

Homes & Real Estate

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Tool libraries equip local do-it-yourselfers

Tool-lending libraries might seem too unusual to become a full-fledged environmental movement. But they already have a foothold in Seattle, and they do more than just help the environment and reduce climate change.

By Tom Watson

Special to NWhomes

An environmental movement needs a little extra oomph to make a big impact.

The farmers market movement, for example, offers great food, brings people together and supports local farmers. The alternative-vehicle movement, steadily driving interest in electric and hybrid cars, keeps us out of the gas station and gives us fun new toys to drive.

Tool-lending libraries might seem too unusual to become a full-fledged environmental movement. But they already have a foothold in Seattle, and they do more than just help the environment and reduce climate change.

Eminently practical, tool libraries save the average Joe or Jane real money. Most important, they build community.

Check it out

The new “sharing economy” — car sharing, bike sharing, clothing swaps and more — has gotten lots of media attention. Tool sharing has been less visible, but tool libraries have quietly reinvented the traditional library model.

Tool libraries directly reduce unnecessary consumption. Instead of buying a tool that you use perhaps once a year — such as a pressure washer, table saw or posthole digger — you borrow it.

Seattle’s four tool libraries reside in West Seattle (wstoollibrary.org), Northeast Seattle (neseattletoollibrary.org), Phinney Ridge (phinneycenter.org/tools) and the Central District (seattlefarmcoop.com). Organizations in several other Seattle neighborhoods have expressed interest in starting their own tool libraries.

Portland has six tool libraries, including two with just kitchen tools and supplies. More than 50 tool libraries operate nationwide.

How it works

At some tool libraries, you go to the front counter and staffers show you potential items. Another example can be found at NE Seattle Tool Library, where you can stroll through a small, well-organized room and look at all of the items, just like a typical library. It offers more than 2,700

tools, nearly all of them donated.

You can usually see listings of available tools on a library's online inventory system, or visit in person to see if they have what you need. Check a tool out, and you typically have a week to return it.

All of Seattle's tool libraries are open at least three days a week, mostly three to five hours a day. Anyone can join them, even if you live outside of the immediate neighborhood or even outside of Seattle.

Tool libraries may suggest a donation for membership — \$40 is suggested at NE Seattle and at West Seattle — and some also charge deposit fees, late fees or small rental fees for certain items.

Sharing tools often leads to bigger things. The West Seattle, NE Seattle and Phinney tool libraries sponsor "fixer's collectives." At these informal meetings, people help each other repair items that they bring from home, including household appliances, electronics and small furniture.

With society so oriented toward consumption and quick disposal, where nothing seems to last, these grass roots gatherings provide support and inspiration. Some tool libraries also offer "maker's nights" where people help each other build things.

Secrets of success

Tool libraries do require significant effort to start and maintain. You usually need at least two people who are willing to take the time-consuming lead roles.

Money always helps. The City of Seattle's Department of Neighborhoods, the garbage- and recycling-collection company CleanScapes and others have helped financially support Seattle's tool libraries.

The libraries need liability insurance and a location, of course. Many tool libraries find space in unused church buildings or old schools.

Community environmental organizations such as Sustainable West Seattle (sustainablewestseattle.org) often launch and operate tool libraries. MyTurn (myturn.com), a public-minded private business connected with the West Seattle effort, offers online resources for tool libraries and related projects.

As part of its Earth Day outreach campaign this year, King County's EcoConsumer program will help provide assistance to groups interested in starting tool libraries in areas of the county outside of Seattle. Use the contact information below to learn about that, and let's keep sharing tools and building community.

Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services, and EcoConsumer is his biweekly column. He can be reached at tom.watson@kingcounty.gov, 206-477-4481 or via KCecoconsumer.com.



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