

# Right steps in the green direction

Corporations as well as students tell **MAYBEL CHONG** why going green is no longer a luxury but a necessity

**G**REEN buildings, a digital receipt system and other environmentally friendly inventions were among the various creative and practical ideas tossed at the Green Innovations, Our Future Together Symposium organised by the European Union Centre in Singapore recently.

The event, held on May 15 at the Suntec Convention Centre, was attended by 600 participants who got the chance to hear the European Commission, Germany and corporate leaders discuss various ways in which policy and technological solutions can tackle the increasingly important topic of climate change and other environmental issues.

For some individuals, going green means bringing recyclable bags to the supermarket but for corporations, the green route can also translate into greater returns in the long term.

Siemens, whose senior management addressed the audience, views sustainability as something mandatory and closely related to the issue of survival. It also sees business opportunities in this sector.

Osman Ahmed, head of global research and innovation for Siemens Building Technologies, said: "Interestingly, the corporate world is finding that there is a very significant business element that is also moving in the sustainable direction so companies can actually generate businesses, while achieving their goals."

Dr Osman cited a Princeton University study which found that there are tangible economic benefits to be gleaned from new environmental solutions proposed by companies.

"For employing a form of technology that removes carbon, companies can earn up to around \$2,500 for removing a ton of carbon. So if you want to remove a billion tons of carbon in a year, this would translate into a trillion dollars worth of business opportunities."

It is not surprising then, with such attractive paybacks, that sustainability has become the new buzzword among the business community globally.

PricewaterhouseCoopers is another company that showed how it manages to save costs and the environment by implementing green habits in its work environment.

Some initiatives introduced by the Big 4 accounting firm include switching off the lights during lunch hour daily, making sure that printers are set to use both sides of the paper and partnering Motorola for a used mobile



**Championing the Green cause:** Some of the students who took part at the Green Innovations symposium (from left) - Soh Kok Wee, Wee Wei Jian, Robin Lee, Jasmin Choo, Chu Yuet, Dileen Ee and Clara Li

phone collection drive where the collected phone parts are subsequently recycled.

During her presentation at the symposium, Deborah Ong, human capital partner at PwC, said: "Such measures enable our clients to benefit from the company's expertise in consulting on green initiatives and we've achieved considerable energy efficiency and improved profitability with these measures."

Even with an increasing number of such private companies heading towards "greener" pastures, there is collective agreement that governments worldwide should lead the way in sustainability.

Frank Lee, executive vice-president of Siemens Building Technologies, explained how numerous companies in China are going green as a result of strict regulations put in place by the Chinese government.

"I think the Singapore government has also taken a good first step. There are incentives that are spelled out by the government or private enterprises to go green, but to me, incentives are only one thing. The next step should be stricter regulations that make green buildings compulsory for the industry," he said.

Beyond the state-driven push, however, lies the pressing need to address concerns that companies have about pumping a large portion of their budget into investing in green technology, especially during the current difficult economic climate.

Mr Lee advises companies to look ahead in

terms of their investments and assures them of good paybacks and increased competitiveness.

"With Singapore being one of the most developed countries in South-east Asia, there are huge commercial opportunities behind these initiatives," he said. "So Singapore could lead these Asean countries and actually capitalise on the commercial opportunities in this sector in the region."

## Involving the young

More than just engaging business corporations, there is also a need to involve the next generation in the green cause.

That is the reason why the European Union Centre in Singapore invited students from the secondary to tertiary levels to submit entries about their ideas on sustainability. Students could participate in the secondary, pre-university or open-categories and submit themed essays, inventions or art pieces. The winners of the competition received their awards at the symposium.

Chu Yuet, 24, who won a merit award for her idea on developing digital receipts in place of paper ones, felt that these environmental issues concerned us and should not be left unaddressed.

For her science and technology project, the final-year architecture student at the National University of Singapore said that she came up with the idea after having witnessed people taking receipts and discarding them almost immediately on various occasions.

"Even though the ATMs allow you to choose whether you want receipts or not, the bin is still always full. It means that people take the receipts for one second and then throw them away. It's quite disappointing to know that," she said.

For Jasmin Choo of the Singapore Management University, it was a five-month exchange trip to Rome that made her more aware of global warming and climate change.

The winner of the open category for her essay on European Union and Asean Climate Change Initiatives said: "When I was in Europe, there were separate bins for metals and plastics and it's very common for the Europeans to segment their garbage. But when we dispose of our rubbish without separating them, they'll throw us strange glances."

As such, they feel that more should be done in order to build environmental awareness.

Ms Choo, 23, has since started trying to convince her father to separate the garbage before taking it out. "I wanted to segment the garbage a little and get my parents in on the act but my dad thinks that even if we throw it together, the cleaner will still help us recycle. I'm still trying to convince him otherwise."

The hope, then, is that going green will increasingly become a way of life.

Dr Osman said: "There are so many things we can do today to make a difference to our environment. For instance, if every one of us switches off the lights when we leave a room, that itself can create a significant difference."