

OPINION

Check out our Letter to the Editor about Sodexo.
Pg. 2

CAMPUS

There's CRABs on campus!
Pg.3

SPORTS

The last day for the Illinois Tech Athletic Survey is today.
Pg. 10

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Opinion 2
Campus 3-6
A&E 7-8
The Slipstick 9
Sports 10-11

Sustainability Forum questions corporate responsibilities

By Brock Auerbach-Lynn & Elizabeth Mauban
TECHNEWS WRITERS

The monthly Sustainability Forum, hosted by the Office of Campus Energy and Sustainability, kicked off the semester last Friday with a discussion on whether government policies or consumer choices are more effective in driving businesses to be environmentally and socially responsible.

Joseph Clair, Director of the Office of Campus Energy and Sustainability, started things off with an update of all sustainability projects on campus. He focused attention on several competitions which IIT will be participating in this semester. The first is Recyclemania, an eight-week contest wherein IIT will compete against universities across the country to see which can recycle the most. Last year, IIT placed second in Illinois. Recyclemania starts February 5.

The second competition will be Campus Conservation Nationals. This three-week contest, from late March thru early April, will encourage certain buildings across IIT

to reduce energy and water usage, compared to a baseline measure. IIT will be competing against universities nationwide for the Campus Conservation Nationals crown, as well as some great prizes.

Clair then passed the stage to the moderator, Brock Auerbach-Lynn, the project implementation coordinator for the OCES, as well as an MBA and MS Environmental Management & Sustainability student at IIT's Stuart School of Business. Auerbach-Lynn outlined the opportunities that both consumer spending and government policy have to drive environmental and social change by businesses. He also mentioned some of the difficulties and problems associated with each, including inefficient outcomes with government and uncoordinated efforts among consumers. Having laid a sufficient background, Auerbach-Lynn introduced Ashley Craig to speak on the government policy side.

Ashley Craig is the environmental business specialist at the Chicago-based Environmental Law & Policy Center. She detailed how government policy is a crucial roadmap for businesses, citing the rise and wane of alternative energy investment with state energy policies. Craig also mentioned that waste poli-

cies requiring electronics producers to recycle a large portion of e-waste have triggered a huge market where once there was none. While government is not always benign and certainly not perfect, Craig put forth a strong argument that sound government policy can make a difference in driving environmentally and socially responsible business behavior.

Kath Duffy, the founder and director at the Dill Pickle Food Co-op in Logan Square, followed Craig to the podium to speak on the power of consumer spending. The co-op model, which she built the Dill Pickle around, is completely customer-owned, with the customers dictating policies on everything from the fair trade chocolate to the farming methods of its vegetable producers. Members of the community wanted an organic and local food option that would cater to their specific and slightly "off the beaten path" needs. Duffy remarked that Dill Pickle Food has no debt and has already achieved over a million dollars in sales each of the last two years. "Certainly a testament to consumer power," cited Duffy. The shareholders of the store also shop there, and they are diligent in making sure everything in the store is something they are proud to buy and sell, to educate casual shoppers on

why certain items are or are not offered, as well as explain any price differences between their store and conventional grocers.

Audience members were then given a chance to direct questions to the speakers. Questions ranged from how this recent recession impacted efforts to influence businesses to become more sustainable to how universities can play a role in influencing consumer behavior and purchases, as well as government policy. In response to questions about corporate lobbying and dealing with counterproductive legislation, both Craig and Duffy encouraged the audience to get involved in the process, both as consumers and as responsible citizens engaged with the political process.

The forum elucidated the power of both consumer purchasing and government policy on their own, but it was clear by the end that, when used in conjunction, they are an even more formidable force in driving business to create social and environmental change.

The next Sustainability Forum will be at noon on Friday February 24, in the MTCC Ballroom. Further details can be found by emailing campussustainability@iit.edu.



Photos by Christina Noonan