VENICE AREA
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE
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The Briefing

June 22, 2026

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

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Hot Topic – The Federal Reserve, an update from Nick Liberoni

Our Demystifying AI initiative
Week 2 of 6

Did You Know?

Big Brothers/Big Sisters needs mentors like you!

Hot Topic: Federal Reserve Holds Rates as Warsh Era Begins.

On June 17, the Federal Open Market Committee voted 12–0 to hold the federal funds target range at 3.50% to 3.75%, marking Kevin Warsh's first policy meeting as Federal Reserve chair. The decision was expected, but the message around it shifted: the Fed shortened its policy statement, removed language that had suggested a bias toward future rate cuts, and emphasized that inflation remains above its 2% goal.

Warsh also signaled a different communications approach. He declined to submit his own projection to the Fed's "dot plot" and said the central bank will review its communications practices, including press conferences, projections, minutes, transcripts and meeting structure. That does not mean the Fed will stop communicating with markets, but it does suggest less explicit forward guidance than investors became accustomed to under prior leadership.

Interest rates remain central to the economic outlook because the Fed's benchmark rate influences borrowing costs across the economy, including mortgages, business loans, credit cards and lines of credit. Higher rates generally make financing more expensive, slowing some purchases and investments; lower rates can support activity but may also add pressure if inflation is already elevated.

The current target range is not a single 3.75% rate; it is a range of 3.50% to 3.75%. The Fed's updated projections also pointed to a more cautious stance than earlier in the year, with several policymakers indicating that a rate increase could still be possible in 2026 if inflation pressures persist.

The policy dilemma remains familiar: the Fed is trying to support maximum employment while returning inflation to its 2% target. Recent inflation readings have remained elevated, with headline inflation reported at 4.2% year over year in May and core inflation lower but still above target. That makes near-term rate cuts less likely unless inflation cools or the labor market weakens materially.

For Florida communities, the local impact is most visible in housing and small-business financing. Elevated rates can keep monthly mortgage payments high, reduce affordability for first-time and move-up buyers, and make expansion or equipment financing more expensive for local employers. In housing markets already shaped by insurance costs, inventory constraints and population growth, rate stability may help buyers plan, but it does not necessarily restore affordability.

Bottom line: The Fed did not change rates, but it did change tone. For "The Briefing," the key takeaway is that businesses, homeowners and prospective buyers should prepare for a longer period of elevated borrowing costs while watching inflation, energy prices and the Fed's evolving communications strategy.

Demystifying AI – Week 2 (our progressive on-line guide to help you with AI considerations for business)

Week 2 of 6 | Operational Efficiency

AI for Operations: Streamlining the Way You Work

What We Cover This Week:

This session moves from theory to practice, focusing on the operational backbone of your business. We examine how AI can eliminate repetitive manual tasks, sharpen financial visibility, optimize scheduling, and support smarter real-time decisions – without requiring a large technology team or infrastructure investment.

1. Learning Objectives

- Identify at least three specific operational workflows in your business where AI automation can reduce manual effort and human error

- Evaluate AI-powered tools for inventory, scheduling, financial management, and workflow automation using a practical selection framework
- Understand the concept of AI-assisted decision-making and how dashboards and intelligent reporting support executive judgment
- Distinguish between automation tools that replace human tasks entirely and augmentation tools that enhance human performance
- Develop an initial priority list of operational AI opportunities tailored to your business's specific needs

2. Session Overview

Operations is the engine room of any business. It encompasses every system, process, and workflow that keeps your organization running — from ordering inventory and scheduling staff to managing cash flow and generating reports. For most small-to-mid-size businesses, operations is also the area most burdened by manual, repetitive work that consumes staff time without generating direct business value.

AI is transforming business operations not by replacing the judgment of experienced managers and owners, but by handling the routine, rules-based, data-intensive tasks that currently require human time and attention. The result: your team spends less time on administrative overhead and more time on the work that actually requires human creativity, judgment, and relationship.

3. Core Content Areas

a. Workflow Automation — Eliminating the Repetitive

Workflow automation tools use AI and rules-based logic to move information and trigger actions across systems without manual intervention. Every time an employee copies data from one system to another, sends a routine follow-up email, fills out a standard form, or manually routes an approval — that is a potential automation target.

Tools like **Zapier** and **Make (formerly Integromat)** allow non-technical business owners to build automated workflows connecting dozens of apps — from your CRM to your email platform to your accounting software — without writing a single line of code. Microsoft's **Power Automate**, included in many Microsoft 365 plans, does the same within the Microsoft ecosystem.

Practical example: A Venice-area property management company automated its rental inquiry process — when a form is submitted on the website, the system automatically creates a CRM record, sends a personalized acknowledgment email, assigns a follow-up task to the appropriate agent, and schedules a callback reminder. A process that previously required 15 minutes of staff time now requires 30 seconds of review. Multiply that across 20 inquiries per week, and you recover significant staff capacity every single month.

Pro Tip

When identifying automation opportunities, ask your team: "What do you do every week that you could describe as a step-by-step recipe?" If the answer follows a predictable sequence of if/then steps, it is almost certainly automatable. Your team will often surface better candidates than any consultant can identify from the outside.

b. Inventory & Supply Chain Intelligence

For retail, food service, construction, healthcare supply, and any other business managing physical inventory, AI-powered demand forecasting is one of the highest-ROI applications available. Traditional inventory management relies on historical averages and human judgment — which works until it doesn't. A seasonal surge, a supply disruption, or a sudden trend shift can quickly produce either costly overstock or damaging stockouts.

AI-powered inventory tools analyze sales history, seasonal patterns, supplier lead times, and even external signals (weather, local events, economic indicators) to generate more accurate demand forecasts and trigger reorder alerts automatically. Tools like **Cin7**, **Lightspeed**, and inventory modules within **QuickBooks Advanced** bring this capability to small and mid-size businesses at accessible price points.

For businesses with supplier relationships, AI can also assist in vendor performance analysis — tracking delivery reliability, pricing trends, and quality metrics to support more strategic procurement decisions.

c. Scheduling & Resource Optimization

Scheduling — whether for staff, equipment, appointments, or project resources — is one of the most time-consuming administrative functions in any service business. AI-powered scheduling tools reduce this burden dramatically by automatically matching availability, skills, and demand, then adjusting dynamically when circumstances change.

For customer-facing scheduling, tools like **Calendly**, **Acuity Scheduling**, and **Microsoft Bookings** allow clients to self-schedule in real time based on actual availability — eliminating the back-and-forth that consumes staff time. For staff scheduling in service and hospitality environments, platforms like **Deputy** and **Homebase** use AI to generate schedule recommendations based on historical demand patterns, employee availability, and labor cost targets.

d. Financial Operations — AI in the Numbers

Financial management is an area where AI delivers immediate, measurable value for small businesses. AI-enhanced accounting tools are now accessible through platforms most Venice area businesses are likely already using.

QuickBooks and **Xero** both incorporate AI features that automatically categorize transactions, identify anomalies that may indicate errors or fraud, and generate cash flow forecasts. **Relay** and **Ramp** offer AI-powered business banking and expense management that automate expense categorization and provide real-time spending visibility. For businesses with complex receivables, AI-powered collections tools can automatically sequence follow-up communications, reducing days-sales-outstanding without requiring manual staff intervention.

Cash flow forecasting — knowing not just what your balance is today but what it is likely to be in 30, 60, or 90 days — is one of the most valuable capabilities AI brings to small business finance. It transforms financial management from a rear-view mirror into a windshield.

e. AI-Assisted Decision Making — Intelligence at the Executive Level

Beyond automating specific tasks, AI is increasingly supporting executive decision-making through intelligent reporting and real-time dashboards. Tools like **Microsoft Power BI** and **Google Looker** now incorporate AI features that can answer natural language questions about your business data — "What were our top five revenue-generating customers last quarter?" or "Show me our staffing costs by department for the past six months" — without requiring a data analyst to build custom reports.

For executives who have historically received data through static monthly reports, this represents a fundamental shift: from scheduled, backward-looking data delivery to on-demand, forward-looking business intelligence. AI does not make decisions for you — it ensures that the decisions you make are informed by the best available data, at the moment you need it.

4. Spotlight Tool Table — AI Tools for Operations

Tool	Best For	Cost Tier	Ease of Use
Zapier	Connecting apps and automating multi-step workflows between systems	Free – $$$	★★★★☆ Moderate

Tool	Best For	Cost Tier	Ease of Use
QuickBooks Advanced	AI-powered accounting, cash flow forecasting, and expense management	$$–$$$	★★★★★ Very Easy
Microsoft Power Automate	Workflow automation within the Microsoft 365 ecosystem	Included in M365	★★★☆☆ Moderate
Deputy	AI-assisted staff scheduling, time tracking, and labor cost management	$–$$	★★★★☆ Easy
Cin7	Inventory management with demand forecasting and multi-channel integration	$$$	★★★☆☆ Moderate
Microsoft Power BI	Business intelligence dashboards with natural language query capabilities	Free – $$	★★★☆☆ Moderate

Cost tiers: Free = $0, $ = under $20/mo, $$ = $20–$100/mo, $$$ = $100+/mo. Ease of use ratings reflect typical small business user experience without dedicated technical support.

5. Week 2 Key Takeaways

✅ Week 2 Key Takeaways

- Workflow automation is the highest-frequency, most immediately accessible AI application for most small businesses — start by mapping your repetitive, rules-based processes
- AI-powered financial tools transform accounting from a backward-looking record-keeping function into a forward-looking strategic instrument
- AI scheduling tools can recover meaningful staff time every week while improving the customer and employee experience simultaneously
- AI-assisted decision-making tools give executives on-demand access to business intelligence that previously required dedicated staff and long reporting cycles

6. Action Items — Complete Before Week 3

✍ **Action Items**

1. **Map your top three repetitive operational tasks** — write out the step-by-step sequence for each and estimate the staff time they currently consume per week. Bring this "process inventory" to Week 3.

2. **Explore one scheduling or workflow automation tool** from the Spotlight Tool Table. Most offer free trials. Identify whether it could integrate with systems your business already uses.

3. **Check whether your existing accounting software** (QuickBooks, Xero, or similar) has AI features you are not currently using. Most platforms now include AI capabilities within standard subscriptions. Identify one feature to activate this week.

7. Discussion Questions

1. What is the single most time-consuming manual process in your operations that, if eliminated or automated, would most meaningfully impact your team's productivity or morale?

2. Have you or your team encountered resistance to changing how a core operational process works? What drove that resistance, and how was it (or wasn't it) resolved?

3. If you could have real-time visibility into any one business metric or data set that you currently don't have, what would it be — and how would it change your decision-making?

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Looking Ahead to Week 3:

With operational efficiency in view, we now turn to the part of your business most visible to the outside world – your marketing, sales, and customer experience. In Week 3, we explore how AI is transforming how businesses attract, engage, and retain customers at a scale and personalization level that was previously available only to enterprises with large marketing teams and budgets.

Did You Know?

Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Sun Coast is seeking caring adult volunteers to serve as mentors for local youth. Just a few hours each month can help a young person build confidence, achieve their goals, and realize their full potential. In Venice alone, BBBS is currently serving over 260 youth and has created over 100 new mentoring matches this year. But we still have a growing waiting list of local youth looking for a mentor.

To learn more or express interest in becoming a mentor, visit https://bbbssun.org/volunteer/ or call 941-488-4009.

Become a Mentor. Change a Life.