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## When gadgets go to the graveyard

By Tom Watson

*Special to the Seattle Times*

It's a problem as close as your computer, your cellphone, your TV or the iPod hanging out of your teenager's ears. When your electronic gadgets die, they've all got to go somewhere. It adds up to 400 million pieces of electronic equipment that will be scrapped in the U.S. this year, according to the International Association of Electronics Recyclers.

"E-waste" is the hottest issue in solid-waste management today. Where will it all go? Who pays? Who profits?

For consumers, recycling electronics can be fairly expensive. In Western Washington, you may pay \$5 to \$20 apiece to recycle a computer, a monitor, a printer or most other items. TVs may cost you even more because they are harder to process.

To find an electronics recycler, check the regional Take It Back Network listings ([www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/takeitback](http://www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/takeitback)). The network is a large group of electronics repair and resale shops, recyclers and nonprofit groups that recycle or reuse electronic equipment. Recyclers listed there have signed a formal agreement saying they handle e-waste properly and have adequate insurance.

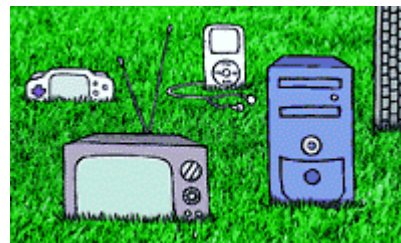
Electronics recycling may be easier than you think. The Take It Back listings include more than 20 options for recycling and donating equipment. For that old computer monitor you're using as a doorstop, for example, you'll find 16 local companies and organizations that will accept it, and you'll see how much they charge.

Recycling programs offered by some manufacturers, including Dell and Hewlett-Packard, provide another option. These also charge a fee.

If you had any sensitive personal information on your computer (even if it's been deleted), it's a good idea to erase your hard drive before you recycle or donate the unit. You can blow that old info away with KillDisk, a popular, free eraser program available at [www.killdisk.com](http://www.killdisk.com).

Why do you have to pay extra to get rid of your electronics? Because e-waste contains a potent mix of plastics, metals and hazardous materials, such as lead, mercury and cadmium. Recycling processing companies have to charge enough money to cover their costs.

But it's not always a pain in the pocketbook. In addition to donation options for later-model computer equipment, you almost never have to pay to recycle a cellphone, since they have resale value in developing countries.



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And some communities, including Bellevue, Redmond, Kirkland and Issaquah, now offer curbside recycling collection of electronics, at no extra charge.

Meanwhile, King and Snohomish counties, the cities of Seattle and Tacoma, and other local and state governments are asking manufacturers, distributors and retailers to take responsibility to provide additional electronics recycling options. The electronics industry has started to get on board, hoping to fend off regulations.

Several major retailers, including Best Buy, the Good Guys, Office Depot and Staples, have joined with manufacturers to offer electronics recycling collection events in Western Washington in the past two years. Prices are often lower, because manufacturers help cover costs.

Electronics disposal regulations are also in flux. Disposal of computer monitors and TVs in the garbage is not allowed in Seattle. Elsewhere in King County, businesses cannot place those items in the garbage, and a ban on disposal of monitors, TVs, computers, laptops and cellphones from residents is scheduled to take effect this fall.

A bill requiring manufacturers to provide e-waste recycling in Washington state was introduced in 2004.

Impending legislation has had a positive effect: Manufacturers now have an incentive to design electronics that contain less toxics and are easier to upgrade and recycle.

U.S. households own an average of 25 electronic products, according to the Consumer Electronics Association. How can you do your part to deal with the avalanche of e-waste? Buy durable, high-quality electronic products, with long-lasting rechargeable batteries. Ask the manufacturer to take back and recycle their used products. Make sure all your old electronic gadgets get recycled. And think about where it all goes, after you pull the plug.

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