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STATE & LOCAL | 6/16/2004

'E-Waste' program targets toxic technology

Disposal of used electronics costs state millions, report says

By Matt Wright

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Disposing of Texas' unused electronic hardware, such as computer monitors, will cost the state at least \$606 million over the next decade, according to an environmental study released by the Texas Campaign for the Environment on Monday.

Environmental advocacy group Keep Texas Beautiful published figures regarding the waste, saying more than 250 million computers nationwide will become obsolete by 2005, and an estimated 130 million cell phones will be discarded every year.

The E-Waste Resource Management Seminar gathered business leaders and environmentalists from around the country to discuss new strategies for dealing with toxic trash from computers, televisions and cell phones.

The conference, hosted in Austin by Keep Texas Beautiful and the Recycling Alliance of Texas, focused on e-waste recycling.

"This reminds us that [recycling] is as important as any other component of technological improvement," Austin Mayor Pro Tem Jackie Goodman said.

Robin Ingenthron, president of Vermont-based Good Point Recycling, advocated greater availability of recycling nationwide, noting that 80 percent of the materials his company processes comes from household waste.

As a result of large amounts of electronic hardware being discarded in exchange for upgraded technology, older working components are exported to countries such as China and India, Ingenthron said.

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"There's no market [in the United States] for working discarded monitors, but China and India need them. It makes perfect sense," he said.

However, these countries do not monitor the disposal of e-waste as closely as the United States. There are health and environmental concerns surrounding the disposal of scrap materials after metals used in electronic manufacturing are extracted.

"The big thing is to increase affordable recycling and reuse without exporting harm," Ingenthron said.

Executive director of the Texas Campaign for the Environment Robin Schneider wants greater regulation of e-waste in the United States, holding the manufacturers wholly responsible for collection and disposal instead of shipping the problem overseas.

Schneider called for the "producer take-back" policy in which manufacturers properly dispose of electronic products after consumers finish using them. Such a policy, Schneider said, would encourage producers to design products with conservation in mind.

"They can include the cost [of producer take-back] in the product, so the companies are competing in how easily their products can be deconstructed," she said.

Allen Whitley of Dell Inc. said that while his company already has a 100-percent take-back policy, there are "many different models" to solving the problem of producer responsibility.

"We believe it's a shared responsibility between the producer, the government and the consumer," Whitley said. "After all, if I bought a car from Ford, I wouldn't expect them to take it back when I was done. Getting rid of it would be my job."

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