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Making Progress on E-Waste

I got a call a few weeks ago concerning e-waste (electronic waste) from someone in my neighbourhood. In fact, in recent months I've had a number of citizens express concerns about seeing old CRT monitors being left on the curb for garbage day. So this started a bit of a research exercise on the increasing e-waste problem that our society is being faced with today.

We live in a time of perpetually updated electronic gear to outfit our home and lives with – from cell phones to computers to stereo and TV equipment. Because of this societal trend, e-waste is now the fastest growing component of the municipal solid waste stream. Mobile phones and computers are causing the biggest problem because they are replaced most often. The average lifespan of computers in developed countries is only about two years; and mobile phones have a lifecycle of less than two years!

There are two inherent challenges here. First, is the rapid rate that technology is advancing which means that hardware is becoming obsolete very quickly; and producers maximizing this opportunity to sell more products. Second, is once this happens and we need to discard our e-waste, what do we do with it? Addressing the first challenge would take us far beyond the confines of this column, so let us focus on the second one for now!

After discussing this issue with an interested citizen, I too remembered that I had tucked away my own e-waste (a very old laptop and CD burner). And after very little legwork I discovered an incredible program called 'Computers for Schools' (CFS) - a national program co-founded in 1993 by Industry Canada and the TelecomPioneers. CFS refurbishes computers and related equipment donated by citizens, governments, and businesses. These computers are then distributed to schools, libraries and registered not-for-profit learning organizations.

The CFS New Brunswick program (CFS-NB) is a registered charity (that means you can get a tax receipt for donating your old computer equipment). As of March 31st, 2009, CFS-NB has delivered approximately 63,162 computers to public and First Nations schools, libraries, and special projects in the New Brunswick area. (CFS-NB in Fredericton is located at 125 Hilton Road in the Industrial Park. Call 444-4501 or check them out at <http://cfsopenb.nbed.nb.ca>.)

CFS-NB also provides environmental benefits by ensuring that computer systems do not end up in landfill sites but are, instead, reused and/or recycled. All non-working systems are stripped of their working parts, which are then used to repair other systems. And the computer equipment needing recycling are taken to a company in Quebec that safely shreds all of the electronics and separates the metals and plastics. Hazardous materials are also removed and dealt with responsibly, keeping them out of landfills and the environment. Each stream is then sent to various smelters for recovery and is used in recycled materials.

So my old laptop and CD burner were put safely in the hands of CFS-NB. The added bonus is that they use RCMP-approved erase software to ensure your hard drive is clean before the computer is sent to a new home. When I dropped off my gear I asked them how they handle broken CRT monitors, and they told me that due to high cost of shipping and recycling them, they need to charge \$10. A small price to pay for making the right choice.

And the future is brightening further - the Province's progressive Recycle New Brunswick (NB) program (which now handles tire and paint recycling) will eventually begin to oversee other industry-managed stewardship programs for waste products such as oil, electronic components, batteries, mercury-containing devices, and pharmaceuticals. The Government is working to improve waste management in the province through such means as better recycling and composting systems, further reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from landfills, reducing waste at its source, advocating recycled content in products and packaging, and promoting extended producer responsibility for products such as paint, oil and electronics. This approach tackles head-on the first challenge in the e-waste dilemma as presented above, and inserts the producers of these products directly into the life-cycle of their products, specifically taking responsibility for the waste stream.

Our Province is definitely moving in the right direction! Let's do our part and dispose of our e-waste with the environment in mind.

Sonya Hull is a consultant and project manager for Fredericton's environmental programs. Find out more @ www.greenmattersfredericton.com. In coming articles the Green Matters writers will explore what to do about battery and cell phone e-waste.