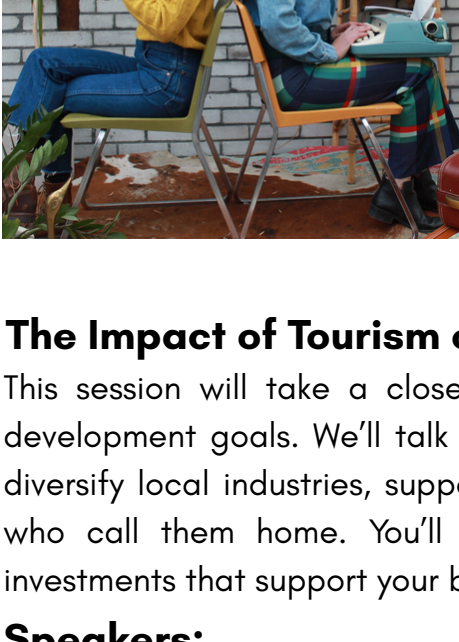




2026 MEDA Spring Conference



Session Descriptions & Speaker Bios



Helena Success Story Keynote: Building Bell Hotel

A pinch of creative financing, a smidgeon of patience and a dollop of persistence is the winning recipe for community champions Karli Mosey and Ashly Tubbs.

Gather round to hear the story of how two local ladies, determined to make their hometown hip, overcame all odds and obstacles to build Helena's first independently owned boutique hotel.

Full of twists, turns— it's an entrepreneurial epic about tipping the scales from dream to reality, that's sure to surprise and delight.

The Impact of Tourism on Economic Development Panel

This session will take a closer look at how tourism can fit into your community's bigger economic development goals. We'll talk through real examples and practical ways the visitor economy can help diversify local industries, support small businesses, and make communities more livable for the people who call them home. You'll leave with ideas and insights on resources available for community investments that support your broader strategy of steady, long-term growth.

Speakers:



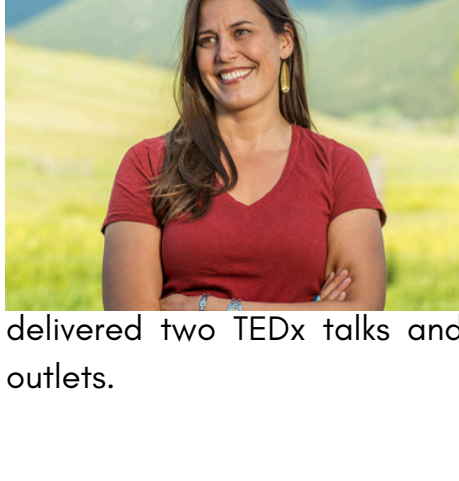
Dax Scheiffer, Administrator, Montana Travel Association

Dax Scheiffer is a Montana-based leader in tourism, economic development, and community engagement, known for advancing the state's visitor economy and strengthening collaboration across the travel and hospitality industries. A Sidney native and graduate of Montana State University, he spent 18 years at Big Sky Resort in roles spanning hospitality, marketing, public relations, and human resources, gaining a broad understanding of resort operations and tourism's impact on local economies. He later became active in statewide efforts through Voices of Montana Tourism, helping elevate awareness of the industry's benefits to communities and small businesses. Scheiffer now serves as Administrator for the Montana Travel Association, where he advocates for policies supporting tourism, including infrastructure, workforce development, and responsible destination stewardship.



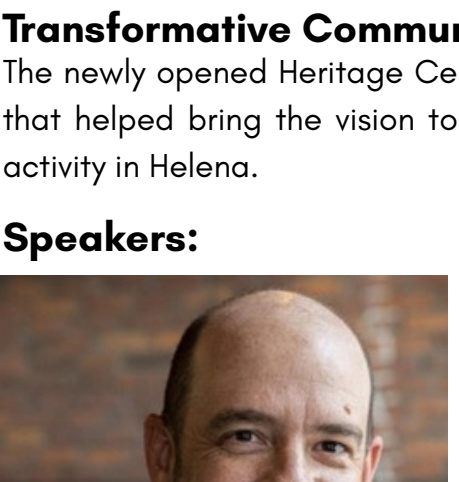
Cole Mannix, Co-Founder & CEO, Old Salt Co-op

Cole grew up on a ranch that's been run by his family since 1882 near Helmsville, MT. Today, his parents, aunts & uncles, siblings and cousins run the ranch together. Cole lives about 60 miles east of the ranch in Helena, where he serves as President of Old Salt Co-op (of which his family's ranch is a founding member). Old Salt is a regenerative marketplace for American Meat, owned and governed by the ranch members that supply it. Cole is married to Eileen Brennan and they have two young sons, Finn and Charlie. He enjoys good food, good company, and live music in small venues.



Paul Tuss, Executive Director, Bear Paw Development Corporation

Paul Tuss is in his 25th year as Executive Director of Bear Paw Development Corporation, Montana's longest-serving Economic Development District, serving a vast region across northern Montana that includes five counties and two tribal nations. A past president of the Montana Economic Developers Association, he has held leadership roles with the Montana Nonprofit Association and currently serves on the Board of Directors for the National Association of Development Organizations, along with past gubernatorial appointments to several state commissions. Tuss served more than nine years on the Montana Board of Regents, including three as chairman, and has advised the University of Montana on economic research and policy. He is currently in his second term in the Montana House of Representatives, where he serves on key committees including Appropriations and Legislative Finance. A native of Anaconda and a University of Montana graduate, he previously held legislative leadership roles in the Montana State Senate and House of Representatives.



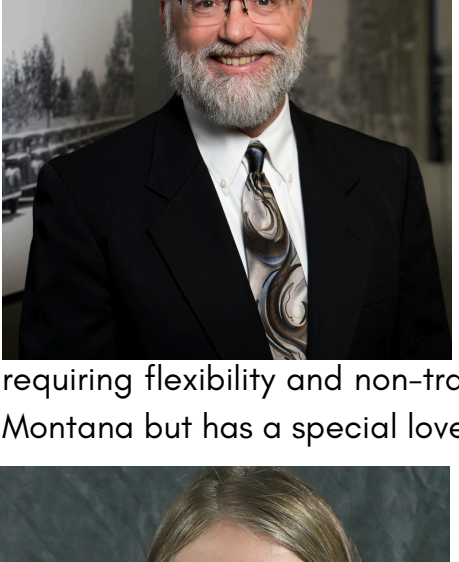
Sarah Calhoun, Founder & Executive Director, Red Ants Pants Foundation

Sarah Calhoun is the founder of Red Ant Pants, Executive Director of the Red Ants Pants Foundation, and producer of the Red Ants Pants Music Festival, now in its fifteenth year and drawing tens of thousands to rural Meagher County. Based in White Sulphur Springs, she is widely recognized for championing rural communities and women's leadership, becoming an inspiration to entrepreneurs nationwide. Calhoun was inducted into the Montana Business Hall of Fame in 2018, named the SBA's National Women in Business Champion in 2012, and honored as Montana's 2011 Entrepreneur of the Year. She has been invited to the White House twice, delivered two TEDx talks and outlets, numerous keynotes, and earned national media coverage across major outlets.

Transformative Community Investment Panel: The Heritage Center

The newly opened Heritage Center was years in the making. Learn about the road to success, the team that helped bring the vision to life and how this community investment will drive significant economic activity in Helena.

Speakers:



Anthony Houtz, AIA, Design Director

Anthony Houtz, AIA, is an architect advancing a simple premise: architecture is not just the design of buildings, but the design of human agency. His work explores how space can amplify decision-making, deepen collaboration, and unlock latent potential within organizations. Operating at the intersection of design, research, and strategy, he translates architectural thinking into systems that shape behavior, culture, and performance. He believes the future of practice lies not in producing more buildings, but in creating environments that support a more capable community, one that is more aligned, more creative, and more effective together. He has been featured in World Architecture News, Montana Architect, and Signature Magazine, and his writing has appeared in Montana Art and Photography. His current research reframes architecture as an instrument of collective intelligence, where precision, experimentation, and authentic human experience converge.



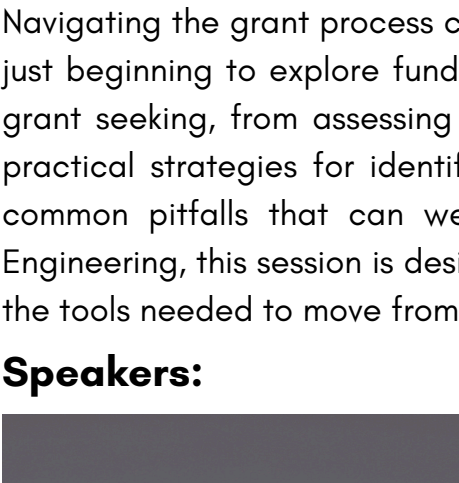
Russ Katherman, Administrator, Dept. of Administration

For nearly 30 years, Russ has served the State of Montana's Architecture & Engineering Division as the Administrator, Engineering Manager, and Contracting Officer. His current responsibilities involve setting overall direction and strategic planning for the State's building program, the state-owned 5,060 buildings - 25.7M sqft inventory, facility assessments, and supervision of all project management and contracting functions for the state's vertical construction efforts. Currently overseeing >\$2B, >300 capital projects, and the state's broadband grants program, all received within the last 4-years, presents big challenges for the small A&E team requiring flexibility and non-traditional paths. When able to find time off, Russ enjoys visiting all parts of Montana but has a special love for camping and hiking in Glacier National Park.



Molly Kruckenberg, Director, MT Historical Society

Molly Kruckenberg is the Director of the Montana Historical Society. She studied history as an undergraduate and completed a graduate degree in library science. She began work with the MTHS in 1999 and moved to the role of Director in 2020, after spending six years as an archivist and fifteen years as manager of the library and archives.



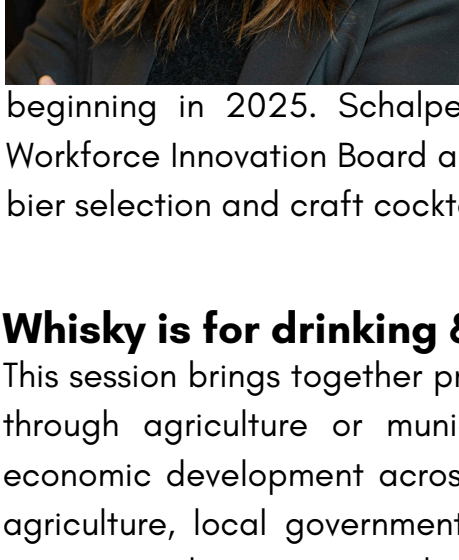
Major Robinson, Tribal Relations

Major Robinson (Northern Cheyenne) is the owner and principal of Redstone Project Development in Lame Deer, Montana, and co-owner with his wife, Michelle, of Sage & Oats Trading Post, an intercultural gift shop in Helena. Over the past 30 years, he has worked with Tribes and companies across the United States and internationally to develop themed entertainment and building projects, including work with Universal Studios Florida on Super Nintendo World, which opened in Japan in 2021, California in 2023, and Florida in 2025. Through Redstone, Major has provided cultural design services for the American Indian Hall at Montana State University in Bozeman, the Montana Heritage Center in Helena, and is currently working on the Northern Cheyenne Healing Trail, an interpretive historical bike and walking trail near Fort Robinson, Nebraska. He and Michelle have two children, Jorian and Kyra, who are both accomplished Native artists.

Grants 101

Navigating the grant process can feel overwhelming, especially for first-time applicants or organizations just beginning to explore funding opportunities. This session introduces the fundamentals of successful grant seeking, from assessing readiness to submitting competitive applications. Participants will learn practical strategies for identifying the right opportunities, developing strong proposals, and avoiding common pitfalls that can weaken an application. Featuring insights from Becky Rosenleaf of KLJ Engineering, this session is designed to build confidence, clarify the process, and provide attendees with the tools needed to move from initial idea to a funded project.

Speakers:



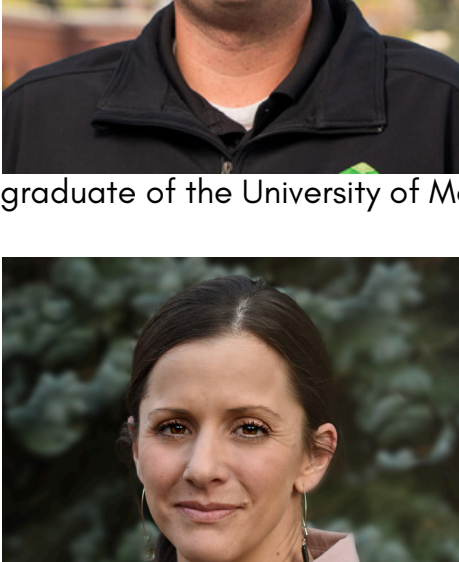
Becky Rosenleaf, KLJ Engineering

Becky Rosenleaf is a Government Relations Specialist with KLJ Engineering, with 11 years in the role and 38 years of experience in grant writing, communications, facilitation, and government liaison work. She has secured local, state, and federal funding for infrastructure and community development across Montana, South Dakota, and Colorado, and became a Certified Professional Facilitator in 2019. Becky focuses on building coalitions and partnerships that help communities achieve economic and infrastructure goals, advocating for collaborative systems that support public safety, health, and growth.

Business Development Building your team: Board & Volunteer Engagement

Business Development is a team sport. We'll focus on how to activate your community as your team.

Speakers:



Jolene Schalper, Executive Vice President, Great Falls Development Authority

Jolene joined the Great Falls Development Authority in 2012 and has since built an extensive portfolio in economic development, earning her Certified Economic Developer (CEcD), Economic Development Finance Professional (EDFP), and Entrepreneurship Development Professional (EDP) credentials, along with a Master Practitioner of Economic Development distinction. She has been actively involved with the International Economic Development Council, serving on multiple committees and was elected to its Board of Directors for a term beginning in 2025. Schalper has also contributed at the state level through the Montana State Workforce Innovation Board and co-owns Kellergeist, a German bar in Great Falls known for its extensive beer selection and craft cocktails.

Whisky is for drinking & Water is for fighting

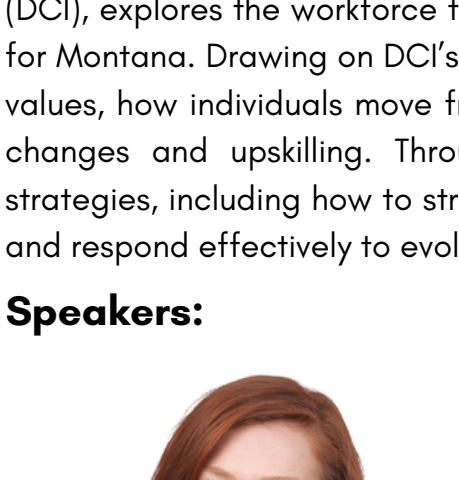
This session brings together professionals who are frequently exposed to topics involving water. Whether through agriculture or municipal planning, water-related subjects are impacting community and economic development across the state. The panelists in this session will speak through the lenses of agriculture, local government, and land-use planning. Lastly, the audience will learn about specific projects and programs, such as the Community Technical Assistance Program (CTAP), and how they are intertwined with water subjects

Speakers:



Eric Seidensticker, Interim Executive Director, Montana Business Assistance Connection

Eric has been in economic development for close to a decade. He has worked in both regional and county-level economic development. During his tenure in the field, Eric has served primarily as a community and business development specialist and as an Executive Director for a county-level economic development organization. Eric focuses heavily on assisting rural businesses, agricultural development, and providing technical assistance to local governments. Eric is the current director of MBAC's Food and Agriculture Development Center (FADC). Eric is a graduate of the University of Montana. He is a proud husband, father, and sixth-generation Montanan.



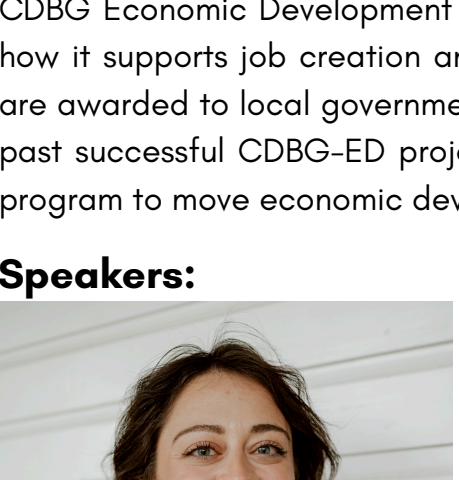
Lindsey Richtmeyer, Broadwater County Commissioner

Lindsey is in her fourth year as a Broadwater County Commissioner. An Air Force "brat" from a multi-generational military family, she spent her summers on her family's ranch in the Castle Mountains, established after her grandfather founded the Montana State University Air Force ROTC program. She attended both MSU and UM, graduating from USM with a journalism degree. Lindsey and her family now live in Townsend near the Richtmeyer cattle ranch. With water rights and availability central to Broadwater County's future, she is committed to thoroughly researching and understanding Montana's complex water policy.



Ann Schwend, Planning Program Supervisor, MT Dept. of Commerce

Ann Schwend has spent a career helping communities understand the connections between land use planning and our impacts on natural resources. Trained in plant and soil sciences, she has spent many years helping rural communities with planning for their economic and sustainable development goals. Following 14 years at DNRC as a water planner, she is now the Planning Program supervisor at the Department of Commerce Community Technical Assistance Program and assists rural communities on a suite of land use planning topics.



Sarah Converse, Executive Director, Sweetgrass Development

Sarah Converse is the Executive Director of the Northcentral Montana Economic Development District, also known as Sweetgrass Development, serving five counties and the Blackfoot and Little Shell Tribes. A sixth-generation Montanan raised on her family's ranch near Augusta, she holds a degree from Montana State University in sociology, social and criminal justice, and public administration, with an emphasis in agriculture. Sarah's career includes roles with the Cascade County Attorney's Office, Mountain Peaks Incorporated, U.S. Senator Conrad Burns' office, and Xerox as Montana's Medicaid fiscal agent before stepping into her current role in 2010.

Keynote: Winning the Talent Wars: National Trends & Practical Strategies for Montana Communities

With the U.S. facing a projected shortfall of roughly 6 million workers by the end of the decade, this keynote by Patience Fairbrother, SVP of Talent Attraction at Development Counsellors International (DCI), explores the workforce trends reshaping communities across North America and their implications for Montana. Drawing on DCI's Talent Wars research, Fairbrother will break down what today's workforce values, how individuals move from considering relocation to making a decision, and what drives career changes and upskilling. Through real-world case studies, attendees will gain practical, scalable strategies, including how to strengthen their community's talent appeal, leverage regional collaboration, and respond effectively to evolving workforce demands.

Speakers:



Patience Fairbrother, Senior Vice President, Talent Attraction, DCI

Patience Fairbrother leads DCI's Talent Attraction practice, helping cities, regions, and states attract and retain workforce through research-driven strategy and targeted marketing. A recognized voice in place marketing and economic development, she has spoken at major industry conferences and was named one of PRSA New York's 15 Under 35. Her work has earned multiple national awards, and she hosts the Talent Wars podcast, exploring how destinations compete for the best talent. Based in Brooklyn, she is a graduate of Kenyon College.

CDBG Economic Development 101

CDBG Economic Development 101 provides a high-level overview of Montana's CDBG-ED Program and how it supports job creation and retention for Montana communities. This session will cover how funds are awarded to local governments, eligible uses, key requirements, and provide examples of current and past successful CDBG-ED projects. Attendees will have a clear understanding of how to leverage the program to move economic development projects forward.

Speakers:



Rosie Goldich, CDBG Coordinator, MT DOC

Rosie Goldich is the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Coordinator at the Community MT Division at the Montana Department of Commerce. Rosie provides technical assistance to communities and coordinates the various grant funding cycles for the CDBG program, which funds planning, infrastructure, economic development and housing activities around the state. Rosie loves working with those who are passionate about their unique small towns and how CDBG funding can help them achieve their goals.



Jordan Conley, Community & Economic Programs Supervisor, MT DOC

Jordan is the Community and Economic Programs Supervisor at the Department of Commerce. Her team oversees the Montana Historic Preservation Grant program, the Montana Main Street program, and Community Development Block Grants for Economic Development. Prior to joining Commerce in 2023, she worked in the fields of community development, downtown revitalization, and education.

Advocacy That Works: Communicating Impact and Influencing Outcomes at the Legislature

As Montana's next legislative session approaches, economic development organizations have a critical opportunity to effectively tell their story, demonstrate impact, and advocate for the programs that support their communities. This session will provide practical, real-world guidance on how to engage with policymakers in a way that resonates. Drawing on her experience in both government relations and lobbying, Kali will share insights on how legislators receive information, what makes testimony effective, and how to communicate complex projects and outcomes in a clear, compelling way. Participants will learn how to prepare for committee hearings, deliver impactful testimony, and build credibility with elected officials before, during, and after the session. The discussion will also cover common pitfalls to avoid and strategies for positioning your organization and projects for success in a fast-paced and often unpredictable legislative environment.

Speakers:

Kali Wicks, President, Treasure State Strategies

Kali was raised on a dryland farm in northcentral Montana, where she developed a strong foundation in trust, integrity, and community. She holds degrees from Gonzaga University and the University of Montana, and is the owner of Treasure State Strategies, a Helena-based government affairs firm. With nearly two decades of experience, Kali has built bipartisan relationships and a proven track record in policy development, lobbying, coalition building, and strategic communications, representing clients across sectors including healthcare, agriculture, education, and business. A dedicated community leader, she is a former Helena City Commissioner and has served in numerous board and advisory roles, while also mentoring future leaders through guest lectures

Executing on Effective Public Engagement

Public involvement is a cornerstone of successful planning, funding, and policy efforts, and expectations for meaningful engagement continue to rise. Many federal grant programs now prioritize projects that demonstrate clear, well-documented community input. Yet reaching people in a way that encourages real participation, not just reaction, remains a challenge in an increasingly busy and distracted world. This session will focus on practical, results-driven approaches to engaging communities, gathering usable feedback, and building processes that people are willing to take part in. Participants will also gain clarity on when to inform the public versus when to actively engage them, and how to align those approaches with project goals and requirements.

Speakers:

Becky Rosenleaf, KLJ Engineering

Becky Rosenleaf is a Government Relations Specialist with KLJ Engineering, with 11 years in the role and 38 years of experience in grant writing, communications, facilitation, and government liaison work. She has secured local, state, and federal funding for infrastructure and community development across Montana, South Dakota, and Colorado, and became a Certified Professional Facilitator in 2019. Becky focuses on building coalitions and partnerships that help communities achieve economic and infrastructure goals, advocating for collaborative systems that support public safety, health, and growth.

Agritourism: Bridging Montana's Agriculture and Tourism Economies

Explore how to turn agritourism into a regional economic driver. This session will highlight the key components of a successful agritourism ecosystem, common barriers to growth, and the role economic developers can play in connecting producers, businesses, and infrastructure. Walk away with actionable ideas to strengthen agritourism in your community.

Speakers:



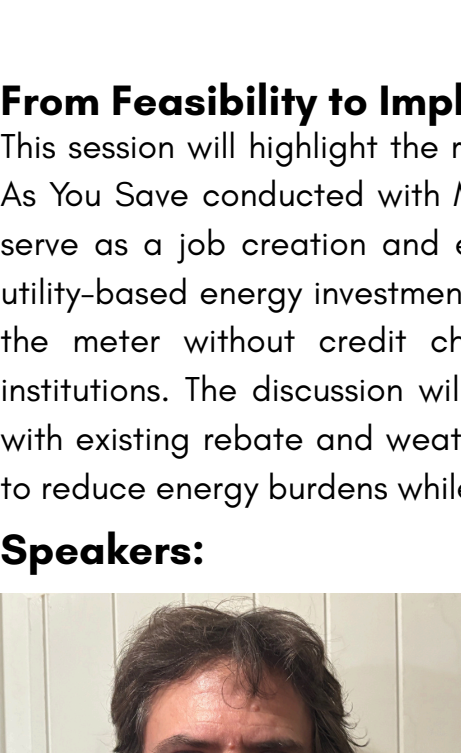
Sam Blomquist, Food and Ag Program Director, Prospera

Sam Blomquist is the Director of the Food & Agriculture Development Center at Prospera in Bozeman. Sam has spent the past fifteen years working in the food and agriculture sector in the Gallatin Valley and throughout Montana. Sam acted as the co-chair of the Montana Agritourism Steering Committee and is currently an advisory member of the MT Agritourism Association. She serves on the Board of Directors for both the Red Ants Pants Foundation and Voices of Montana Tourism. She holds a B.S. from the University of Montana in Resource Conservation and a M.S. from Montana State University in Sustainable Food Systems. Sam believes deeply in the connection between food, agriculture, economic vitality, and community, and is delighted to support the growing agritourism industry in Montana.



Dr. Shannon Arnold, MSU Professor in Agricultural Education

Dr. Shannon Arnold is a Professor in Agricultural and Extension Education at Montana State University. She has been involved in advancing agritourism for 10 years with advisory councils, grants, research projects, programming, and outreach education for agricultural producers and tourism professionals. She has been a Principal Investigator for several grants to expand Montana's agritourism industry from the Montana Department of Agriculture and Western SARE. She co-hosted the 2024 and 2025 Montana Agritourism statewide conferences, assisted in creating the Montana Agritourism Association, led the Agritourism Fellows program, and is on a grant project committee to develop a nationwide agritourism curriculum.



Callie Aschim, President/CEO, Helena Area Chamber of Commerce

Born and raised on a multi-generational farm in Sunburst, Montana, Callie Aschim developed a strong work ethic and deep appreciation for community that has shaped her career. After attending Montana Tech in Butte, where she further connected with the power of local identity and pride, she spent over two decades in hospitality and tourism, gaining firsthand insight into its role as a driver of economic development. Today, as President/CEO of the Helena Area Chamber of Commerce, she leverages that experience to champion tourism as a strategic economic engine, focusing on partnerships, visitor investment, and long-term community growth, guided by her belief that when people and their stories are prioritized, communities thrive.

From Feasibility to Implementation: Exploring Pay As You Save (PAYS) in MT

This session will highlight the results of Mission West CDP's feasibility study on Inclusive Financing - Pay As You Save conducted with Missoula Electric Cooperative and partners, and explore how PAYS could serve as a job creation and economic development tool in Montana. Participants will learn how this utility-based energy investment model allows efficiency upgrades to be repaid through a fixed tariff on the meter without credit checks, making it accessible to renters, homeowners, businesses, and institutions. The discussion will cover financing through the Rural Energy Savings Program, integration with existing rebate and weatherization programs, contractor opportunities, and the potential for PAYS to reduce energy burdens while strengthening local economies.

Speakers:



Karl Sutton, Mission West Community Development Partners

Karl serves as Mission West's REAP (Rural Energy for America Program) specialist and Brownfields Program Manager, assisting rural businesses and agricultural producers with grants for energy efficiency and renewable energy projects. He leads initiatives like a feasibility study with Missoula Electric Cooperative on Pay as You Save on-bill financing and recently completed a 72-hour energy bootcamp through Montana State University. Previously, Karl managed Mission West's cooperative development program, including the creation of Triple Divide Organic Seeds Cooperative. He holds a Master's in Environmental Studies with a focus on Social Ecology and has presented his community-based research at national conferences.

All Aboard the Future: Enhancing Rail, Expanding Opportunity

Join the Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority to explore the expansion of passenger rail in Montana, reconnecting communities through the Big Sky North Coast Corridor and enhancements to the Empire Builder. These efforts will drive economic growth, improve connectivity and create new opportunities statewide. Learn how your community can prepare to benefit.

Speakers:



Dan Bucks, Chair, Development and Strategic Engagement Committee, Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority

Dan Bucks has more than 50 years of experience in public policy and administration, with a focus on taxation and natural resource issues. He served as Director of the Montana Department of Revenue from 2005 to 2013, and earlier as its Deputy Director. From 1988 to 2004, he was Executive Director of the Multistate Tax Commission, and in the 1970s, he served as chief policy advisor to the Governor of South Dakota. A nationally recognized tax expert, Bucks holds a BA from Grinnell College and an MPA from the University of Montana. Since 2021, he has chaired the Development and Strategic Engagement Committee of the Big Sky Passenger Rail Authority.

Expanding Opportunities: Montana's Role in National Defense Innovation Panel

Montana is increasingly contributing to the national defense innovation ecosystem through its research institutions, manufacturing base, emerging technology companies, and statewide economic development network. This panel explores how Montana organizations connect local innovation to Department of Defense needs and pathways, and the impact on communities across the state.

Panelists from the Defense Innovation OnRamp Hub: Montana, the Montana APEX Accelerator, and industry will discuss how companies move from early capability development to defense engagement, the role of economic developers in supporting that journey, and how coordinated partnerships lower barriers to participation. Attendees will gain insight into practical pathways for defense opportunities, support for dual-use companies, and how Montana's research, industry, and EDOs can collectively strengthen the state's defense innovation ecosystem.

Speakers:



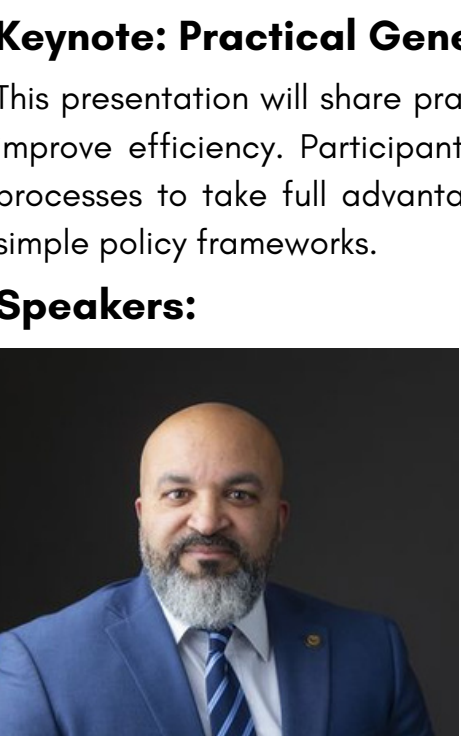
Marta Bertoglio, Director, MTDOC

Marta Bertoglio is the Director of the Montana Department of Commerce, where she leads efforts to grow Montana's economy, support innovation, and expand housing and business opportunities across the state. A native of Deer Lodge and a 1991 graduate of the United States Air Force Academy, she served in the U.S. Air Force until returning to Montana in 2007. She is also a business owner, operating a boutique real estate firm based in Helena with satellite locations statewide. Marta previously represented Jefferson County for three sessions in the Montana House of Representatives, gaining firsthand insight into the challenges and opportunities facing the state. In her current role, she works closely with communities, legislators, and economic development partners to position Montana as a leader in innovation, technology, and economic growth.



Marcell Bruski, Ecosystem Marketing Lead, Defense Innovation Onramp Hub MT

Marcell Bruski is an economic development and marketing professional with experience spanning ecosystem marketing, communications, and partnership development. She currently serves as Ecosystem Marketing Lead for Defense Innovation OnRamp Hub: Montana, where she leads marketing and external engagement efforts to support Montana's defense and dual-use innovation ecosystem. Marcell brings a background in branding, public relations, workforce development, and community engagement, with a strong track record of building partnerships and driving participation across public and private stakeholders. Born and raised in rural southeast Montana, she holds a degree in Business Administration from Rocky Mountain College and is the Billings Chapter VP of the Montana Ambassadors.



Elle Gahl, CEO & President, Shadow Ridge Analytics

Elle Gahl is a Montana native and alumna of Montana State University with extensive experience in venture development, commercialization strategy, and fundraising across defense, national security, and industrial sectors. A Certified Licensing Professional, she specializes in bridging commercialization gaps by helping inventors, academic institutions, and federal laboratories translate innovative intellectual property into market-ready solutions. After building specialty chemical business units within large, industrial operations, she now serves as CEO of Shadow Ridge Analytics, a defense strategy firm and venture studio advancing critical technologies, and as Managing Director of 1864 Capital, which focuses on strengthening resilient national security supply chains by connecting defense and dual-use startups with capital across the Mountain West.



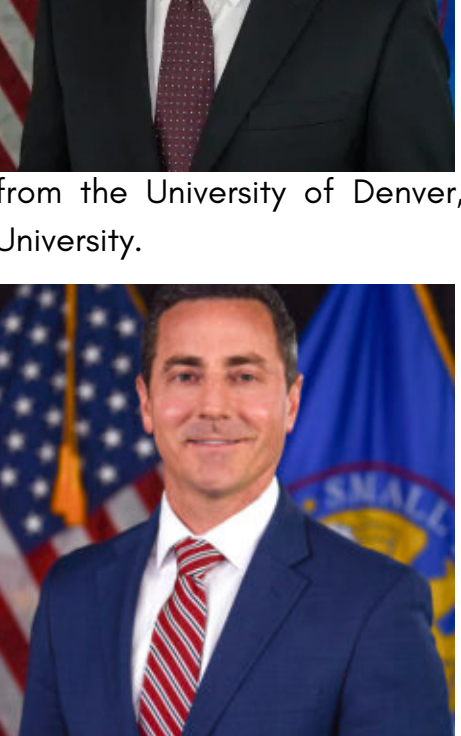
Al Deibert, Executive Director, Institute of National Security Research and Education at MSU

Al Deibert is MSU's Institute of National Security Research and Education Executive Director and oversees MSU's MilTech Partnership Intermediary, Applied Research Lab and other programs. He has a BS and MS in industrial and management engineering from MSU and over 35 years of experience in product development, program leadership, and technology transition in support of DOD and DHS. Al has led MSU's MilTech Partnership Intermediary since 2004 and is responsible for developing its national reputation in transitioning defense technology to the US warfighter. MilTech has grown into one of MSU's most significant research organizations, spending over \$65,000,000 in SFY'25 with approximately 100 employees in 14 states.

406 Jobs and State Workforce Innovation Board Update

Get the latest update from the Montana State Workforce Innovation Board and the 406 Jobs Initiative—two key drivers shaping the state's workforce strategy. This session will highlight current priorities, progress, and partnerships aimed at strengthening Montana's talent pipeline, supporting employers, and connecting workers to high-demand opportunities

Speakers:



Tammie Hickey, Executive Director, State Workforce Innovation Board

Tammie Hickey serves as the current State Workforce Innovation Board (SWIB) Director and has more than 40 years of experience leading workforce development initiatives and programs. She previously directed Great Falls College MSU's Continuing Education & Training department while simultaneously overseeing Great Falls Public Schools' Career & College Readiness Center, the district's Title II Adult Education program. Drawing on extensive experience across nonprofit, public, private, and small business settings, Tammie brings a comprehensive understanding of Montana's talent pipeline and is committed to advancing the state's 406 JOBS initiatives to modernize and strengthen Montana's workforce system.

Keynote: Practical Generative AI for EDOs: Effective, Everyday Uses

This presentation will share practical ways organizations can support the use of artificial intelligence to improve efficiency. Participants will learn the basic functions of AI, build simple workflows into daily processes to take full advantage of those functions, and consider how their organization can create simple policy frameworks.

Speakers:



Dr. Dell Gines, Chief Innovation Officer, International Economic Development Council

Dr. Dell Gines is Chief Innovation Officer at the International Economic Development Council, the world's largest association for economic development professionals. He directs professional development, research, emerging practices, and international strategy, guiding practitioners to apply emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence while responding to market and societal shifts. His emerging practices portfolio manages IEDC's grant-funded initiatives, including the thirty-million-dollar Economic Recovery Corps program, with the goal of building local economies that work for everyone. With more than twenty-one years of experience, Dr. Gines is a nationally recognized expert on entrepreneurship-led growth. He has authored six practitioner guides and two books on entrepreneurial ecosystems, and his insights have appeared in PBS, Forbes, Black Enterprise, CNN Business, Brookings, and Entrepreneur. As a speaker, he has delivered keynotes on innovation and economic transformation in thirty-seven U.S. states and territories, as well as in multiple countries. Dr. Gines is a Certified Economic Developer and holds an MBA, a Master of Finance, and a Ph.D. in Public Administration from the University of Nebraska. His honors include the Omaha Jaycees Top 10 Outstanding Young Leaders Award, induction into the Kansas City Black Achievers Society, multiple President's Awards from the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, and the University of Nebraska Omaha Alumni Award for Excellence in Public Service.

Partnering for Small Business Success: Policy, Advocacy & the Path Forward

Join senior leadership from the U.S. Small Business Administration for a timely discussion on federal priorities, regulatory reform, and opportunities to strengthen Montana's small business environment. Regional Administrator Justin D. Everett will outline SBA policy initiatives, strategic priorities, and how local leaders, economic developers, and business advocates can collaborate to achieve shared goals. Regional Advocate Trent Staggs will provide insight into ongoing deregulation efforts across federal agencies, share current economic data, and highlight tools and resources available to support business growth. Together, this session will explore how public and private partners can work effectively to advance a pro-growth agenda and reduce barriers for small businesses across the region.

Speakers:



Justin Everett, Regional Administrator, SBA Region VIII

Justin D. Everett serves as Rocky Mountains Regional Administrator, overseeing Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming. A seasoned political strategist and business consultant, he previously served as Colorado State Director for Donald J. Trump's 2024 presidential campaign and played a key role in the 2024 Republican National Convention. A three-term Colorado State Representative, Everett focused on fiscal policy, business regulation, and education, and later focused on fiscal policy, business regulation, and later focused on campaign strategy and communications. He also leads Everett Consulting Services, supporting business growth and operations, and holds a JD an MBA from the University of Colorado, and a BA from Chapman University.



Trent Staggs, Regional Advocate, SBA Region VIII

Trent Staggs is a public sector and business leader who served four years on the Riverton City Council and eight years as mayor, where he implemented a business-minded approach that reduced taxes and fees while delivering significant savings for residents. He was also a candidate for U.S. Senate in 2024 and has extensive private sector experience across finance, technology, and energy, including helping take an energy company public on NASDAQ. Staggs holds a bachelor's degree from the University of Utah and an MBA from Brigham Young University and now serves as a Regional Advocate for small businesses.

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2026 MEDA Spring Conference

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