

Can Better Recycling Lead To More Green Jobs?

By Robbie Knight

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Here at Denver Green Streets, we are always interested in the Green Job question. I talked recycling job numbers with Matt McLaughlin, the Regional Sales Director of ERI (Electronic Recyclers International), which employs managers, asset managers, disassemblers, forklift drivers, dock supervisors and dock specialists in what Matt calls, "Your typical warehouse atmosphere," All full-time ERI employees are offered benefits.



Robbie Knight of Denver Green Streets and Matt McLaughlin, Regional Sales Director of Electronic Recyclers International

Job numbers are not as high as they could be in the electronics recycling industry. The Denver ERI facility has 26 employees. Job projections in the e-waste industry, like any other job numbers, are based on the amount of work that needs to be done-in this case, that's determined by the amount of e-waste material in the waste stream.

Consumers often balk at the cost of recycling electronics, since they don't anticipate it. Materials differ widely in cost to recycle. For instance, it's very expensive to process CRT leaded glass or flat screen technology with mercury bulbs, which have to be disassembled very meticulously.

Processing of e-waste is rapidly changing on many fronts, however. On the manufacturing side, there are efforts to eliminate the consumer cost of recycling altogether.

"If somebody brings in a Samsung TV to ERI, we recycle it at no cost because Samsung pays for the proper recycling of that item," said Matt. "There are other manufacturers that have similar programs; I

know Sony, Toshiba, Panasonic and Mistubishi all work with recyclers to recycle their products at no cost to consumers,"

But because Colorado does not have any e-waste legislation, "Manufacturers are not required to have any type of program in the state," Matt continued, "That being said, we've been able to leverage relationships with the states that do require manufacturers to subsidize the cost of recycling and we've been able to get them active or start getting them active in Colorado. That is a sign that more volume will be moving into proper recycling streams in the coming months," This would also impact job numbers in the industry for the better.

People love free e-recycling events, and events in Colorado in the past have been literally mobbed, with epic crowds and cars lined up for miles and waiting for hours to drop off that TV or stereo system to be recycled for no cost.

"Somebody's footing the bill for those events," Matt reminded me, "And that's great. You also see so many events in so many small communities. And the people having those small events really need to use due diligence and make sure they're using a certified recycler,"

Otherwise you could end up on *60 Minutes*, with your company name announced during horrifying footage of toddlers in a third-world country with mercury and lead smeared on their tiny, slave-laboring fingers.

"There are a handful of companies in Colorado that have made investments to protect their customers and that's the E-Steward Certification and the R-2 Certification which require independent auditors to visit a facility, audit the downstream of the facility, audit the internal operations and the environmental health and safety operations and certify that the company is handling their material properly. And for a consumer, business or government that's looking for an outlet for material, that's the only safety net that you have to be sure that you're using a recycler that's really doing what they say they're doing,"

Buying habits, recycling habits and manufacturing practices all have the ability to improve the e-waste stream. More to the point, we have the ability to create more jobs in the industry by insisting on right recycling practices.

"Part of our job is to educate consumers," says Matt, "If they know the dangers of improper disposal, they will want to do the right thing. Even in the last 5 years, recycling rates on the e-waste front in Colorado have increased dramatically. Currently the estimate is 15% of all electronics are being recycled in Colorado. An increase to just 50% of e-waste recycling in the state would triple the numbers of Green jobs in the industry.

In addition to educating consumers and hopefully inspiring more proper e-recycling for governments and private businesses, legislation is part of the equation.

"Twenty-seven states have the e-waste laws right now and we're not one of them," Matt says, "So we just need to keep pushing,"

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