South Dakota State University Extension

Good Neighbor AI Symposium
Speakers and Panelists

November 5, 2026

9:30 – 9:45 AM | Welcome & Opening Remarks



Ryan Lefers, Griffith Endowed Chair in Agriculture and Water Resources, South Dakota Water Resources Institute Director & SDSU State Water Extension Specialist SDSU

Dr. Ryan Lefers is the Griffith Endowed Chair, South Dakota Water Resource Institute Director and State Water Extension Specialist in the Agriculture and Biosystems Engineering Department at SDSU.

Ryan holds a BS and MS in Agriculture Engineering from South Dakota State University and a PhD in Environmental Engineering from King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) in Saudi Arabia. He is considered an international expert in water quality and management in agriculture systems and understands well the complex interactions between food, water and energy.

Throughout his career, Ryan has focused his efforts on systems that serve to advance local economies, water and food security. Ryan grew up on a mixed row crop and dairy farm in Corsica, South Dakota. After graduation from SDSU, he became a licensed Professional Engineer working across the Midwest. Ryan later founded multiple companies related to water and agriculture in the fresh produce, consulting and technology fields.

In his current role, Ryan oversees the South Dakota Water Resources institute, whose mission is to: provide leadership on evolving water concerns and problems being faced by South Dakota citizens through research, educational opportunities for students and professionals, and community outreach. The institute is affiliated with SDSU's College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences, Department of Agricultural and Biosystems Engineering and the South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station. https://www.sdstate.edu/agricultural-biosystems-engineering/south-dakota-water-resources-institute

Ryan's passion is to serve people and steward the planet through education, research, extension and innovation.



Rajesh Kavasseri, Co-Executive Director, Center for AI Innovation and Emergent Technologies, Associate Dean for Research, Jerome J Lohr College of Engineering, SDSU

Dr. Rajesh Kavasseri is Associate Dean for Research and Professor in the Jerome J. Lohr College of Engineering at South Dakota State University and Co-Executive Director of its Center for AI Innovation and Emergent Technologies. With a background in electrical power systems, dynamics, and control, he brings an engineering perspective to the opportunities and infrastructure demands of artificial intelligence.

His work spans foundational AI research, AI-enabled scientific discovery, and the development of practical AI applications. He helps guide the college's research portfolio, including high-performance computing and computational resources supporting engineering and interdisciplinary science.

As a researcher, educator, and technology entrepreneur, Dr. Kavasseri connects emerging AI capabilities with real-world needs. His perspective on "Good Neighbor AI" centers on how computing infrastructure, responsible deployment, and useful applications can work together to strengthen regional innovation and deliver tangible benefits to rural communities.



Mike Bockorny, President, SD EDPA

Michael (Mike) Bockorny is a South Dakota native, born and raised in Huron, SD. He attended Northern State University where he graduated with a degree in Business Management. He also holds an MM from the University of Mary and is a Certified Master Economic Development Practitioner (MEDP).

Mike founded The 17-20 Group and serves as the President & CEO. The 17-20 Group serves several clients in business development, childcare, and family services. Mike's primary focus is serving the Economic Development Professionals Association (EDPA) of South Dakota as their CEO; an organization dedicated to the growth and diversification of South Dakota's economy through professional development, networking, and advocacy. He has served on numerous Boards through the years; including the Northern State University Foundation, Boys and Girls Club of the Aberdeen Area, Aberdeen YMCA, Lake Area Technical College and he currently serves on the South Dakota Trade Advisory Board and the South Dakota Defense Institute Board.

Michael has founded/co-founded 19 companies throughout the years and has also taught multiple college courses, primarily focusing on entrepreneurship and small business management. Michael's business ventures include; multi-family rentals, single family housing developments, various commercial ventures including historic downtown restoration projects, a vintage bookstore, and consulting businesses.

He and wife Kristi (a native of Leola, SD and the Dean of the School of Business at Northern State University) have three children, two daughters-in-law, and a grand fur baby; Matthew (Aubrey), Connor (Ryleigh), Emily, and Skye.

- Framing: How can AI infrastructure be a "good neighbor" in South Dakota?
- Acknowledge concerns + outline practical opportunities, discuss agenda

9:45 – 10:30 AM | Keynote Address



Theme: AI Infrastructure in Real Communities: Opportunity, Risk, and Responsibility

Scott Sandal, VP of Client Services, Sunbird Software

Scott Sandal is a lifelong South Dakotan raised on a family ranch near Howes where he attended K-8 at Plainview's 2-room country school. Scott graduated from Faith High School, married Heidi from Irene, SD in 1997. They are both alumni of Dakota State University and have 4 children and 2 grandchildren. Their children attended Lennox HS where Scott is serving his 10th year on the Lennox Board of Education.

In 2008, Scott and Heidi built the Yankton data center, which led to his current title of VP of Client Services for Sunbird Software. Sunbird Software is the industry leading provider of a data center infrastructure management (DCIM) platform. This position has allowed Scott to travel globally, working with data center managers on improving the operational efficiencies in the facilities they manage. Today, with over 200 employees, Sunbird has clients in all 50 states and 110 countries. Scott's leadership has ensured that over 50 of those Sunbird jobs have been created here in Southeast South Dakota.

10:45 AM – 11:30 AM | Panel 1: AI Infrastructure Footprint: What the Load Actually Requires

Theme: Energy, water, and land at regional scale, and whether supply can meet it.

- Load growth and grid readiness: interconnection queues, generation and transmission buildout, timelines
- Water at scale: sourcing, cooling demand, where regional supply comes from
- Siting and land: what makes a parcel viable, and the tradeoffs
- Frame Question: Is the supply there, and on what timeline?

Moderator: Mike Bockorny, EDPA

Panelists:



Bleau LaFave, Northwestern Energy

Bleau LaFave serves as Vice President of Planning, Development, and Asset Management at NorthWestern Energy, where he oversees the planning, development, and management of the company's electric and natural gas generation, transmission, and distribution assets. He is a member of the Southwest Power Pool's Members Board Committee and previously served for 17 years on the South Dakota One Call Board. Bleau holds a Bachelor of Science in Mechanical Engineering from the South Dakota School of Mines & Technology



Kyle Peters, Partner – Harvest Group

Kyle Peters is a South Dakota native raised on his family's row crop and cow-calf operation. Throughout his career, he has worked with companies, communities, and government leaders to advance complex projects through strategic partnerships, government relations, and economic development. As a Partner at Harvest Group, Kyle advises clients on government, infrastructure, public affairs, project development, and large-scale capital investment projects across the country. Previously, he helped build a development advisory firm and served with the South Dakota Governor's Office of Economic Development, where he led business development efforts focused on business recruitment and value-added agriculture. Kyle also serves on Watertown City Council and on several business, nonprofit, and economic development boards. An avid outdoorsman and licensed pilot, he brings a practical, collaborative, common sense, and results-driven approach to his work.



Chris Schmit, PhD, Water/Wastewater Project Manager, Bolton & Menk, Inc.; Professor Emeritus SDSU

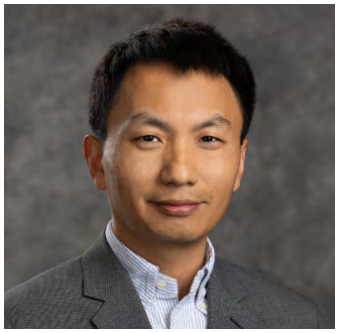
Chris began his professional career in 1998 after graduating with his PhD from Iowa State and brings extensive experience in wastewater treatment, water quality, utility operations, and environmental engineering. He has spent nearly three decades teaching engineers how to effectively complete these items as well for communities. His leadership in engineering education, applied research, and operator training is unmatched across the upper Midwest as Chris has a unique ability to translate complex biological and chemical treatment processes into clear, actionable (and practical) guidance for clients and project teams. He works closely with municipal utilities, conducts performance evaluations of water and wastewater treatment systems, and contributes to the advancement of innovative treatment technologies that improve public and environmental health. Known for his fun collaborative and common-sense approach, Chris is passionate about helping clients better understand the science behind water and wastewater treatment.

11:30 – 12:15 PM | Panel 2: Rural Readiness: Communities as Infrastructure Hosts

Theme: How small utilities, broadband providers, and permitting bodies integrate a hyperscale load, and who benefits.

- Municipal and rural systems: capacity, rate impacts, risk to existing customers
- Broadband and fiber as the enabling layer (and what it unlocks beyond the data center)
- Permitting, zoning, and state coordination: what a community must have ready before the call comes
- Local economic benefit, workforce, and environmental stewardship
- Frame Question: If a developer called tomorrow, is your community ready — and should it say yes?

Moderator: Dr. Junjian Qi



Junjian Qi, SDSU Hohbach Endowed Associate Professor, Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, Lead Scientist AI WEAR Project

Dr. Junjian Qi is the Harold C. Hohbach Endowed Associate Professor in the McComish Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science at South Dakota State University. He received his B.E. in electrical engineering from Shandong University in 2008 and his Ph.D. in electrical engineering from Tsinghua University in 2013. Before joining SDSU, he held Assistant Professor appointments at the University of Central Florida (2017–2020) and Stevens Institute of Technology (2020–2023). His research spans cascading blackouts, microgrid control, cyber-physical systems, and synchrophasors. Dr. Qi is a recipient of the NSF CAREER Award (2020), the 2021 Best Paper Award from IEEE Transactions on Power Systems, the 2022 Best Paper Award from the Journal of Modern Power Systems and Clean Energy, and Best Paper Awards from IEEE PES General Meetings, IEEE PES ISGT Asia, and International Conference on Probabilistic Methods Applied to Power Systems. He serves as an Associate Editor for IEEE Transactions on Power Systems and IEEE Power Engineering Letters, and Editor for Scientific Reports.

Panelists:



Todd Kays, Executive Director, 1st Planning District

Todd Kays serves as the Executive Director of the First District Association of Local Governments in Watertown, South Dakota. During his more than thirty-three years with the organization, he has worked extensively with communities, counties, economic development organizations, and elected officials to identify community and economic development opportunities, address growth-related challenges, build consensus among diverse stakeholders, and facilitate sound public policy. He has extensive experience in comprehensive planning, land use and zoning, infrastructure planning, economic development finance, grant administration, GIS applications, and regional development. Throughout his career, he has assisted local governments in securing funding, implementing strategic initiatives, and developing practical solutions that strengthen communities and promote sustainable economic growth. He is a graduate of the University of South Dakota and holds the designation of Certified Economic Development Finance Professional (EDFP) from the National Development Council. Mr. Kays is also a member of the American Planning Association and the South Dakota Planners Association.



Tim Reed, Chair of the SD Senate Local Government Standing Committee and current SD State Senator District 7

Tim Reed serves as South Dakota State Senator for District 7 and previously served eight years as Mayor of Brookings and as CEO of the Brookings Economic Development Corporation. His experience spans local government, infrastructure planning, business investment, and workforce development. A Brookings native and South Dakota State University graduate.



Mike Jaspers, Business Development Director, East River Electric Cooperative, Inc.

As Business Development Director for East River Electric, Jaspers leads economic development efforts and supports business development projects for the cooperative. Prior to joining East River Electric in 2018, Jaspers served as South Dakota's Secretary of Agriculture from 2016-2018 during the Daugaard Administration and previously served as a state legislator from 1997-2004 and as state director of USDA/ Rural Development in 2007-2008. A life-long agricultural producer, Mike and his family continue to raise row crops and beef cattle in eastern South Dakota.

12:45-1:15 Economic Impact Perspective

Lunch Speaker: "How will AI Infrastructure and Use Impact the Economy of South Dakota?"



Rajesh Kavasseri, Co-Executive Director, Center for AI Innovation and Emergent Technologies, Associate Dean for Research, Jerome J Lohr College of Engineering, SDSU

1:30 – 2:15 PM | Panel 3: AI, Economic Development & South Dakota

Theme: AI Infrastructure financing/investment, pros/cons, payback and "how it all works"

Moderator: Mike Bockorny, EDPA

Panelists:



Tyler Tordsen, CEO of Sioux Metro Growth Alliance

Tyler Tordsen serves as president and CEO of Sioux Metro Growth Alliance, leading regional economic development efforts across communities in southeastern South Dakota. A lifelong South Dakotan and enrolled member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Sioux Tribe, he brings extensive experience in public service, community engagement and government relations. Before joining SMGA, Tyler served eight years on U.S. Senator Mike Rounds' staff and represented District 14 in the South Dakota House of Representatives. A University of South Dakota graduate, he is passionate about strengthening communities, building partnerships and creating opportunities for responsible growth throughout the Sioux Metro region.



Jack Valentine, President & CEO of Elevate Rapid City

Jack Valentine serves as President and CEO of Elevate Rapid City, where he leads the organization's work to strengthen the regional economy and improve lives through economic development. His focus is on supporting existing businesses, advancing innovation, attracting investment, and creating primary jobs that provide meaningful opportunities for people and families.

Jack brings more than 27 years of experience in leadership, finance, operations, lending, and administration. His service in the United States Marine Corps, law enforcement, and state government shaped his belief that leadership begins with serving others, earning trust, and taking responsibility for results. He values integrity, accountability, continuous improvement, and bringing people together around a common purpose.

Jack holds a bachelor's degree from Montana State University and a Master of Business Administration from Liberty University. He and his wife, Alanna, have five daughters. Outside of work, he enjoys time with his family, being outdoors, and competing in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu.

2:30 – 3:15 PM | Panel 4: AI in Practice in South Dakota

Theme: Real-world AI applications and benefits to agriculture and rural communities

- Agriculture
- Health Care
- Connectivity

Moderator: Dr. Rajesh Kavasseri, SDSU

Panelists:



Nick Fosness, CEO of Marshall County Hospital Healthcare Center Avera, Vice President and incoming Chair of the Board of Directors for the South Dakota Association of Healthcare Organizations (Health Care)

Nick was appointed to the District 1 House seat and stepped into the role ready to serve with a balanced, common sense approach and a commitment to listening to the people he represents.

With more than 26 years of experience in rural healthcare, Nick understands how important it is for families to have access to quality care close to home. He has worked firsthand with patients, providers, and communities to strengthen local healthcare systems.

His service also includes nine years on the Britton Hecla School Board, including time as board chair, where he focused on supporting students, teachers, and long term stability for the district.



Ben Dold, President and COO, Midco (Connectivity)

As President & COO of Midco, Ben Dold is responsible for the executive oversight of the company's day-to-day operations, including the Operations, IT, Technology, Marketing, Strategy & Growth, Enterprise Project Management, Legal and Sales teams. In his role, Ben is focused on providing a great customer experience and helping the organization achieve its mission to be the best communications company in the country for its customers, team members, business partners and communities. Prior to joining Midco in 2010, Ben worked in corporate finance and strategy in the CPG and distribution industries. Ben earned an MBA from St. Cloud State University and a bachelor's degree in economics from St. John's University. Ben is a graduate of the Leadership Sioux Falls program and serves on the board of the St. Francis House, a homeless shelter in Sioux Falls. In 2026, he was elected to the boards of CableLabs and NCTA – The Internet and Television Association, providing leadership and strategic insight on issues impacting the broadband and telecommunication industry.



Nicholas Uilk, Klingbeil Endowed Educator in Precision Agriculture/ Lecturer, Ag & Biosystems Engineering, SDSU (Agriculture - Precision Ag/Row Crops/Ag Machinery)

Nicholas Uilk, Klingbeil endowed educator in Precision Ag and Lecturer, has been with the Agricultural and Biosystems Engineering department since 2009 and is heavily involved in developing and maintaining curriculum to meet the demands of today's precision agriculture professional. Courses he leads include: Introduction to Precision Agriculture, Chemical Application Systems, Computer Applications in Agriculture, Ag Industrial & Outdoor Power, and Introduction to Ag Systems Technology. Nic also advises undergraduate students in both the Precision Ag and AST programs as well as coordinates the internship program for Precision Ag and AST majors.



Hector Menendez, Assistant Research Professor/Extension Specialist-Livestock Grazing, Animal Science, SDSU West River Ag Center (Agriculture - Precision Livestock)

Dr. Hector Menendez is an Assistant Professor at South Dakota State University (SDSU), with a focus on complex grazing systems. He is housed at SDSU's West River Research and Extension center and focuses his research and extension programming on grazing beef cattle and bison systems in the western U.S. Dr. Menendez earned his B.S. and M.S. degrees from Sam Houston State University in 2010 and 2012, respectively, and his Ph.D. from SDSU in 2018. He gained postdoctoral experience from Texas A&M University and the USDA-ARS Dairy Forage Research Center before starting his faculty appointment at SDSU in the fall of 2020. Dr. Menendez has rapidly gained a national and international reputation for employing a systems-level approach to tackle the complex issues facing today's livestock producers. Dr. Menendez develops and employs cutting-edge technologies to enhance his research. He additionally strives to ensure those same technologies can be feasibly used by producers to enhance their operations.

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MC-04410