

E-Waste Legislation Puts Recycling Costs On Manufacturers

By Brandon Butler

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In 2000 Massachusetts passed first-in-the-country legislation that banned cathode ray tubes (CRTs), which are found in traditional tube televisions, from being dumped in landfills or processed in incinerators.

Dozens of other states followed suit requiring that the CRTs be properly recycled and processed.

Scott Cassel, executive director and founder of the Product Stewardship Institute of Boston, said since then, the Bay State has fallen behind in regulating responsible electronic waste processing.

E-waste, which can sometimes be hazardous because it can contain lead and mercury, can end up in municipal landfills, creating a cost for cities and towns to collect it, process it through disposal or recycling.

Now, state legislators could be close to joining laws that 19 other states in the country already have passed that requires manufacturers of electronic hardware equipment, such as computers and televisions, to be financially responsible for the disposal and recycling of the e-waste.

Dollars And Dumpsters

Proponents said the issue comes down to basic fairness.

“The reality is that there are costs being incurred by society,” said State Sen. James Eldridge, D-Acton. Eldridge had sponsored a Senate bill on the issue. That bill has since been merged with House Bill 4374, which has been passed out of the legislature’s Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture and could be voted on by the House and Senate this year.

Cities and towns are being forced in many cases to shoulder the burden of processing the e-waste and in some cases an estimated 1.5 million pounds of e-waste is not being processed and ending up in landfills.

The state estimates that the city of Boston spends \$200,000 a year dealing with e-waste.

Meanwhile, many of the materials used to make the products, if disposed of correctly, can be recycled and reused to make new products, requiring less new materials to be used.

“There has to be a big picture solution that includes companies that make these products taking some responsibility for their end-of-life case,” Eldridge said.

It would allow registered waste haulers to charge computer and television manufacturers a fee, the price of which would be set by the state Department of Environmental Protection, for processing the waste, either based on the weight of the waste processed or that company's market share.

Proponents of the legislation, such as Eldridge, say not only would it help cities and towns not have to pay for the disposal, but it will also be a job creator.

New jobs in the collecting and processing industry would be created with the incentives that allow haulers to be paid back for parts of their costs from the manufacturers.

But what about the cost to all those manufacturers who will now possibly have to pay for the processing?

Cassel, of the Product Stewardship Institute, said similar laws are already in place around the country and companies usually incorporate the costs of disposing the products into the sales prices.

Apple, Dell and Hewlett Packard did not return calls for this story, but each of the companies have on their web sites sections speaking about their commitment to using environmentally friendly products.

Plus, the legislation also allows manufactures to partner with waste collection companies to avoid having to pay processing fees by providing an avenue for customers to dump their waste with the company.

John Shegerian is president and founder of Electronic Recyclers International based in Gardner. He said any law that helps encourage more recycling and proper disposal of electronic waste is good for everyone.

"When you recycle electronics appropriately — plastics, glass, metals — they can go back to smelters and can be reused," he said. "That provides a huge savings, a money savings, an environmental savings, and jobs creation."

The overall goal of the bill is to make it easier for consumers to safely recycle and dispose of the electronic waste.

Businesses and residents who have electronic waste have multiple options for what to do.

Westborough and Marlborough provide waste collection at no charge if the resident has a sticker, which can be obtained at town hall. Ayer, Littleton, Maynard, Shirley, Sudbury, and Harvard charge up to \$20 per item to recycle the e-waste.

Other communities don't have e-waste recycling, such as Acton, Boxborough and Northborough. Hudson and Southborough have annual one-day collections.

Some retailers have even begun getting into the e-waste business.

Framingham-based Staples began collecting customers' used computers and cell phones in stores in 2007.

The store collects the products and either refurbishes parts of the products for reuse, or company workers grind down the materials to be sold to manufacturers.