018). *Race and ethnicity in West End, Atlanta, Georgia.* https://statisticalatlas.com/neighborhood/Georgia/Atlanta/West-End/Race-and-Ethnicity

12. USPS. (2023, November 3). *Look Up a ZIP Code* [Data set]. https://tools.usps.com/zip-code-lookup.htm?byaddress#page-10

13. ZipDataMaps. (2023, November). *Atlanta, Georgia Neighborhoods* [Data set]. https://www.zipdatamaps.com/neighborhoods/georgia/city/map-of-atlanta-neighborhoods

About Us

WHO WE ARE

At DataedX Group, we believe that - data ethics is accessible and implementable. You can build responsible data practices that'll align people, processes, practices and policies. We help our clients, across sectors and industries, clarify their data strategy in order to align people, processes, practices and policies. We're intentional in centering ethics in the data industry as well as championing data literacy efforts in organizations.

The AIAI Network believes that an equitable, ethical, and justice-oriented approach to AI is possible when humanistic ways of thinking come together with technical knowledge and community expertise. The network aims to bring the city of Atlanta with its historical place in civil rights movements, to current conversations about the biases embedded in our AI systems.

AIAI@DATAEDX.COM | DATAEDX.COM