

HOW TO TRASH YOUR TUBE

BY LAUREN FITZPATRICK, STAFF WRITER

The guts of an old television set look like a bunch of junk. There's a heavy glass screen, a bunch of plastic plugs and a jumble of wires tucked inside a wooden or plastic cabinet. A cathode ray tube, the key to the picture, hides more glass, a metal frame and up to 8 pounds of lead. Nothing will prevent Southlanders from chucking old sets once the June 12 switch changes broadcast signals to digital, when analog TVs, the kind with the tube inside rather than a digital tuner, become obsolete. Curbside garbage pickup grabs electronics, too. State law doesn't yet prevent electronic trash — or e-waste — from going to the landfill.

"They go into the landfill and the tubes and all are hazardous to our Earth — there's mercury in there," said Jean Porter, a mother of two who runs a "freecycle" recycling group in Orland Park and Tinley Park. "It's ridiculous to throw things out. One's man's trash is another man's treasure."

Not that couch potatoes are rushing to toss their old analogs en masse, because cable watchers will experience a seamless conversion. Many others with tube TVs opted for converter boxes, which at about \$50 or \$60 come cheaper than a new digital TV.

Still, to mistake any of those old TVs as trash is shortsighted.

The guts of a TV can be hazardous if not treated properly. They take up a lot of space as trash. And they're valuable as raw materials when recycled.

They're also gold to a Chicago Heights company, which will transform those insides into ingredients purchased by American manufacturers.

Salvaging everything possible

Walls of old console TVs stand inside Intercon Solutions' giant warehouse, piled up 10 feet tall on an industrial floor still scarred with steel rails from when the Washington Street building contained railroad cars.

Shrink-wrapped on wide pallets, TVs in bulky wood consoles and colored plastic cases alike await disassembly in a process Intercon Solutions calls "demanufacturing." Pieces get unscrewed, unhooked, unfastened, all by hand, in the opposite order of their manufacture. The parts then are sorted by materials and packaged for shipping to a series of manufacturers within the United States (but none in Illinois).

Nearby, workers are dismantling old telecommunications consoles from the outside in, while conveyor belts sit silent, full of plastic calculators from another shift. And a carton of old film unspooled from Defense Department reels waits to be stripped of its silver.

Mark Medic, of Intercon, said this recycling process is tidier than shredding and keeps hazardous materials from contaminating the ground. Intercon doesn't resell working gadgets overseas for consumer reuse. And they put nothing into landfills, he said.

This is important because the lead alone in TVs causes health problems when released haphazardly into the environment. Other heavy metals like mercury and cadmium — found in the TV tubes — also can contaminate groundwater. Mercury causes birth defects and damages the central nervous system. Lead poisoning often leads to learning disabilities in children. And cadmium irreversibly damages kidneys and lungs and softens bones.

Intercon pulls the lead components out of the sets and sends them downstate where the metal is smelted out. The smelters get the glass, too, which they use to help regulate the heat of the smelting process.

The lead is resold to electronics companies, mostly for use as solder. Wood from cabinets is chipped up for particle board. And the plastics become plastic lumber and parking bumpers.

And the more metals that can be salvaged from junk, the fewer that must be mined underground.

You don't want to fill the landfill

Intercon charges for recycling dropoffs. Several times a year, the company partners with area municipalities that pay the fees, which start at \$10 and depend on the size of the set.

Will County has several free recycling dropoff centers and ships electronics they collect to a Plainfield recycler similar to Intercon. The county has just added a location at the New Lenox Township offices; e-recycling is open to county residents.

"You don't want to fill the landfill with (hazardous materials); you don't want to fill the landfill anyway," said Marta Keane, a recycling specialist at



Employees at Intercon Solutions deconstruct some old telecommunications devices Jan. 29 at the facility in Chicago Heights. Mark Medic, director of business development for Intercon, says their recycling process is tidier than shredding and keeps hazardous materials from contaminating the ground.

PHOTOS BY MATT MARTON — SOUTHTOWNSTAR

the Will County Land Use Department. "Once it's full, we have to make a new one somewhere else. So why fill it up with televisions just because we're going to switch to digital?"

Consumers want to recycle their gadgets, according to an industry group, the Consumer Electronics Association. In 2005, when nearly 65 million TVs were discarded, 17 percent of those sets were recycled, 63 percent were given away and 21 percent were trashed. By 2007, recycled TVs increased to 20 percent, while 59 percent were given away and 21 percent were trashed.

And local freecycle groups — Internet-based efforts to give unwanted stuff away so useful things don't clog landfills — are growing in popularity. Groups in Oak Lawn and Orland Park have been finding new homes for old TV sets.

But electronic recycling still takes individual effort and initiative. State law doesn't yet ban trashing your TV, and Homewood Disposal, which contracts for most south suburban municipal garbage collection, still picks up televisions left alongside trash cans.

"As of right now, everything is still going into the garbage," site manager Jon Schroeder said of televisions. "Customers put it out at the curb with the trash, and our trash trucks pick it up."

Illinois passed a law in September requiring manufacturers to take back e-waste and recycle it, said Dave Walters, a waste reduction manager at the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency. The law starts to take effect in 2010, and by 2012, all TVs, computer monitors and printers, and other electronics will be banned from the landfill stream.

"The new Illinois law is really much broader than other states," Walters said. "It's the first piece of legislation that includes printers."

About 20 states have some kind of e-waste laws, most of which are recycling programs rather than bans on landfills.

"So I would not say we're late in coming to the game," Walters said. "We're ahead of the curve than in other states."

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Medic is seen through an old reel talking about TVs waiting to be deconstructed at the Chicago Heights facility.

MAKING THE SWITCH

The digital turnover had to be extended four months to June 12 partly because the program providing coupons for converter boxes ran out of money.

Thousands of people who applied for the \$40 converter coupons at the end of last year were put on waiting lists, informed they likely wouldn't get them in time for the original Feb. 17 conversion. And without the boxes, analog TVs that rely on antennas to pick up over-the-air signals won't work.

A proposed \$650 million was added to the initial \$1.5 billion fund subsidizing the boxes, which will be needed by anyone with an old TV set that does not have cable or a satellite system, aka, one that relies on

rabbit ears.

The money pays for the converters, a free help hot line (888) 225-5322 (888-CALL FCC) and no-cost house calls to anyone who can't manage to set up a converter box with telephone help from the Federal Communications Commission.

Despite the delay, a May 21 digital test-run by the FCC turned up more problems in the Chicago area than in any other market. And some 3.3 million people nationwide still don't have a digital-ready television, according to the Nielsen Co.

So if you need help or still have questions about digital broadcasting, call (888) 225-5322, or log onto DTV.gov or DTVanswers.com.

GO RECYCLE THAT OLD TV

New Lenox Township recycles electronics for Will County residents at its town hall, 1100 S. Cedar Road.

Freecycle has groups in most south suburbs. Find your town and post your TV for pickup at www.freecycle.org.

Best Buy stores have been offering electronics recycling for consumers, who pay a \$10 fee for each item with a screen and receive a \$10 Best Buy gift card.

The stores will not take TVs bigger than 32 inches, console televisions, appliances or

microwaves. Participating locations include 7330 191st St., Tinley Park, 15854 S. La Grange Road, Orland Park, 4707 Lincoln Mall Drive, Lincoln Mall, Matteson, and 4925 Cal Sag Road, Crestwood.

And Intercon Solutions, 1001-59 Washington St., Chicago Heights, will take TV dropoffs if you call ahead, (708) 756-9838, and shipments if you attach payment. Fees to recycle televisions start at \$10 and vary by size. Check out www.interconrecycling.com for more information.

'Freecycling' helps keep useful stuff out of landfills

BY LAUREN FITZPATRICK
STAFF WRITER

Yohannah Scott had a 27-inch TV that was just too good to throw out. And yet she didn't want it anymore.

So she posted this message on the Chicago Ridge freecycle Web site: "OFFER: 27" JVC tv older but still works -60501."

About 10 responses later, a gentleman showed up to cart it out of her Summit home.

"He stated that his went out and he needed another one," she said. "It worked just fine; I just had no room for it. If no one wanted it, I would have donated it."

But the Goodwill isn't taking TVs, and while commercial recyclers can process TVs and other old electronics that have outlived their usefulness into scrap and raw materials, working equipment is being passed from people sick of looking at old junk to others in need of that exact same old junk.

Local freecycle groups are facilitating the free person-to-person exchanges to keep useful things out of landfills through www.freecycle.org.

And folks are still looking for analogs, which still will work with cable, video players and game systems.

A mother was looking for an old working TV on the Chicago Ridge site after her daughter got a new Nintendo Wii for her birthday. Another lady in Chicago Ridge was looking for "anyone going to a flat screen and looking to give away their old, bulky, cable ready, color TV." And a Steger woman setting up house for the first time was looking for a small set for a child's room.

The Goodwill store in Orland Park isn't taking TV donations because disposing of broken sets costs too much, said Cheryl Lighthouse, the charity's Chicago-area spokeswoman.

Jean Porter, a freecycle moderator for the Orland Park and Tinley Park group, said her members are looking to get rid of their electronics.

"I would say most posts regarding TVs are offers, and a few 'wants' — people looking to pick up free sets, she said.

Nikki Mackovitch, who moderates a group in Oak Lawn and Burbank, and another in Chicago, said participants seem to be hanging onto their old sets but clamoring for converter box coupons.

"We have seen a small increase in TVs offered compared to normal, but I do not think it has been a great surge," she said. "I think with the economy the way it is right now, many people will not be switching their TVs over just yet. I know we cannot afford to ourselves as much as we would love to."

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JEAN PORTER, MODERATOR FOR A "FREecycle" RECYCLING GROUP IN ORLAND PARK AND TINLEY PARK.

