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Recycle old electronics during spring cleaning to give gadgets new life

It's the time of the year for emptying basements, cleaning out drawers and finding new homes for all the clutter that accumulated over the winter. For a growing number of Wisconsin residents, that clutter includes old electronics like computers, cell phones or TVs.

While it may be tempting to toss the old cell phones in the trash with the rest of the basement junk, or haul the TV to the curb, state law bans most electronics from Wisconsin's landfills and incinerators. Instead, residents can use E-Cycle Wisconsin to recycle electronics at more than 400 locations around the state.

"Electronics are resources that are too valuable to waste, and we can help both our economy and the environment by recycling them," said Sarah Murray, program coordinator for E-Cycle Wisconsin.

Recycling your electronics is important because they contain valuable materials that can be recycled and reused. These materials include plastics, steel, glass and precious metals like gold and copper.

Many devices also contain harmful materials such as lead, mercury, cadmium, chromium and chemical flame retardants. If disposed of improperly, these pollutants can pose a risk to human and environmental health. Residents may be asked to pay a fee to help cover the full cost of responsibly recycling their old electronics, especially larger, old TVs. Electronics manufacturers help pay for recycling in the E-Cycle Wisconsin program, but their payments do not always cover the full cost of carefully managing hazardous components.

The costs of avoiding a recycling fee at an established collector could be much higher than people realize. Information stored on computers, cell phones, printers and other devices, like credit card numbers, social security numbers and passwords, can all be accessed long after the computer or phone stops working. Responsible recyclers can protect personal data by handling recycled electronics securely and destroying or completely wiping hard drives and other memory.

The DNR maintains an up-to-date list of collection sites registered with E-Cycle Wisconsin. Go to dnr.wi.gov and search "e-cycle" for details. For questions, contact the E-Cycle Wisconsin program at (608) 266-2111 or DNRWAE-cycling@wisconsin.gov.