

Connecting Entrepreneurial Communities Conference

June 25-26, 2026, Courtland, Kansas

Thursday, June 25 – Rotation Session Summaries

Rotation Session 1

1. ***Banking on Small Businesses***

11:00AM – 11:45 AM

Presented by Tanner Johnson, Chairman of the Community Bankers Association of Kansas

How banks look at small businesses to evaluate risk and make lending decisions. Learn what's important in a business plan and how you operate your business to make it easy for your bank to work with you.

2. ***No Chamber, No Problem: The Rise of Community-Driven Growth***

11:00AM – 11:45AM

Presented by Sara Bloom, Quality Places Director for the Kansas Department of Commerce

Discover how communities can succeed without relying on formal structures like a chamber of commerce, drawing on the Kansas Community Empowerment Program and its proven success for over 50 years. By focusing on grassroots leadership, collaboration, and individual initiative, it shows how everyday people can drive meaningful change. Attendees will learn practical ways to empower themselves and others, build momentum, and create sustainable success from within. Strong communities are built by engaged individuals working together toward a shared vision. Everyone can be empowered to make a difference!

3. ***Mastering Cash Flow: The Key To Small Business Stability***

11:00AM – 11:45AM

Presented by Susan Penka, Senior Business Advisor with Kansas Small Business Development Center at FHSU

Cash flow is the lifeblood of every business—but too many small business owners confuse cash flow with profit and only discover the difference when money gets tight. This workshop is designed to give entrepreneurs the knowledge, tools, and confidence to understand, predict, and manage cash flow in a practical, real-world way. In this session, participants will learn how money truly moves through a business, how to identify the common causes of cash shortages, and how to implement simple strategies that can significantly improve their financial stability. Using clear examples, easy-to-use templates, and guidance from the Kansas SBDC, this workshop helps business owners turn cash flow from a mystery into a powerful management tool.

4. ***From Start to Scale: Building and Growing Your Food Business***

11:00AM - 11:45AM

Presented by Jenny Doty, Food Systems Entrepreneurial Resource Navigator, K-State Research & Extension

Whether you're dreaming of launching your first food product or ready to take your existing business to the next level, this presentation is a guide to success in the food industry. We'll cover the essentials of starting strong – developing your product, navigating food safety regulations, and connecting you to resources to support your goals – we will discuss growth strategies to scale production, expand your distribution, and building a loyal customer base. Discover practical tips for

branding, funding, and leveraging opportunities like farmers markets, retail partnerships, and online sales.

5. ***Beyond the Block Party – Where Events Meet Economic Impact***

11:00AM - 11:45AM

Presented by Lyndsey Baxter, Executive Director of Downtown Excelsior Partnership, Inc.

Events are more than just fun. They're powerful economic development tools. In this session, Lyndsey Baxter shares how Downtown Excelsior Springs transformed its district through strategic, revenue generating events that celebrate local identity. Learn how to design events that align with your community's strengths, engage businesses, secure sponsorships, market creatively, and measure real economic impact. From large scale festivals to niche experiences, you'll walk away with practical strategies to turn your events into sustainable drivers of tourism, consumer spending, and long term downtown revitalization.

6. ***Brewing Up Entrepreneurship***

11:00AM – 11:45AM

Presented by Luke Mahin, Owner of Irrigation Ales

Brewing Up Entrepreneurship takes a pivotal look at scaling a small business, growing with intention, and connecting people to rural culture through fermentation. Drawing on lessons learned as a former economic developer turned small-town brewery owner, Luke Mahin shares how Irrigation Ales transformed a former café and senior center into an award-winning destination brewery – using retrofitted dairy tanks and a refrigerated semi-trailer. Drawing lessons from fermentation and irrigation, this session explores the essential elements of success: patience, small bets, creativity, and connection. Attendees will leave with practical ideas for building third-space businesses that cultivate rural culture and grow without losing their roots.

Rotation Session 2

1. ***Brewing Up Entrepreneurship***

1:30PM – 2:15PM

Presented by Luke Mahin, Owner of Irrigation Ales

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2. ***Turning Historic Designations Into Money for Property Owners***

1:30PM – 2:15PM

Presented by Kelly Gourley, Director of Lincoln County Economic Development

While there are programs and tools to help with major downtown revitalization projects, what programs are available for those business owners that just need to fix their roof or take care of other maintenance issues? Answer: nothing... unless you have a historic designation. Learn how the downtown historic designations for both Lincoln and Sylvan Grove have been a catalyst for both the big exciting projects along with the more mundane (but unavoidable) maintenance and repair projects.

3. *From Chaos to Clarity: Bookkeeping That Works For You*

1:30PM – 2:15PM

Presented by Kaneali Ag, LLC

Bookkeeping can feel overwhelming and stressful—but it doesn't have to be! Join Kaneali Ag for a workshop that turns your books into tools for progress, efficiency, and long-term success. We'll cover tracking income and expenses, entering transactions, reconciling accounts, and understanding cash flow—showing how these practices create clarity, confident decisions, proof of profitability, and a planning tool for growth. Walk away with practical systems that strengthen your operations, no matter your business size.

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6. *Communities of the Future™*

1:30PM – 2:15PM

Presented by Karly Frederick, Kansas Sampler Foundation

Entrepreneurship doesn't just happen in spreadsheets. It happens in places people like. This session explores how “communities of the future™” create the conditions for entrepreneurship by first investing in people, especially young rural Kansans. Thriving communities listen. They engage. They believe in and invest in themselves. Local leaders ask how they can help instead of prescribing solutions, working to remove barriers and cultivate civic leadership. When rural Kansas supports its next generation, everyone benefits. Participants will explore how shifting from directing to listening builds inclusive, vibrant places where entrepreneurs want to start, stay, and grow.

Rotation Session 3

1. ***Thriving and Diversifying***

2:30PM - 3:15PM

Presented by Shanna Lindberg, Owner Soul Sister Ceramics and Soul Sister Scoops

Knowing how to diversify your business and learning when to pivot to help your already established business.

2. ***Turning Historic Designations Into Money for Property Owners***

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4. ***Unlocking Opportunity: Strategic Funding for Entrepreneurs***

2:30PM - 3:15PM

Presented by Imogene Harris & Thomas Papadatos with Network Kansas

Explore how entrepreneurs can access and leverage the right mix of capital to start, grow, and scale their businesses. This panel will highlight practical funding pathways, share real-world insights from the Network Kansas ecosystem, and offer guidance on aligning financial resources with business goals. From early-stage microloans under \$50,000 that help turn ideas into action, to larger loan opportunities reaching \$1 million that fuel expansion, attendees will gain a clear understanding of how capital can evolve alongside their business. The conversation will also introduce equity investment options of varying sizes, illustrating how entrepreneurs can position themselves for growth-oriented partnerships when the time is right. Participants will leave with a stronger grasp of funding stages, what to expect at each level, and how to confidently pursue the capital that aligns with their vision.

5. ***Beyond the Block Party – Where Events Meet Economic Impact***

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you'll walk away with practical strategies to turn your events into sustainable drivers of tourism, consumer spending, and long term downtown revitalization.

6. *Legal Must-Knows for Small Business Success*

2:30PM – 3:15PM

Presented by James M. Johnson

Description TBD

Friday, June 26th – Rotation Session Summaries

Rotation Session 4

1. *How to determine your marketing needs as a small business*

9:30AM -10:15AM

Presented by Josey Hammer, Director of Operations JenRus Marketing

Helping small businesses and entrepreneurs determine what marketing is necessary and what is not. Where to spend their marketing money and what to do on their own.

2. *Unlocking Opportunity: Strategic Funding for Entrepreneurs*

9:30AM -10:15AM

Presented by Imogene Harris & Thomas Papadatos with Network Kansas

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3. *Courtland Arts Council – 34 years in the making*

9:30AM – 10:15AM

Presented by Tanner Johnson

The Courtland Arts Center has been on a 34 year journey to bring a wide range of arts programming to North Central Kansas. Learn about this history and the administrative challenges of maintaining an active arts council over time, then hear from the local superstars who are on the ground making it happen.

4. *Growing Business Through Tourism*

9:30AM – 10:15AM

Presented by Holly Lofton, Director fo the Lindsborg Convention and Visitors Bureau

Growing Business Through Tourism explores how tourism acts as an economic engine for local communities and small businesses. Drawing on insights from the Lindsborg Convention and Visitors Bureau, this talk highlights practical ways destinations and businesses can collaborate to

attract visitors, extend stays, and convert tourism activity into sustainable business and community growth.

5. 10 Years as a Rural Airbnb Host

9:30AM – 10:15AM

Moderated by Caleb Mahin, owner Mahin Insurance

I will share our experience of owning and managing short term rental houses in rural Kansas for the past 10 years.

6. Benefits and Your Small Business

9:30AM – 10:15AM

Presented by Brandy Willett, Kansas SBDC Regional Director

Benefit programs can have a huge impact on a small business. Whether you are a sole proprietor or an employer, just getting start or have been around for years, this presentation will help you understand the variety of benefits available and their impact on your bottom line.

Rotation Session 5

1. The Borderless Kitchen: Building a Mult-Platform Brand from Rural Kansas

10:30AM – 11:15AM

Presented by Chris Coffman, Executive Chef

In rural entrepreneurship, geography is often viewed as a limitation—but what if it was your greatest competitive advantage? Join The Kansas Chef, Chris Coffman, as he explores the "Digital Homestead" model: a three-pillar strategy for scaling a high-end physical craft into a global digital brand. From managing a premier destination dining experience to building a high-fidelity studio kitchen for content creation, learn how to decouple your income from your hours and transform local products into a regional digital storefront. Discover how to leverage technology to remove the "rural tax" and turn small-town authenticity into a global reach.

2. Shared Kitchens as Entrepreneurial Infrastructure for Rural Communities

10:30AM – 11:15AM

Presented by Quinlan Carttar, Food Business Resource Navigator with K-State Extension

Shared kitchens are more than places to cook—they are powerful pieces of entrepreneurial infrastructure that help rural communities lower barriers to starting food businesses. From farmers launching value-added products to caterers, bakers, and specialty food producers testing new ideas, shared-use kitchens create pathways for local entrepreneurs to start and grow. This session will explore how shared kitchens support rural economic development, activate underused community spaces, and strengthen local food systems. Participants will learn about different models communities are using, key considerations for launching a shared kitchen, and real examples from Kansas communities that are leveraging shared kitchens to support entrepreneurship and local economic vitality

3. An Unlikely Farm Market in An Unlikely Place

10:30AM - 11:15AM

Presented by Dan Kuhn, Owner Depot Farm and Market

Starting a retail farm market in a historic train station. A history of how our farm operation inspired a destination retail store in a rural area

4. ***Investing in Main Street***

10:30AM – 11:15AM

Presented by Elizabeth Weese, Executive Director of the Community Foundation of Dickinson County and Jennifer Russell, Owner of JenRus Marketing

Invest Dickinson County is the name of the Community Foundation's impact investing initiative designed to strengthen the local economy while protecting charitable dollars. Instead of traditional grants, the Foundation uses loan guarantees and mission-aligned investments to support local businesses, childcare, housing, and community projects. As loans are repaid, funds are recycled and reinvested, allowing the same dollars to create impact again and again. This approach grows opportunity, supports local jobs, and ensures philanthropic assets work for both immediate needs and long-term community vitality.

5. ***Grassroots to Growth: Revitalizing Rural Downtowns***

10:30AM – 11:15AM

Presented by Harley Schuster, Owner of North 40 Architecture

When formal programs, grants, and large-scale incentives aren't available, rural communities must rely on vision, persistence, and local investment. This session shares how one small Kansas town (population 285) is revitalizing its downtown through owner-financed building rehabs, strategic design improvements, and community-led momentum. From adaptive reuse to streetscape upgrades, these projects demonstrate how incremental investment can spark economic activity and inspire others to follow. Learn the challenges, advantages, and practical lessons behind a grassroots approach—and how small towns can build lasting vitality from the ground up.

6. ***Community Childcare Solutions***

10:30AM – 11:15AM

Presented by Dana Jo Stanton, NWKS Innovation Center Childcare Program Specialist

A lack of childcare is a critical issue for most Northwest Kansas communities. Unfortunately, most communities are unsure of what steps to take to address this critical need. In this presentation, you will learn how the Northwest Kansas Economic Innovation Center has helped multiple communities design childcare solutions for their specific community needs. This presentation will include a path forward for communities wanting to take the next steps to not only expand childcare capacity but to also become more supportive to existing childcare providers.