

# Illinois PIRG

— Standing Up  
To Powerful Interests



**ILLINOIS PUBLIC INTEREST RESEARCH GROUP & ILLINOIS PIRG EDUCATION FUND**

# 2007 Annual Report





# Letter From The Director

**Brian Imus**

*As I review 2007, I'm struck by two things: First, in the Legislature and in Congress, it was a good year for the public interest. Second, more than ever, we have our work cut out for us when we stand up to powerful interests.*

*Thanks to your contributions, your online actions and other support, we were able to overcome powerful opposition in Springfield and in Washington, D.C. We won significant changes to the way transit agencies are funded and operated, which will help provide world-class transit in northeastern Illinois.*

*We pushed past opposition from Big Pharma to help win new drug safety legislation that will require greater transparency in clinical trials, greater independence on FDA drug safety panels, and greater accountability for drug companies that fail to put the safety of their customers first.*

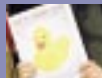
*In Washington, D.C., we stood up to the big K Street lobby firms and helped convince the U.S. House to approve landmark Illinois PIRG-backed legislation that bans lobbyist-paid gifts and travel and requires that they disclose fundraising for candidates. This bill will weaken the ties that bind members of Congress to powerful special interests.*

*But we know these powerful interests—like the tobacco lobby, prescription drug industry and utility companies—will continue to make lots of big campaign contributions and use their deep pockets and vast resources to block reform.*

*That's why we'll be working harder than ever to move forward on issues that matter to you, including fighting for a long-term fix for what is still a mass transit mess in northern Illinois and working to make sure that Illinois enacts real health care reforms to ensure all Illinoisans have access to necessary coverage at reasonable rates.*

*In 2007 we once again demonstrated that the time-tested tools of lobbying, education, outreach, media work and research, combined with your support and activism, make Illinois PIRG a potent force for the public interest. Thank you for standing with us in 2007.*

Brian Imus  
State Director



*In 2007, Illinois PIRG was able to stand up to Big Pharma, the tobacco lobby and K street lobby firms, in Springfield and Washington, D. C., using time-tested tools of lobbying, media work and research—made possible by your support.*

# Ensuring The Safety Of Children's Toys

## Amidst Recalls, Illinois PIRG Pushed For Stronger Oversight

Illinois PIRG-backed product safety bill passed both houses of Congress in 2007

In 2007, more than 25 million toys were recalled due to the risks posed to children by lead paint or loose magnets that, if swallowed, can perforate a child's intestines. Unfortunately, we weren't surprised by the recalls. In 2007, our annual toy safety report uncovered four toys with lead levels ranging from 1.8 to 34 percent lead by weight.

But the recalls did have a silver lining: momentum for lasting reforms that would keep dangerous toys off the market has strengthened considerably.

Unsafe toys made it to store shelves because toy manufacturers failed to ensure their own products' safety. In part, that's because our government routinely lets manufacturers off the hook and spends less on product safety than ever before, even as globalization has fundamentally changed the way that products get to store shelves.

For the past 20 years, Illinois PIRG advocates have been trying to stop the flood of unsafe toys onto store shelves and, ultimately, into our homes. We've even supplemented the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) inspectors by doing our own annual toy survey, which has led to more than 130 recalls and other enforcement actions.

We released our 22nd annual toy safety report as parents began holiday shopping



*State Director Brian Imus at the release of our 22nd annual toy safety report, highlighting one contaminated toy identified in the report.*

and as members of Congress prepared to introduce a new product safety bill. Here in Illinois, Illinois PIRG's Brian Imus was interviewed for "Eye On Chicago," ABC News and other news programs, discussing last year's recalls. We pushed Illinois' congressional delegation to approve legislation that would give the CPSC the funding and authority it needs to hold toy manufacturers accountable.

In November, the House and Senate introduced different versions of the Consumer Product Safety Modernization Act, which would lower the amount of lead allowed in products and increase the penalties that companies pay if they break the rules. The bills passed in Congress in early 2008.

## Our Mission

When corporate or governmental wrongdoing threatens our health and safety, or violates the fundamental principles of fairness and justice, Illinois PIRG stands up for the public interest.

We conduct investigative research, publish reports and exposés, advocate new laws, and, when necessary, take corporate wrongdoers or unresponsive government to court.

Illinois PIRG was founded in 1987, and has offices in Chicago and Springfield, and a national lobbying office in Washington, D.C.

To see a list of our recent achievements, visit our Web site: [www.illinoispirg.org](http://www.illinoispirg.org).

# Saving Public Transportation

## Illinois PIRG Helps Break Gridlock On Transit

Illinois PIRG-backed law will end “doomsday” funding scenarios and bring greater accountability

After months of frustration, Illinois PIRG finally saw real, concrete action to find a permanent funding solution for mass transit in northern Illinois.

### Transit In Crisis

In March of 2007, the release of the Illinois auditor general’s report on transit funding helped show how serious the problem is. The report found that even if fares were doubled for the CTA, Metra and PACE, there still wouldn’t be enough resources to maintain the current system in good working order.

Transit agencies faced a \$226 million budget shortfall in 2007. Without action from state lawmakers, this shortfall would mean the elimination of dozens of bus routes and fare hikes up to 50 percent on some bus and train routes.

At the same time, the need for more and better transit has become more pressing than ever. Illinoisans wasted nearly 203 million hours and 141 million gallons of gas as a result of traffic congestion in 2005, according to the Urban Mobility Report released by the Texas Transportation Institute.

“With the third worst traffic in America, congestion in Chicago isn’t going away on its own,” said Brian Imus, director of Illinois PIRG. “State lawmakers need to focus policy on getting more cars off

the road, particularly through enhanced rail and bus transportation.”

Increasingly, transit riders have faced growing deterioration in the quality and reliability of service. In response, Illinois PIRG launched our Transit, Not Traffic campaign to build support for reforms to the transportation system in northeastern Illinois.

Complicating efforts to solve the transit crisis, Gov. Rod Blagojevich opposed transit reform legislation pending before the General Assembly and failed to present a solution that adequately addressed the problem.



Illinois PIRG Director Brian Imus speaks to the media at a rally outside of Gov. Blagojevich’s Chicago offices.

With gridlock in the Legislature and transit agencies saying that they would need to drastically raise fares and cut service if additional funding wasn’t found, the prospects for the future of transit in Illinois looked grim.

### Research And Advocacy

Illinois PIRG jumped into this debate with our report, “Finding Solutions To Fund Transit: Combining Accountability And New Resources For World-Class Public Transportation.”

Our report argued that without a permanent funding solution authorized by state lawmakers, the short-term consequence of budget shortfalls would be dramatic service cuts and increased fares.

Service cuts would not only harm the millions of transit riders who currently depend on the RTA, they would also increase traffic congestion for those who drive to work, and decrease economic output of the region as a whole as more time is wasted in traffic and commuters are less able to access parts of the region where jobs are plentiful.

The report also highlighted basic principles for evaluating potential revenue sources and considered several funding options available to state lawmakers to create a sustainable funding system for supporting the growing public transportation needs of northeastern Illinois.

“Having funding linked with stronger transit agency accountability is not just

good public policy, it's the way to get lawmakers moving toward finding a solution," said Imus. "We can't expect taxpayers to spend more on agencies that waste money. At the same time, greater efficiency alone won't do the trick without additional resources."

We supported a bill championed by state Rep. Julie Hamos (Evanston), which ensured adequate funding for transit throughout the region and included new reforms requiring transit agencies to improve transparency and reporting on basic performance standards.

"Commuters saw the road blocks facing long-term, reliable transit funding finally clear," said Imus. "While the political wrangling it took to get there wasn't pretty, Gov. Blagojevich's decision to support the transit reform and funding bill was the right thing to do."

While the bill fixes the 25-year-old formula that led to shortfalls in transit funding, there is more work to be done. The funding only fills the hole in current service and does nothing to meet capital needs. According to the Regional Transportation Authority, \$10 billion



*Northeastern Illinois deserves the sort of world-class transportation system that will help the region grow and prosper.*

Illinois PIRG partnered with the Center for Neighborhood Technology and other groups to organize a citizen lobby day in Springfield to build support for the passage of the bill and its reforms. Illinois PIRG also generated hundreds of e-mails, letters and phone calls from citizens to lawmakers in support of the transit reform legislation.

The bill was almost derailed by a last-minute amendatory veto from the governor, but it ultimately passed on Jan. 18, 2008.

must be invested in the next five years to repair the aging system of buses and trains and add service where it is needed to meet growth.

"We must meet growing regional needs with new projects and better service," said Imus. "Doing so is the next step in re-establishing a world-class transit network for a region that deserves one."

## Our Research

### Principles For Better Transit:

Our research laid out three principles that any transit funding plan should follow to make sure that Illinois continues to have a world-class transit system:

- Lawmakers should consider diversifying agency revenue sources. Doing so protects transit systems from fluctuations in the economy that might hit one particular revenue source harder than others. Under the current system, changes in sales tax revenue are a major source of transit's funding shortfall.
- Transit funding should either discourage pollution and sprawl or target revenue from those who will most benefit from the reduced congestion brought about by transit. For example, impact fees could help ensure that developers pay their fair share of public infrastructure needs, including transit, to accommodate new growth. Another option could include an increase in license, registration and title taxes based on vehicle fuel efficiency or miles traveled.
- Finally, transit funding cannot be a blank check. State lawmakers should attach some strings to new funding that would improve agency transparency and accountability. The Illinois auditor general's soon-to-be-released report could be a helpful resource in determining proper accountability measures.

# Standing Up For Illinois' Consumers

## On Cable Competition, Energy Rates And A Smoke-Free Illinois

Illinois PIRG promoted consumer protections on a range of issues in 2007

In 2007, Illinois PIRG stood up for consumers in Illinois on a variety of issues, from preventing unregulated cable monopolies, to fighting media consolidation, to seeking fair utility rates, to making sure Illinoisans can enjoy a meal or a drink in a smoke-free environment.

### Protections For Cable Customers

In the summer of 2007, AT&T lobbied to pass a bill that would have drastically reduced oversight and regulation of cable television in Illinois.

Illinois PIRG worked with Attorney General Lisa Madigan to make sure that the bill protected the interests of Illinois consumers, replacing a patchwork of local agreements with strong, statewide consumer protections.

"AT&T had hoped for favored status in the cable and Internet market while avoiding consumer protection standards," said Brian Imus, director of Illinois PIRG. "Fortunately, the current bill has meaningful consumer protections."

The bill eliminated the requirement for AT&T to make separate deals with each municipality before offering cable and Internet service, but, in its original form, it would have offered no protections for consumers.

Concerns remain about the development of adequate competition. The bill requires

that AT&T build out to just 35 percent of its customers in three years. There is no guarantee of further build-out beyond that.

"If adequate build-out doesn't occur, consumers will pay the price with poor cable competition, and legislators will have enacted a law that actually widens the digital divide," said Imus.

### Standing Up To Big Media

On Sept. 20, all five members of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) faced more than 800 people who attended a public hearing in Chicago to voice con-

cerns about changes to the nation's media ownership rules.

Illinois PIRG partnered with a coalition of local and national groups, including the NAACP, Common Cause, CAN TV, Rainbow PUSH and the Media and Democracy Coalition to encourage citizens to come and testify about new rules that would make it easier for media companies to consolidate.

Dozens lined up as early as seven hours before the hearing to sign up for two minutes of testimony before all five FCC commissioners. More than 200 people signed up to speak, and testimony didn't end until well after midnight.

Brian Imus testified before the Federal Communications Commission stating, "Corporate media has already proved that they will always look out for their bottom line. In fact, I expect you'll hear from a few of them today who will testify in an attempt to do just that. All we ask is for the FCC to follow its mandate and look out for the public interest."

Unfortunately, despite overwhelming public opposition, the FCC voted on Dec. 18 to overturn a 30-year-old ban prohibiting a single company from owning both the local newspaper and a television station in the same community.

### Supporting Fair Utility Rates

On Feb. 27, the speaker of the Illinois House, Mike Madigan, called a rare Committee of the Whole calling for public comment and solutions to skyrocketing electricity prices.



Yunuen Rodriguez, one of more than 800 people who showed up to testify to the FCC about their plan to weaken media consolidation rules.

The record-high electricity bills are a result of the ComEd-backed reverse auction scheme, a part of restructuring the electricity market. Customers had seen average increases of 25 to 30 percent; some had seen as high as 300 percent.

Illinois PIRG's Brian Imus was asked to speak before the committee and provided testimony on how best to protect consumers from high electricity bills.

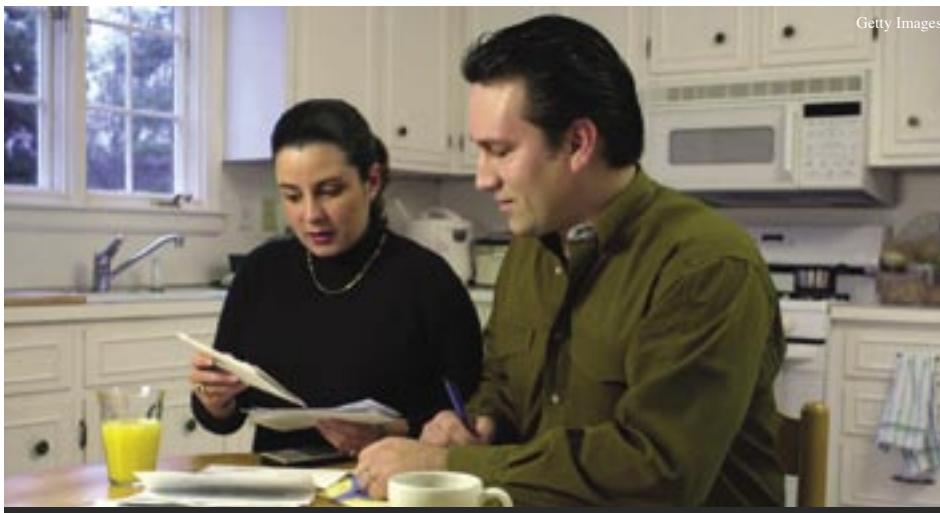
Before the committee, Imus said, "Our analysis of Illinois and other states that have implemented this type of electricity restructuring shows the record of retail

a Chicago ordinance requiring that all workplaces to go smoke-free by 2008.

Then, working with the American Library Association and the American Cancer Society, we helped pass a state-wide ban on indoor smoking. As of Jan. 1, 2008, all indoor workplaces in Illinois are smoke-free.

The Centers for Disease Control has concluded there is no safe level of exposure to second-hand smoke, the third leading cause of preventable death in America.

Second-hand cigarette smoke contains 69



*We helped pass a bill that provided \$1 billion in rate relief to customers of Ameren and ComEd who had seen skyrocketing electricity rates.*

competition in delivering lower prices and real choice has been poor. There is little evidence to suggest that it will soon improve."

As a result of this process, a law passed in 2007 will rein in prices and result in \$1 billion in rate relief for customers.

### Smoke-Free Illinois

Pointing to the mounting evidence of public health threats posed by second-hand smoke, Illinois PIRG helped pass

different kinds of chemicals that cause cancer. According to the U.S. Surgeon General, second-hand smoke kills as many as 53,000 nonsmokers a year, including 3,000 lung cancer deaths and 35,000 coronary heart disease deaths.

"It is clear from the experience of other states that a clean indoor air law that protects everyone from second-hand smoke has positive health and economic results," said Sen. John Cullerton, who introduced the bill in the Illinois state Senate.

## Report

### Forgiving Fraud and Failure: Profiles in Federal Contracting



The rapid increase of federally contracted dollars—100 percent since 2000—makes outsourcing the fastest growing component of discretionary spending.

We reviewed hundreds of records and found numerous cases of contractors with questionable performance or responsibility records receiving contracts without competition or sufficient time to determine the extent of the problems identified.

**Bank of America:** The company experienced several instances in a single year (2006) in which unencrypted data files were lost or stolen. In one instance, the bank lost records for 1.2 million federal employees, including records of United States senators. Federal agencies including the IRS continued to award the company contracts for data processing and management services.

**General Electric:** Among other concerns, GE allegedly sold the government faulty helicopter and airplane engine blades in 1999 and 2000. In August 2005, the same year that the government decided to trust GE with the better part of a \$2.4 billion contract, the government was forced to get a court order to retrieve documents from GE for an ongoing fraud case. In 2005, almost half of GE's federal contract dollars were awarded without competition.

# Making Prescription Drugs Safer

## Illinois PIRG-Backed Bill Reins In Unscrupulous Drug Makers

New law means more transparency in studies and stiffer penalties for drug-makers who don't make sure their products are safe

New Illinois PIRG-backed legislation signed by the president in September should make the drugs we put in our medicine cabinets safer this year.

Illinois PIRG urged our state's congressional delegation to stand behind provisions that would require greater transparency in clinical trials of new drugs, greater independence on FDA drug safety panels, and greater accountability for drug companies that fail to perform required safety studies—including fines of up to \$10 million.

The Food and Drug Administration Amendment Act of 2007 is a comprehensive FDA reform that includes drug safety reforms. The reforms were in response to safety problems with several FDA-approved drugs such as the pain reliever Vioxx and antidepressant Paxil that were later shown to cause dangerous side effects and deaths. Over the last few years, the FDA has been criticized for withholding information about the diabetes drug Avandia that links it to increased risks of heart attacks.

According to Steve Blackledge, our lead advocate on the issue, controversies surrounding the harmful side effects of such drugs as Vioxx, Paxil and Avandia left members of Congress more open to our push for reform. "In the end," Blackledge said, "there were too many headlines about dangerous drugs. Congress had to act and we're pleased they did."

The reforms strengthen the FDA's drug safety review process, and they hold drug makers more accountable to consumers. "In recent years safety problems with drugs like Vioxx, Paxil and Avandia have made consumers question whether the drugs they are taking to keep themselves healthy are causing more harm than good," said Blackledge. "For a number of years, the FDA's system for reviewing the safety of drugs has been broken. This action by Congress takes steps to solve our drug safety problems."

### The Bill In Congress

The bill's near-unanimous final approval

belied the intense debate that surrounded its key provisions.

We made it a priority to require drug companies to disclose clinical trial results—a step vehemently opposed by lobbyists for the drug industry.

Together with other members of U.S. PIRG, our national federation, we spearheaded the Patients and Consumers Coalition, which included groups ranging from the Union of Concerned Scientists to the Breast Cancer Fund.

We also made the case for mandatory posting of clinical trials in our meetings with key congressional leaders, including Rep. John Dingell (Mich.) and Sen. Dick Durbin (Ill.), who ultimately co-sponsored the provision.



Peter Morgan, Getty Images

*We helped pass FDA reform over the objections of powerful drugmakers. Above, former Merck CEO Raymond Gilmartin speaks to the press.*

# Making College More Affordable

## Illinois PIRG-Backed Legislation Means Savings For Students, Not Wealthy Lenders

Congress passes legislation to cut subsidies to lenders and reduce interest rates for students

This September, President Bush signed a new law, the College Cost Reduction And Access Act, that will lower interest rates on student loans for low- and middle-income families by cutting billions of dollars in subsidies to private banks. This action occurred in response to a campaign led by our staff and fueled by the support of our members.

In July 2006, our Higher Education Advocate Luke Swarthout and other staff released city-by-city reports, detailing how student loan borrowing has increased, on average, three times faster than consumer spending. In another study, we documented how the growing debt carried by many students can diminish their career opportunities and have a lasting impact on important life decisions.

Thanks to our research, which made headlines across the country, from The New York Times to the Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune and USA Today (to name a few), we were able to kick our organizing into high gear. We helped organize a coalition of our allies and mobilized students and faculty on college campuses—including the 100 campuses with PIRG chapters—to e-mail or call their members of Congress. By the time Speaker Pelosi put together her “100 hours” agenda for the beginning of the 110th Congress, we had made a strong case for reversing the cuts in student aid to make the high-priority list.



*Higher Education Advocate Luke Swarthout stands with Sens. Bernie Sanders (Vt.) and Edward Kennedy (Mass.) after the Senate voted to increase student aid.*

In early January, the new House leadership proposed lowering interest rates on subsidized Stafford student loans from 6.8 percent to 3.4 percent over the next five years.

Shortly after the plan was announced, we released a report analyzing its impact. The report and its analysis were widely quoted in the media and referred to by legislators.

All of this culminated in the September signing of the bill.

## Research Gets Results

### PIRG Report Influences Lawmakers

Chairman of the Education and Labor Committee George Miller (Calif.) circulated a letter to all members of Congress encouraging them to read our report before they voted on whether to lower interest rates on student loans.

On Jan. 17, riding a wave of national attention and public concern, the House bill to lower interest rates passed overwhelmingly, 356 to 71.

In his floor statement, Chairman Miller addressed the support of U.S. PIRG, the Federation of State PIRGs, for the legislation.

“There has been a lot of discussion today about who doesn’t like this bill. Maybe some of the lenders don’t like this bill, some of the pundits don’t like this bill . . . The people who like this bill, and the people who matter, are the students.

“And that is why U.S. PIRG and the U.S. Student Association and so many students support this legislation, because they know what this means to them . . . They know this will lower the cost of college.”

You can read “Cutting Interest Rates, Lowering Student Debt,” the report that helped convince Rep. Miller and others, on our Web site: [www.illinoispirg.org](http://www.illinoispirg.org).

# First Steps On Curbing Corruption

## Curbing The Influence Of Powerful Interests In Congress

Illinois PIRG-backed measures restrict lobbyist gifts to our elected representatives

In its opening session, the new Congress took the first critical steps toward changing the way business is done in Washington, D.C. In January, the House voted 430 to 1 and the Senate voted 96 to 2 to end lobbyist-funded trips and gifts.

We lobbied for the new rules, which are aimed at reducing the access that powerful corporations and other special interests gain by purchasing meals, buying premium seats at sporting events, or sponsoring golf junkets in Scotland—any method of subsidizing perks for lawmakers and their families.

“The overwhelming support for new restrictions sends a powerful message that the new Congress is taking the need for reform seriously,” said Democracy Advocate Gary Kalman. “This move is a sea change from the ill-conceived and ineffectual bill considered and passed by the House during the scandal-plagued session last year.”

### Disclosing Lobbyists’ Fundraising

In the summer of 2007, Illinois PIRG backed a lobby reform bill that could shed light on the often-hidden activities of lobbyists and their interactions with legislators.

Under the bill, which became law in

September, lobbyists now need to disclose their fundraising efforts on behalf of candidates. Increasingly, candidates rely on outside fundraisers, often paid lobbyists called “bundlers” who raise up to hundreds of thousands of dollars for candidates.

President Bush’s “Pioneers” and “Rangers” each raised between \$100,000 and \$200,000. Sen. Hillary Clinton’s “Hill-raisers” were each charged with raising \$1 million.

“This information will help the public better identify the powerful interests who use fundraising to build access and influence,” said Kalman.

Of course, the rules are only as strong as their enforcement. Speaker Nancy Pelosi (Calif.) appointed a special House task force to examine how state governments have handled enforcing the ethics and lobby rules for state legislators.

Kalman urged Rep. Michael Capuano (Mass.), head of the task force, to recommend an independent office to police ethical scandals, ending the practice of “self-policing.” We pushed to model the new office on existing state ethics commissions.



Federal Legislative Director Gary Kalman testified before the Senate Rules Committee on the importance of strong lobby reform measures.

# Illinois PIRG Supporters

## Illinois PIRG and Illinois PIRG Education Fund

Citizen support is the cornerstone of Illinois PIRG and the Illinois PIRG Education Fund. Thousands of Illinois citizens supported Illinois PIRG by making membership contributions in fiscal year 2007. The members listed below were particularly generous in backing the organization's research and advocacy. Names that appear in italics denote our monthly supporters. These members provide stability to the organization's resources through our monthly giving program.

### Development Committee

Development Committee members supported Illinois PIRG with contributions of \$1,000 or more.

Karen Anderson • Bradley Beile • Mohammed Khan • Douglas H. Phelps • Eileen Sirkin

### Patrons

Patrons supported Illinois PIRG with contributions of \$500 to \$999.

Joe Atkinson • John Cowan • Richard Foulkes • Margaret Stetka Girdzius • Gillian Goodman • Brandon McKenna • Mary Meller • Judith Pieper • Juanita & Richard Ray • Adrienne Schumaker • Scott Smith • Patti Taylor

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Sponsors supported Illinois PIRG with contributions of \$250 to \$499.

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### Illinois PIRG Education Fund

Illinois PIRG Education Fund, a 501(c)(3) organization, conducts research and public education on emerging public interest issues. Contributions to Illinois PIRG Education Fund are tax-deductible. For more information, call Brian Imus at (312) 364-0096. Illinois PIRG Education Fund received recent grant awards from:

Patrick & Anna M. Cudahy Fund • Friends of the Earth • Media & Democracy Coalition • Surdna Foundation • The Woods Fund of Chicago

### Planned Giving

Members who include Illinois PIRG in their wills leave a legacy of activism that will protect consumers and taxpayers, as well as revitalize participation in the democratic process for decades to come. For more information about including Illinois PIRG in your estate and major giving plans, call (800) 841-7299 or e-mail [PlannedGiving@illinoispirg.org](mailto:PlannedGiving@illinoispirg.org)

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Design by Public Interest GRFX (215) 985-1113; Printed on recycled paper.

# 2007 Annual Report

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