

CORNERING SUSTAINABILITY

St. Joe/Benton Harbor group considering forming SBF

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BENTON HARBOR – Two years ago, the topic of sustainability had become such a prominent subject on the minds of business leaders in West Michigan that a popular group, the **WEST MICHIGAN SUSTAINABILITY BUSINESS FORUM**, spawned another such group for the Kalamazoo/Battle Creek market.

Now, the **SOUTHWEST MICHIGAN SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS FORUM (SWMSBF)** is looking to pay the help forward with a potential new group in the St. Joseph/Benton Harbor area.

The SWMSBF was borne out of the demand in the business community for a place to discuss how sustainability issues are affecting business today, and how companies can embrace those principles in practical ways. The group's meetings and "Green Drinks" events have become so popular that many attendees have been traveling from the southwest corner of the state to attend.

To accommodate this demand, several SWMSBF members, led by Becky Kliss of **GREAT LAKES CLEANING** in St. Joseph, are working to form a new group specifically for the St. Joseph/Benton Harbor market.

To gauge interest in a local forum, the first meeting and Green Drinks event was held at **LAKE MICHIGAN COLLEGE** in Benton Harbor on November 4, where the main speaker was J.B. Hoyt, director of government relations for **WHIRLPOOL CORP.**

Approximately 30 people attended the event, and 25 were from the local area.

In his presentation, Hoyt said that Whirlpool has been using the principles of sustainability for several decades and that the company "was green before green was cool." One of Whirlpool's current sustainable projects is an Energy Star-certified washer that would cost approximately \$9 per year to operate.

Hoyt also said the company has a goal that all of its electronic products will be smart grid compliant by 2015. These products would be installed with smart grid sensors that would cause the appliance to adjust its energy usage based on the smart grid load. This will help manage resources more effectively, and be more cost efficient to operate, as it would perform higher level functions at times when rates are the cheapest.

Lynn Spurr, president of the SWMSBF and senior environmental specialist with the architectural firm **FISHBECK, THOMPSON, CARR & HUBER (FTC&H)** was very pleased with the turnout at the first event in the area.

"This is where it all needs to start – with a group about this size," Spurr told *TBL*. "The next step is to get those members that will come back regularly, and those that will take a leadership role to sustain the organization."

Two years ago, Spurr was one of the leaders of the Grand Rapids-based WMSBF.

"It takes a lot of time and a lot of effort for members to come from long distances,

which is why we began the Kalamazoo organization," she said.

Spurr is currently working with Kliss to help set up the bylaws of the new organization and to put a steering committee and board of directors in place. They are also looking to partner with an environmental organization, similar to what the Kalamazoo group did with the **KALAMAZOO NATURE CENTER**, and to what the WMSBF did with the **WEST MICHIGAN ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION COUNCIL**.

Currently, Kliss has been working with the **CORNERSTONE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE** and through the current SWMSBF contact lists to recruit business leaders that might be interested in starting a forum, or just becoming members. Kliss said for the local branch of the Southwest Michigan Sustainable Business Forum, she hopes to have quarterly meetings, similar to the Lake Michigan College event.

She would also like to institute the Green Drinks events on a monthly basis. These events currently draw about 70 members in the Kalamazoo area, according to Spurr, and they provide a more informal way for members to meet and exchange ideas about how they are applying sustainable practices in their businesses. Similar Green Drinks groups are also operating in Grand Rapids, Holland, and Muskegon.

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