

SC needs electronic waste policy

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Technology is great. Computers, televisions, and other electronic devices are an integral part of our everyday lives. We demonstrate this fact by being avid consumers of everything electronic and striving to keep up as the electronics industry introduces the next upgrade or “gotta have it” product. All of this technological activity does come at a price, though; electronic waste is one of the fastest growing and most problematic waste streams in the nation.

Unfortunately, the amount of electronic waste (“E-waste”) that is being recycled is small. As stated in the 2007 Report for Congress, “Managing Electronic Waste: An Analysis of State E-Waste Legislation,” also a major source of information for this article, the Environmental Protection Agency estimates that in 2005 alone, between 1.9 to 2.2 million tons of electronics became obsolete. Of that amount, 1.5 to 1.9 million tons were discarded primarily in landfills. Moreover, with each new technological advance, for example as we transition to high definition televisions, even more electronic waste will be generated.

Not only is bulky electronic waste taking up precious room in our landfills, these products contain hazardous materials. Cathode ray tubes (“CRTs”), central processing units (“CPUs”) and other electronic devices contain significant quantities of lead, mercury, and other metals. CRTs contain, on average, four pounds of lead. Other heavy metals such as mercury, beryllium, barium, chromium, nickel, or zinc pose health hazards. Also, brominated flame retardants are commonly added to the plastic housing of televisions, computers, and other electronic devices. When disposed in landfills or incinerated, hazardous components of e-wastes may be released into the groundwater or air.

There are several ways of keeping e-waste out of our landfills. First, working devices can be sold or donated; devices can be broken down into component parts that can be sold and reused; and further processing allows plastics, metals, and glass to be extracted for new use. For instance, the leaded glass in a CRT can be recovered to manufacture new CRTs. Any remaining parts that cannot be reused can then be disposed of properly.

You might wonder why electronic recycling is not more readily available. Unfortunately, recycling electronic devices is not cheap. Recyclers and refurbishers often charge a fee for their services because their costs exceed the revenue received from recycled commodities. Recycling is costly, and the problem is figuring out a way to finance e-waste collection and recycling. As the US Department of Commerce stated in its report, “Recycling Technology Products: An Overview of E-Waste Policy Issues,” most stakeholders agree that if e-waste is to be recycled, it must be as easy for consumers to recycle electronics as it is to buy them.

In order to collect, recycle, and properly dispose of as many electronic devices as possible, South Carolina needs an e-waste collection and recycling program. I have introduced H. 3398, "Electronics Waste Recycling Act" which creates an effective and efficient system for South Carolinians to recycle e-waste. This legislation is modeled on our state's nationally recognized recycling program that has garnered the confidence of local governments, retailers, and consumers. As currently proposed, a five dollars electronic waste recycling fee will be collected with the purchase of a computer monitor or television. The funds generated from this will establish the Electronics Recycling Fund that will distribute funds to the counties based on population to establish and operate a permanent collection program for certain electronic waste, specifically monitors and televisions. There will be no charge to dispose of household e-waste at county recycling collection sites.

"Takeback" programs offered by some computer manufacturers present problems and cannot be relied on alone. Inconsistent, piecemeal, inconvenient programs will not adequately address the volume of our e-waste. Manufacturers generally only take back their own products, unless a consumer purchases one of their products. This brand exclusive policy worsens the problem of orphan waste for which no manufacturer can be identified or for which the manufacturer is no longer in business. A recent survey by the State of Washington identified over 1200 orphan brands of electronics potentially sold or likely to appear in its e-waste stream. Most television manufacturers do not offer "takeback" programs. Therefore, your old TV set may just have to collect dust in the garage or find its regrettable end in the county landfill.

Additionally, the recycling fee proposed by this bill will in most cases be cheaper than the cost of packing and shipping a computer to the manufacturer. Not insignificant to the plan proposed by H. 3398 is that it will do the most to provide business opportunities that support our state's economy.

South Carolina needs a convenient and efficient method to recycle all returned televisions and computers, including orphan waste. The plan that I have proposed will have an immediate and reliable impact in reducing e-waste in our landfills and is a bold way to improve South Carolina's environmental and economic health.