

RECYCLING ELECTRONIC WASTE By Senator Bob Smith

When we dispose of old televisions and computers, we create waste that is dangerous to public health and to the environment because of the chemicals contained in electronic products. The federal Government Accountability Office reported in 2005 that more than 100 million computers, monitors and televisions become obsolete each year in the United States. The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection estimates that about 2.4 million computers and monitors, and 600,000 televisions become obsolete annually. Those numbers will only increase as more electronic products are introduced into the market and consumers upgrade to the newest models.

Computers and television sets contain large amounts of toxic substances and the proper disposal of these substances is a growing problem for local governments, who are responsible for financing – through property taxes – solid waste disposal. Cathode ray televisions and computer monitors, which are quickly being disposed of in favor of LCD or plasma flat-panel models, contain about four pounds of lead each, meaning that roughly 12 million pounds of lead are put into our landfills each year through the disposal of television sets and computer monitors. This older equipment also contains chromium, cadmium, mercury, beryllium, nickel and zinc. The new flat-panel models contain higher amounts of mercury, which could pose an equally dangerous pollution problem five to ten years into the future if we do not enact a meaningful electronics recycling program now.

According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, just 9 percent of the electronic waste generated was recycled in 2000, and the vast majority of this electronic waste ends up in landfills and sometimes even in incinerators. The potential for hazardous chemicals to make their way into groundwater and the air is high and dangerous, making the recycling of electronic devices even more important.

New Jersey Senate Bill No. 554, the Electronic Waste Producer Responsibility Act, will create an electronics recycling program in New Jersey similar to programs already in place in Maryland, Maine and California. According to the National Caucus of Environmental Legislators, an additional 18 states, including New Jersey, are currently considering e-waste legislation.

The bill divides the management of electronic waste into two categories: televisions and computer equipment. An advance recovery fee of \$10 would be imposed on the retail sale of each new television. The fees will be used as part of a Used Television Management Fund, which would be administered by the NJDEP, pay for a used television management program and make recycling payments to authorized used television recyclers.

In addition, the legislation provides for fines to be issued to any individual who knowingly disposes of e-waste. Collectors of solid waste and the owners and operators of solid waste facilities will also be fined for knowingly accepting e-waste. Within one year of the law's effective date, all devices offered for sale in New Jersey that are covered by the e-waste legislation would need to be marked with a permanent label clearly identifying the manufacturer,

any hazardous materials contained in the device, the laws prohibiting disposal of the device and recycling information.

The e-waste legislation shifts the financial responsibility for the collection and recycling of discarded electronic waste from the taxpayers of New Jersey to electronics manufacturers. Many manufacturers, including Dell and Hewlett Packard have already established recycling programs. Dell's pilot program with Goodwill Industries is active in Michigan, San Francisco and Austin, Tex. Consumers can drop off their old computers at any Goodwill location and Dell will recover the units and either refurbish or recycle them. Hewlett Packard has taken an active role in recycling cathode ray monitors and televisions, and has established pilot programs with Staples and Office Depot to encourage consumer participation.

Most electronic device manufacturers, while recognizing the need to take responsibility for disposal of their products, oppose state legislation as creating an unwieldy regulatory patchwork and would prefer a national approach to the problem. Others prefer a narrower or a more voluntary approach. Additionally, some business groups oppose the e-waste legislation because, they argue, the bill increases the cost of doing business in New Jersey.

However, environmentalists and the legislation's sponsors, including myself, support the e-waste bill as a way to ensure that electronic waste is managed in an environmentally-sound manner. If we do not tackle the e-waste problem now, we will see a mountain of obsolete electronic products in our landfills, and the harmful chemicals contained in those products will negatively effect our environment. New Jersey is the most densely populated state in the nation, and every square foot we give up to create more landfills and every breath of air that is polluted from trash incinerators is precious. It is essential that we do more to promote and use alternative forms of waste management that do not foul our land and air, and instead preserve our natural resources. Along with two pieces of legislation – the Plastic Container Recycling Enhancement Act and the Recycling Enhancement Act – the Electronic Waste Management act will go a long way toward accomplishing those goals.