



Annual Conference Agenda 2026

Virtual Conference

Business Retention & Expansion

Tuesday, June 16, 2026

Community Relationships and AI Integration

Noon

Welcome

Alia Abbas, Toronto, Ontario

12:15 p.m.

Managing Relationship with Elected Officials

Presenter: Alia Abbas, Toronto, Ontario

This session will explore effective strategies for building and sustaining productive relationships with elected officials at the local, state, and federal levels. Attendees will gain practical insights into communication approaches, advocacy positioning, and how to align community and business priorities with public policy objectives. The presentation will also address common challenges in government relations and provide tools to navigate political environments with confidence and professionalism. Participants will leave with actionable techniques to strengthen partnerships that support long-term economic growth and community development.

1:15 p.m.

2026 Artificial Intelligence in BR&E Update

Presenter: Eric Canada, Wheaton, Illinois

This session will provide a forward-looking update on how artificial intelligence is transforming Business Retention and Expansion efforts in 2026. Attendees will explore practical applications of AI in data analysis, business outreach, predictive insights, and community engagement strategies. The presentation will highlight real-world examples and emerging tools that can enhance decision-making and improve responsiveness to local business needs. Participants will leave with a clearer understanding of how to responsibly and effectively integrate AI into their BR&E programs for greater impact.

2:15 p.m.

Building Sovereign AI Infrastructure: Integrated On-Site Power for the Next Generation of Data & Innovation Campuses

Presenter: Sunny Sarpal, Red Deer County, Alberta

The AI Hub of Innovation (AHI) in Red Deer County is developing a fully integrated energy and data infrastructure platform designed for long-term sovereign compute capacity. Anchored by 250 MW of on-site combined heat and power (CHP), battery storage, and renewable integration, the project demonstrates how jurisdictions can secure reliable, cost-predictable power for mission-critical digital infrastructure. This

session will explore how energy independence, physical infrastructure design, and Indigenous partnership models can align to deliver resilient AI and industrial campuses. Attendees will gain insight into structuring scalable power platforms that support national competitiveness while maintaining ESG discipline.

3:15 p.m.

Identifying Financial Resources for BR&E Projects

Presenters: Tara de Munnik, Leduc, Alberta, and Ruth Buchanan, Tampa, Florida

This session will explore a range of funding opportunities available to support Business Retention and Expansion projects at the local, state, and federal levels. Attendees will learn how to identify, access, and align financial resources with community and business needs to maximize impact. The presentation will highlight grant programs, public-private partnerships, and innovative financing strategies that can accelerate project implementation. Participants will leave with practical guidance to effectively secure and leverage funding for successful BR&E initiatives.

4:15 p.m.

Adjourn Day 1

Wednesday, June 17, 2026

Strategic Initiatives

12:15 p.m.

Fast, Practical Strategies for Community Impact

Presenter: Ramona Ciparis Gallagher, Brantford, Ontario

Business Improvement Districts sit at the heart of local economic life, and this one-hour session brings together the essential tools that help BIDs champion their business communities more effectively, especially during times of uncertainty, construction, and revitalization. We'll explore practical approaches to understanding business challenges, improving district-business relationships, and supporting entrepreneurs through disruption and change. Participants will gain clear, adaptable strategies for strengthening communication, building trust, and creating supportive environments where businesses can stay resilient and thrive. This session is designed to boost confidence, capacity, and community impact, no matter what your district is navigating.

1:15 p.m.

Annual Meeting / Awards Session

The BREI Annual Meeting will present business for the association. This will also include a special message from IEDC's Centennial Celebration showcasing the evolution of the field of economic development.

1:45 p.m.

BREI Awards of Excellence and Awardee Presentations

BREI will recognize outstanding achievements in Business Retention and Expansion through its Awards of Excellence, honoring innovative and impactful projects from across participating communities. This session will showcase award-winning initiatives that demonstrate measurable success in supporting local businesses and

driving economic growth. Selected awardees will present their projects, offering insights into strategies, challenges, and outcomes. Attendees will gain valuable, real-world examples and practical ideas to enhance their own BR&E efforts.

2:45 p.m.

Facilitated Group Discussion

This session will consist of a facilitated group discussion regarding hot topics in BRE, discussion on ideas generated from the BREI Award Recipients, and other topics as deemed needed for discussion.

4:00 p.m.

Adjourn Day 2

Thursday, June 18, 2026

Structural BR&E

12:00 p.m.

Survey Design and Analysis

Presenter: Simon Webb, Hamilton, Ontario

This session will provide practical guidance on designing effective surveys to capture meaningful insights from community businesses. Attendees will learn proven strategies for structuring questions, increasing response rates, and ensuring data quality. The presentation will also explore methods for analyzing survey results and translating findings into actionable strategies for business retention and community improvement. Participants will leave with tools and techniques to confidently use survey data to drive informed decision-making and measurable impact.

1:00 p.m.

Business Succession and Transition

Presenter: Michael Darger, St. Paul, Minnesota

American business owners over 55 continue to be the majority and they are growing as a percentage of all business owners. While the ages of owners and businesses are changing every year in small businesses, the combination of those two factors is worth studying because it represents an important BRE issue. Therefore, the University of Minnesota conducted a survey of Minnesota employer businesses in 2023. We received 286 valid responses and this has created a valuable dataset (which is likely relevant to other states as well) about owner awareness, attitudes, aspirations, and preparedness for transitioning the ownership to new owners. This presentation will cover our Business Succession and Transition research as well as our online Extension resources for businesses, economic developers, and business advisers.

2:00 p.m.

BR&E Cluster Analysis

Presenter: Jason Rittenberg, Columbus, Ohio

This session will introduce the fundamentals of cluster analysis and its role in strengthening Business Retention and Expansion strategies. Attendees will learn

how to identify industry clusters, assess regional strengths, and uncover opportunities for targeted growth and investment. The presentation will highlight practical tools and real-world applications to support data-driven decision-making at the community level. Participants will leave with actionable insights to better align economic development efforts with existing business ecosystems.

3:15 p.m.

Adjourn Conference