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Off the scrap heap

ElectroniCycle spins gold from old computer components

Rebecca Evans
SPECIAL TO THE TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

GARDNER- A one-ton bale of aluminum sat on the loading dock at ElectroniCycle Inc. Company President Richard A. Peloquin ran his hands along the smooth strips of metal and smiled approvingly.



"This is a beautiful bale," he said. "You're looking at perfectly clean aluminum." The aluminum scrap, which was extracted from the guts of old computer monitors, will be sold to manufacturers and reused to make everything from soda cans to new computers.

ElectroniCycle Inc.'s vice president Robin F. Ingenthron, left, and President Richard A. Peloquin stand in the Gardner warehouse full of computer monitors. (T&G Staff / RICK CINCLAIR)

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The final resting place for old televisions and computers is often an attic or a landfill. But ElectroniCycle gives them a second life.

Since 1999, the electronics recycling and repair company has processed more than 15 million pounds of damaged, broken or obsolete electronic equipment collected from New England municipalities, state agencies, charities, private corporations and individuals.

Two-thirds of what is processed comes from municipalities.

"What sets ElectroniCycle apart from other recyclers is its commitment to reuse and repair," said Brooke A. Nash, branch chief of municipal waste programs for the

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Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection.

Technicians at the Gardner recycling plant examine each computer, printer, television, VCR and household appliance for reusability. Salvageable items, which account for 15 percent of volume, are fixed and sent back for resale at Goodwill Industries, the Salvation Army and other charities.

"They do a great service for us," said John E. Midura, director of business and operations at Pittsfield-based Goodwill Industries of the Berkshires. "We receive donations of televisions and computers and those that don't work can be shipped to ElectroniCycle for repair or recycling."

Outdated computers and other obsolete electronics that can't be resold in the United States are often sent to schools in developing countries.

"We try to find a buyer for anything that is reusable," said Vice President Robin F. Ingenthron, pointing to an old overhead projector. "If you sit on something like this long enough, you may find a school in South America that needs it."

The 85 percent of material that doesn't qualify for reuse is harvested for parts and then recycled. Using hammers and drills, the demanufacturing team breaks apart televisions, computer monitors and other electronics to recover reusable material. Aluminum, plastic, glass and steel are sorted by chemistry and grade and sold as scrap. Gold, silver, palladium and copper are extracted from computer circuit boards and sent to smelters for recovery. Wood from TV consoles is processed and sold to landscapers. Even screws are saved and reused in new electronics.

ElectroniCycle's recycling efforts help preserve natural resources, reduce mining for precious metals and keep electronics out of landfills.

"Just as a lot of people recycle paper to save trees, we are recycling electronics to preserve forests, rivers and mountainsides," said Mr. Ingenthron.

But not all consumers are aware of the environmental and social benefits of recycling used electronics. "Our biggest challenge is making the public aware that all electronic items can and should be recycled," said Mr. Peloquin. "And it doesn't have to be



Mr. Ingenthron holds a tray of IBM computer processors that contain gold to be recycled. (T&G Staff / RICK CINCLAIR)

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complicated. Something like a toaster can be recycled for less than a dollar."

Rapid technological advances have decreased the lifespan of most electronics, making electronic waste, or "e-waste," the fastest growing component of solid waste, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, which estimates that 250 million computers will become obsolete by 2005.

If disposed in landfills, cathode ray tubes found inside televisions and computer monitors can contaminate groundwater with lead, which causes nerve damage, birth defects and other health hazards. In 2000, Massachusetts became the first state to ban the disposal of computers and televisions in landfills. Mr. Peloquin, who ran a television repair company for 30 years, saw an opportunity to move into the recycling business.

"I'd always been interested in recycling," he said. "When the state introduced legislation to ban CRTs, I began researching potential markets."

After placing competitive bids, ElectroniCycle and Superior Special Services of Stoughton (now Onyx Environmental Services) were chosen to be the state's official recycling contractors. The contracts were renewed last May for three years with renewal options. More than 290 Massachusetts cities and towns provide some CRT device recycling. Fees are paid for by the municipality, consumer or combination of both, said Ms. Nash.

In addition, the DEP awarded ElectroniCycle two grants of about \$45,000 each that allowed the company to buy new equipment and expand into the 50,000-square-foot 461 West Broadway facility, a former plastics factory, which it purchased in 2001. That allowed the consolidation of facilities in Spencer, Auburn and Middlebury, Vt.

In 2001, ElectroniCycle merged with American Retroworks of Vermont, which was founded by Mr. Ingenthron.

"ElectroniCycle is a big success story of a Massachusetts homegrown business," said DEP's Ms. Nash. "They've exceeded everyone's expectations in what they've been able to do."

Today, ElectroniCycle, with 28 employees, has statewide contracts in Massachusetts and Maine and is the CRT recycler for several corporations, counties and waste haulers in the Northeast.

"There are not many companies out there like ours," said Mr. Peloquin. "This is a dirty, hard work business, and the profit