

Updates and analysis from the Government and Leadership Office of the Venice Area Chamber of Commerce

INSIDE

Intern Nicolas Liberoni shares “The Bottom Line” for local business

Hot Topic – Tax Exemption Amendment

Our Demystifying AI initiative
Week 1 of 6

Did You Know?

C&C Café at the Sarasota County Jail



The Bottom Line:

The latest economic indicators as of June 11, 2026 point to a steady but cautious economic environment across Sarasota County, and the broader national landscape. Locally, Sarasota County’s housing market remains active, with 704 home sales recorded in March 2026, reflecting continued demand and population-driven economic support. At the state level, Florida’s unemployment rate sits at approximately 4.8%, with only modest year-over-year change, reinforcing a stable labor market. Initial jobless claims total 5,167, and labor force participation remains steady near 57.7%, signaling consistency in workforce engagement. However, early signs of softening consumer confidence are emerging, with sentiment declining by 2.1% in May. At the same time, businesses continue to navigate elevated fuel costs, with gas prices around \$3.83, and a still-active job market with approximately 8,460 open positions statewide.

National indicators mirror these trends, suggesting a broader environment of stabilization rather than acceleration. Gas prices average approximately \$4.13, while the national unemployment rate stands at roughly 4.3%. Inflation remains a factor, with consumer prices increasing about 4.2% year-over-year, highlighting ongoing cost pressures despite signs of moderation.

For Venice area businesses, this data signals a dual operating environment. Stable employment and a strong housing market support a reliable customer base, particularly in essential services, health care, and home-

related industries. However, declining consumer sentiment and persistent inflation suggest that households may become more selective in discretionary spending, impacting retail, hospitality, and tourism sectors. Rising fuel costs and steady—though not expanding—labor participation also reinforce ongoing operational challenges tied to logistics and workforce availability.

In this environment, the most successful businesses will be those that remain agile—closely managing pricing strategies, prioritizing employee retention, and monitoring shifts in customer behavior. Maintaining operational efficiency while preparing for potential fluctuations in demand will be critical as the regional economy continues to balance stability with emerging constraints.

HOT TOPIC: The Florida Homestead Tax Exemption Amendment proposal

Florida lawmakers passed a property tax amendment that would raise the homestead tax exemption from \$50,000 to \$250,000 by 2028. This bill will be voted on by Florida residents on the November ballot, requiring a 60% vote to pass.

This amendment has important potential ramifications for Sarasota County. It is estimated that Sarasota County will lose roughly \$87 million in the 2029 fiscal year if this exemption is to be passed, according to ABC7 News.

Property taxes help fund city and county services like fire departments, police departments, and parks. Reducing this tax would mean that the county's budget would be constrained, and these services may face significant losses.

According to the Tax Foundation, 74% of taxes from counties across Florida come from property taxes. This increase in the homestead exemption would “yield harmful economic consequences,” the organization states.

The organization also argues that the lost revenue would have to come from other sources. Because fire and police departments are essential to the community, the money that funds them needs to be present regardless of where it comes from. This means that local governments may have to borrow money to fund these services or increase taxes in other areas.

The Tallahassee Democrat claims that the exemption could even raise home prices if counties are forced to raise taxes on commercial and residential rent.

Senior Economist at Realtor.com, Joel Berner, argues that the tax amendment disproportionately benefits the wealthy as it would cut taxes for those who own the home and potentially raise prices for those who are renting.

The amendment looks to make housing more affordable across Florida. Florida homeowners find it consistently more difficult to afford rising prices and insurance premiums. Slashing property taxes would lower the amount of money homeowners owe, and it can make home buying a more affordable option.

Many large firms find it difficult to move to Florida because laborers find it challenging to relocate to or within the state. Lowering the amount of taxes paid by homeowners would make it easier for educated workers to move to the state and build Floridian companies.

The tradeoff between housing prices and local services is the grand debate of the amendment. This November, Florida residents will have to decide if lower property taxes are worth potentially lower quality services.

VACC Chamber Demystifying AI (our attempt) WEEK 1 of 6

This program is deliberately **progressive**. Week 1 establishes a shared foundation — a common language and map of what AI actually is. Each subsequent week builds on that foundation, applying AI concepts to specific business functions you manage every day: operations, marketing, human resources, administration, and strategy. By Week 6, you will have the beginning of a “roadmap” for your business.

Venice is a growing, vibrant, and economically active community serving Osprey, Laurel, Nokomis, Venice, and Wellen Park—and it is reaching an important moment. Venice Area Chamber of Commerce members represent nearly every sector AI is transforming, including retail, real estate, hospitality, healthcare, professional services, construction, and nonprofits. You are not behind. The opportunity for small and mid-size businesses to adopt AI strategically is wide open, and this program is designed to help you move forward with more confidence.

Week	Session Title	Core Theme	Key Takeaway
1	AI 101: What It Is, What It Isn't, and Why It Matters Now	Foundation & Literacy	Build a clear, jargon-free understanding of what AI is, how it works at a business level, and where it applies across industries represented in Venice.
2	AI for Operations: Streamlining the Way You Work	Operational Efficiency	Identify specific operational workflows where AI can eliminate manual effort, reduce costs, and free your team to focus on higher-value work.
3	AI for Marketing, Sales & Customer Experience	Revenue & Relationships	Discover how AI tools can extend your marketing reach, personalize the customer experience, and enhance your sales process — without a large team or budget.
4	AI for Administration, HR & Business Policy	People & Compliance	Understand how AI is reshaping hiring, onboarding, documentation, and internal policy — and how to build the governance framework your business needs.
5	AI Risk, Ethics, Data Privacy & Governance	Responsibility & Protection	Recognize the real risks of AI adoption — including bias, hallucinations, and data exposure — and build the governance practices that protect your business and customers.

Week	Session Title	Core Theme	Key Takeaway
6	Your AI Roadmap: Building a Strategy for Your Business	Strategy & Action	Leave with a practical, personalized AI strategy framework — and a 90-day quick start plan you can begin implementing the week after graduation.

Venice Area Chamber of Commerce | Demystifying AI Executive Briefing Series

Week 1 of 6 | Mid-Level Introduction | Foundation Session

AI 101: What It Is, What It Isn't, and Why It Matters Now

What We Cover This Week:

We begin at the beginning – building a shared language for AI, separating fact from fiction, and constructing a map of the AI landscape that is relevant to your specific business context. By the end of this session, every participant will have a clear, confident understanding of what AI is, what it is not, and why now is the strategic moment for Venice area businesses to engage.

1. Learning Objectives

By the end of Week 1, participants will be able to:

- Define artificial intelligence in plain business language, without relying on technical jargon
- Distinguish between narrow AI, machine learning, large language models, and generative AI — and explain why each distinction matters for business decision-making

- Identify and refute the five most common myths that prevent business leaders from engaging with AI strategically
- Map the primary categories of AI tools to the functions of a small-to-mid-size business
- Apply the AI Adoption Maturity Model to accurately assess where their own organization currently sits on the adoption spectrum
- Articulate two to three specific AI opportunities relevant to their own industry and business model

2. Opening Framing: The AI Moment We Are In

We are living through a technology transition that business historians will describe the way we now describe the arrival of the internet or the personal computer — except this one is moving considerably faster. Artificial intelligence has crossed from experimental novelty to practical business tool, and the data confirms it with remarkable clarity.

Consider these benchmarks from 2025 and 2026:

- According to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, **58% of small businesses** now use generative AI — up from 40% in 2024 and roughly double the rate of 2023.
- Among growing small businesses, AI adoption stands at **83%**, compared to just 55% among declining businesses — a 28-percentage-point gap that strongly correlates AI adoption with business growth.
- Of small business owners actively using AI, **63% use it daily**, reporting savings of more than 20 hours per month in manual work.
- Global AI spending is projected to surpass **\$301 billion** in 2026, growing at 35% year-over-year — meaning the tools are becoming more powerful, more accessible, and more affordable every quarter.
- Skills gaps remain the number one barrier to AI adoption, affecting **46% of business leaders** — which is precisely why this program exists.

Pro Tip

The most dangerous place for a Venice area business leader to be in 2026 is not "experimenting cautiously with AI." It is "waiting until things settle down." The window for early-mover advantage in your local market is open right now — and your competitors, locally and regionally, are starting to move.

What about Venice specifically? The Venice, Florida area is a community in active growth — with a projected City of Venice population approaching 30,000 by 2026, a median household income of approximately \$76,755, and a rich ecosystem of businesses across retail, healthcare, real estate, tourism, construction, and professional services. The Venice Area Chamber of Commerce serves businesses across Osprey, Laurel, Nokomis, Venice, and the rapidly expanding Wellen Park corridor. Every one of those business categories is actively being transformed by AI tools — tools that are now affordable and accessible to organizations of any size.

The question for Venice area business leaders is no longer *whether* to engage with AI. The question is *how* to engage strategically, practically, and on your own terms. That is what this series is designed to help you answer.

3. What Is Artificial Intelligence?

a. A Plain-Language Definition

Artificial intelligence, at its core, is **software that learns from data to make predictions, generate outputs, or automate decisions** — tasks that previously required human intelligence. Think of it less like a robot from science fiction and more like a tireless, highly trained analytical assistant that has read an extraordinary amount of material and can apply what it has learned to new situations remarkably quickly.

When your email client filters spam, that is AI. When Netflix recommends what to watch next, that is AI. When a business uses software to predict when a customer is likely to churn, or to draft a first pass of a marketing email, or to answer a customer service inquiry at 11 p.m. on a Saturday — that is all AI. The common thread is software learning patterns from data and applying them to new situations.

b. Narrow AI vs. General AI

Narrow AI (also called Weak AI) refers to systems trained to do one specific type of task extremely well. A spam filter, a product recommendation engine, a chatbot, a fraud detection system — these are all narrow AI. They are

extraordinarily capable within their defined domain, and utterly unable to do anything outside of it. This is the AI you are encountering in business tools today.

General AI (also called Artificial General Intelligence, or AGI) refers to a hypothetical system that could reason, learn, and apply intelligence across any domain, the way a human can. Despite the headlines, we are not there yet. Do not let AGI speculation distract you from the enormous practical value of narrow AI tools available to your business right now.

c. Machine Learning: The Engine Behind AI

Machine learning (ML) is the primary technique that powers most modern AI. Rather than being explicitly programmed with rules, a machine learning system is fed enormous amounts of data and *learns* patterns from that data. A business analogy: imagine hiring a new analyst and instead of giving them a rulebook, you hand them 10 years of your sales records, customer feedback, and operational data, and say, "study this, then tell me what you see." Machine learning does that — at superhuman speed and scale.

d. Large Language Models (LLMs)

A **Large Language Model (LLM)** is a specific, very powerful type of AI that has been trained on massive quantities of text — books, websites, articles, code, documents — and learned to predict, continue, and generate human-like text. When you type a question into ChatGPT and receive a coherent, contextually appropriate answer, you are interacting with an LLM. The "large" refers to both the volume of training data and the enormous number of mathematical parameters the model contains. Think of an LLM as a research assistant who has read virtually everything ever written, can synthesize it instantly, and can communicate the results in plain English.

e. Generative AI

Generative AI is the category of AI that creates new content — text, images, code, audio, video — rather than simply classifying or analyzing existing content. ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, Google Gemini, and Claude are all examples of generative AI tools. For business leaders, generative AI is the most immediately accessible and practically relevant category, because it can assist with writing, analysis, planning, customer communication, and countless other daily tasks.

4. What AI Is NOT — Dispelling Five Common Myths

Myth 1: "AI is magic — it can do anything."

AI is a powerful tool, not a miracle worker. It operates within the boundaries of what it was trained on and what it was designed to do. It makes mistakes. It can generate plausible-sounding but incorrect information (a phenomenon called "hallucination"). Treating AI outputs as authoritative without human review is one of the most common and

consequential errors businesses make. AI is a powerful *assistant* — it performs best with human oversight and verification.

Myth 2: "AI is infallible — I can just trust whatever it produces."

AI systems make errors — sometimes subtle ones, sometimes significant ones. LLMs in particular can confidently state incorrect facts, miscalculate, or misinterpret context. For any business-critical output — financial data, legal language, medical information, client communications — treat AI as a highly capable first draft, not a finished product. The human review layer is non-negotiable.

Myth 3: "AI is going to eliminate all our jobs."

This is the anxiety that perhaps most often prevents business leaders from engaging thoughtfully with AI. The reality is considerably more nuanced. Research consistently shows that AI is primarily *augmenting* human work — automating specific tasks within jobs rather than eliminating entire roles. For small businesses, AI is far more likely to be the tool that lets your team of five operate with the leverage of a team of ten than it is to be a replacement for your employees. The businesses most likely to see job disruption are those that don't train their people to work alongside AI.

Pro Tip

The businesses losing team members to AI are largely those that failed to *involve* their teams in AI adoption. When employees feel threatened by AI, they disengage. When they are empowered to use AI as a tool in their own work, they become more productive and more valuable — and more loyal.

Myth 4: "AI is only for big tech companies with massive data teams."

This was more true five years ago. Today, the AI tools available through platforms like Microsoft 365, Google Workspace, Canva, QuickBooks, HubSpot, and dozens of other subscription services are designed explicitly for small and mid-size businesses — with no data science team required. If you can type a question into a search engine, you have the basic skills to begin using AI tools productively.

Myth 5: "AI is too expensive for a business like mine."

The most powerful generative AI tools in the world — ChatGPT, Microsoft Copilot, Google Gemini — are available for anywhere between free and \$30 per month per user. The business-grade versions of these tools, integrated into software your organization may already be paying for (Microsoft 365, Google Workspace, HubSpot, QuickBooks), are available as plan upgrades. The cost of *not* adopting AI — in lost productivity, slower decision-making, and competitive disadvantage — is considerably higher than the cost of starting.

5. The AI Landscape: A Business Owner's Map

AI tools for business can be organized into five broad categories. The table below maps each category to common business functions and lists representative tools.

AI Category	What It Does for Your Business	Representative Tools	Business Functions Served
Productivity & Automation	Automates repetitive tasks; drafts documents; summarizes meetings and emails; manages workflows	Microsoft Copilot, ChatGPT, Notion AI, Zapier, Make	Operations, Administration, Executive Office
Customer-Facing AI	Handles customer inquiries 24/7; personalizes responses; routes service requests; powers live chat	Intercom, Ada, Tidio, Nextiva, Drift	Customer Service, Sales, Hospitality
Data & Analytics	Analyzes business data; identifies trends; generates forecasts; creates dashboards and reports	Microsoft Copilot for Excel, Tableau, Power BI, Domo	Finance, Operations, Strategic Planning
Content & Marketing	Generates marketing copy, blog posts, social media content, email campaigns, and ad creative	Jasper, Copy.ai, Canva AI, HubSpot AI, Grammarly	Marketing, Communications, Brand Management
HR & Operations AI	Screens candidates; automates scheduling; assists onboarding; supports policy documentation	Rippling, BambooHR, Workable, Otter.ai, Calendly AI	Human Resources, Administration, Scheduling

Pro Tip

You do not need tools from every category on day one. The most effective AI adopters start by identifying one or two high-friction areas in their business — tasks that consume disproportionate time or cause recurring frustration — and begin with AI tools that address those specific pain points. Breadth comes later. Focused depth comes first.

6. How AI Benefits Business Across Multiple Sectors

Venice area businesses represent a rich cross-section of industries. The following provides sector-specific AI use cases relevant to the Chamber membership community.

Business Sector	High-Impact AI Use Cases for This Sector
Retail	• AI-powered inventory management to predict demand and reduce overstock/understock • Personalized email and SMS marketing based on customer purchase history • AI chatbot for after-hours product inquiries and order tracking
Hospitality & Tourism	• 24/7 AI chatbot for booking inquiries, availability questions, and local recommendations • AI-generated personalized guest communication (pre-arrival, post-stay follow-up) • Sentiment analysis of online reviews to identify service improvement priorities
Healthcare & Wellness	• AI-assisted appointment scheduling, reminders, and patient communication • AI-powered transcription for clinical notes and administrative documentation • Patient intake automation and eligibility verification assistance
Professional Services (Legal, Accounting, Consulting)	• AI document review and summarization for contracts, reports, and filings • AI-assisted research and brief preparation • Automated client communication and follow-up workflows
Real Estate	• AI-generated property descriptions and marketing copy • Lead scoring and automated buyer/seller follow-up sequences • AI market analysis tools for pricing intelligence and trend identification
Construction & Trades	• AI-assisted project estimating, scheduling, and resource planning • Automated invoice generation and accounts receivable follow-up • AI-powered job site safety documentation and compliance checklists
Non-Profits	• AI-generated grant proposal drafts and donor communication • Volunteer scheduling optimization and automated communication • AI-powered donor segmentation and targeted fundraising campaigns

7. The AI Adoption Spectrum — Where Are You Today?

AI adoption is not a binary on/off switch. Organizations move through a spectrum of maturity over time. The following model will help you and your team self-assess your current position — honestly and without judgment. Every starting point is valid. The goal is to know where you are so you can plan where you are going.

Stage	Organizational Profile	Typical Characteristics	Recommended Next Step
Stage 0: Unaware	AI is not on the organization's radar	No AI tools in use; leadership not tracking AI developments; "we'll deal with it when it matters"	Complete this 6-week series and identify one AI tool to evaluate
Stage 1: Curious	AI awareness is present but no action taken	Leadership has read about AI; perhaps experimented personally with ChatGPT; no organizational use yet	Identify 2-3 business pain points AI could address and begin a structured evaluation
Stage 2: Experimenting	Individual team members using AI tools informally	Ad hoc, uncoordinated AI use; no policy; no measurement; results are inconsistent	Formalize a pilot program with clear objectives, success metrics, and a usage policy
Stage 3: Integrating	AI is embedded in specific workflows with organizational awareness	Defined use cases in production; team training underway; basic policy in place; tracking ROI	Expand successful pilots to adjacent functions; document best practices; build AI fluency across the team
Stage 4: Optimizing	AI is a core operational capability woven into strategy	AI embedded across multiple functions; continuous improvement mindset; competitive differentiation through AI capability	Focus on advanced analytics, custom AI integrations, and AI-driven innovation in products/services

8. Policies & Administration Impact Overview

As a brief preview of what we will cover in Week 4: AI adoption has meaningful implications for how you manage your people and your organization. Before your employees begin using AI tools — or if they have already started — your business needs basic governance in place.

Key areas where AI intersects with business administration and policy include:

- **HR Policies:** What AI tools may employees use, for what purposes, and what oversight is required? Who owns AI-generated work product?
- **IT & Data Security Policies:** What data may be entered into AI tools? What safeguards prevent sensitive client or business data from being inadvertently shared with AI platforms?
- **Data Governance:** How does the organization manage the data that AI tools rely on — and what obligations exist regarding customer data privacy?
- **Business Administration:** AI is already reshaping scheduling, meeting documentation, contract review, and email management — areas often handled informally in small businesses that now benefit from clear guidance.

We will develop a practical AI Acceptable Use Policy framework together in Week 4. For now, simply be aware that having this conversation at the organizational level — before AI use becomes widespread and uncoordinated — is one of the highest-value investments of your leadership time.

9. Week 1 Key Takeaways

✓ Week 1 Key Takeaways

- AI is not magic, not infallible, and not just for large enterprises — it is a practical tool available to businesses of every size and sector today
- The core AI technologies relevant to your business — machine learning, LLMs, and generative AI — are tools that assist and augment human work, not replace human judgment
- Small business AI adoption is accelerating rapidly; growing businesses are significantly more likely to use AI than declining ones
- Venice area businesses across every sector — retail, hospitality, healthcare, real estate, trades, and non-profits — have specific, concrete AI opportunities available to them right now
- Knowing where your organization sits on the AI Adoption Spectrum is the essential first step toward building a deliberate, strategic AI approach

10. Week 1 Action Items

🔑 Action Items – Complete Before Week 2

1. **Create a free account with ChatGPT (chat.openai.com) or Microsoft Copilot (copilot.microsoft.com)** and spend 20 minutes asking it questions about your business, your industry, or a challenge you are currently facing. Note what surprises you — positively or negatively.
2. **Complete the AI Adoption Spectrum self-assessment** for your organization. Assign your business to one of the five stages. Write two or three sentences justifying your rating. Bring this to Week 2.
3. **Identify your organization's top three "AI opportunity areas"** — specific tasks, workflows, or challenges that consume disproportionate time or produce inconsistent results. These will become the seeds of your AI strategy in Week 6.

11. Week 1 Discussion Questions

💬 Discussion Questions – For Your Workgroup or Personal Reflection

1. What has been the primary source of your impressions — positive or negative — about AI before today? Was that source primarily media, colleagues, personal experience, or something else?
2. Which of the five AI myths we discussed today most closely mirrors assumptions you held before this session? What shifted in your thinking?

3. Looking at the sector-specific use cases for your industry, which one or two felt most immediately relevant and realistic for your business? What would need to be true for you to pilot one of them in the next 90 days?
4. What is the biggest specific concern — not a general anxiety, but a specific concern — that would need to be addressed before you would feel comfortable expanding AI use in your organization? We will address this directly in Weeks 4 and 5.

12. Recommended Resources for Week 1

Resource	Type	Description & Why It Is Relevant for Beginners
ChatGPT (chat.openai.com)	AI Tool — Free & Paid	The most widely used generative AI tool. Start with the free version. Ask it about your business, have it draft an email, or explain a concept in plain language. The best way to understand AI is to use it.
Microsoft Copilot (copilot.microsoft.com)	AI Tool — Free & Paid	Microsoft's AI assistant, integrated with Bing search and Microsoft 365. Excellent for business research, document drafting, and data analysis within Word, Excel, and Outlook.
Google Gemini (gemini.google.com)	AI Tool — Free & Paid	Google's AI assistant, deeply integrated with Gmail, Google Docs, and Google Drive. Particularly strong for users already working within the Google ecosystem.
Claude (claude.ai)	AI Tool — Free & Paid	Anthropic's AI assistant, widely regarded for thoughtful, nuanced responses on complex topics. Excellent for summarizing long documents, drafting professional communications, and analytical reasoning.
SBA Office of Advocacy — AI & Small Business Report	Research Report — Free	The U.S. Small Business Administration publishes ongoing research on AI adoption trends among small businesses. Accessible, data-rich, and directly relevant to businesses of your scale. Available at sba.gov/advocacy .

Looking Ahead to Week 2:

Now that we have established a shared foundation – what AI is, where it applies, and where your organization sits on the adoption spectrum – we turn from the "what" to the "how." In Week 2, we focus on the operational engine of your business: where AI can eliminate friction, accelerate workflows, and give you back time and resources to invest in growth.

Did you know?

C&C (Courts and Corrections) Café at the Sarasota County Jail

This past Friday, June 12th, the VACC adult Leadership Venice program participants toured the Sarasota County Jail as part of Government Day. Many interesting things were learned that day by the group, one of which being that our own Venice Area Chamber of Commerce member business, **Black Gold Coffee Roasters**, has for several years supported, through coffee supplies and training, the C&C Café work-study program. This program provides training opportunities to qualified inmates for excellent customer service, cashier skills, and barista-ing. The coffee can be purchased in the café by SCSO employees and visitors to the jail. How about that for one of the many great programs supported by local business and offered by the Sheriff's Office for skills and trades training, etc.? Two of the coffee flavors available are the "Hoffman House Brew" and the "Major Meinberg Mocha".