

Empowering Rural Entrepreneurs: Highlights from the 2026 CEDA Rural Business Innovation Lab (RBIL) Annual Event

Community and Economic Development Associates (CEDA) hosted the 2026 Rural Business Innovation Lab (RBIL) Annual Event on Wednesday, July 23, 2026 at the Community Center in Sartell, MN. This event brought together small business owners and entrepreneurs and regional founders for a high-impact day dedicated to rural growth, resource connections, and entrepreneurial development.

This event is designed to provide direct technical assistance, capital guidance, and practical tools to businesses within the cohort. This year's event featured inspiring insights, one-on-one advising, and a supportive environment for entrepreneurs to polish their business pitches.

The event kicked off with guest speaker Shelby Stahl of Beloved Social, who delivered a session on leveraging digital marketing and social media storytelling to grow rural brands. Shelby highlighted actionable strategies for small business owners to build authentic online communities, reach new customers, and convert social media engagement into sustainable revenue; through demonstrating that rural businesses can have a wide-ranging digital footprint.

Entrepreneurs were also able to participate in one-on-one discussions through a Resource Roundtable. These discussions offered attendees direct, individualized access to subject matter experts and regional partner organizations. Attendees were able to discuss Succession Planning, ask questions regarding Human Resources, talk with an IT expert, inquire about grant writing and grant opportunities, visit with a loan's expert on small business lending opportunities, connect with regional investors, and regional initiative foundations.

To wrap up the day, local entrepreneurs took center stage at the Entrepreneur Pitch Event. This event was designed as a constructive, high-value practice space, where entrepreneurs presented their business concepts and growth plans. Participants received real-time, actionable feedback on their business models, value propositions, and presentation delivery. Through this exercise they gained confidence and were able to polish their delivery as they approach investors, lenders, and future business partners.

CEDA for 40 years now has remained committed to helping small communities and entrepreneurs do BIG things through our Rural Business Innovation Lab. Through

events like this we are able to offer technical assistance, planning and entrepreneurial support.

