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Green jobs for R.I. discussed at forum

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WARWICK - A key solution to Rhode Island's economic struggles is increasing awareness of and investing in more "green" jobs for the state's residents, according to a panel of local experts who gathered at the New England Institute of Technology Saturday.

The forum, which attracted almost 100 people from all over the state, including Providence Mayor David Cicilline '83, was one of several hundred events organized around the country as part of Green Jobs Now, a nonprofit, nonpartisan national day of action spearheaded by environmental groups such as Green For All, 1Sky and the We Campaign.

Saturday's panel, comprised of economists, educators and others passionate about environmental issues, discussed the need to reduce demand for traditional sources of energy and educate the state's youth about renewable energy technology.

Part of the task is to convince consumers and legislators that embracing renewable energy will help create jobs, especially for low-income groups, and will prove healthier and more profitable in the long run, said Joseph Ilaqua, professor of economics at Bryant University.

"Green jobs are really not that different from (the jobs) people have or had before they lost them," he said.

At the start of the event, Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I., addressed the audience in a short satellite message from Washington, emphasizing his commitment to bringing more green jobs to the state.

"I envision a new green economy beckoning us, creating new industries and millions of new jobs to fuel America's growth and prosperity in the future," a smiling Whitehouse said.

Panelists suggested that possible green jobs in the state include retrofitting existing buildings in the state to make them more energy efficient, installing white roofs that reflect certain types of radiation to help cool the earth and repairing hybrid and electric cars.

Steven Kitchin, vice president of corporate education and training at NEIT, said high school graduates, members of various ethnic groups and inmates at the Adult Correctional Institutions must be trained in green technology.

"We have to increase our ability to get people to participate in the labor force," Kitchin said.

Many attendees interviewed by The Herald said the event was successful in kicking off a dialogue about the need to "go green," policy initiatives and potential challenges in the path of switching over to non-traditional sources of energy.

Visiting Assistant Professor of Mathematics Jessica Millar said she had discovered a new community of like-minded, environmentally conscious people at the event.

Millar, who serves on Barrington's Committee for Renewable Energy, said she was able to share her passion for wind energy with several people she met at the event. In the future, she said she might work with some of those people on environmental projects.

The event was "a good combination of the practical and the philosophical," said Keally Dewitt '04.5, a marketing associate at Solar Wrights, which installs efficient renewable energy systems, including photovoltaic, solar-thermal and wind systems in New England.

Dewitt said the knowledge and awareness of green technology in the state must spread from traditional sources - from Brown and other leading institutions - and from independent and nonprofit organizations.

Matthew Soursourian '08, an Urban Studies concentrator who works as a policy associate for Cicilline, said the event energized those who are passionate about environmental issues.

Soursourian said young people who come from different educational backgrounds and interests can play a part in helping make Rhode Island greener.

"This is the future," he said. "It's the next dot-com-type industry."

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