

## Life after CRTs

### Entrepreneurs get in on the electronics-recycling business

By [Dorian Hargrove](#) 02/19/2008

On a recent Saturday morning, two 70-foot-long semi trucks from Electronic Recyclers International squeezed through the gates of Mission Bay High School's parking lot and weaved their way around parked cars to the far end of the lot where Ron LaChance waited, dressed in plaid shorts and sneakers, no socks. Trickle of early-morning sweat formed in the middle of his T-shirt as he flung open the trucks' doors and inspected the contents—wood pallets and unassembled, flat boxes.



In a matter of seconds, LaChance was outside the parking lot, hanging posters and setting up old computer monitors to mark the entrance. Meanwhile, SUVs pulled up to drop off Mission Bay's freshman baseball team.

Yelling over the sound of a beeping forklift, LaChance instructed the boys: "It's very important to keep the monitors and TVs together, and, guys, it should only take two of you to set up one box—c'mon."

A few minutes later, cars began to line up at the check-in point. La Jolla resident Herb Higgins was one of the first through the gates. Before he could put his car in park, the teens popped open his trunk and started lifting out a dusty 27-inch Panasonic TV. Ryan Barrera hoisted the wood-grain dinosaur, straining under its weight, while Sam Elgoual grabbed an old Betamax player and examined it as if he had discovered a new species.

When asked if everything still worked, Higgins responded, "Yeah, everything works fine. The remote doesn't [work] to the TV. Well, it does, but they don't make those types of batteries for it anymore."

Electronic-waste (or "e-waste") collection is a growing industry in California. In 2006, there were some 300 e-waste recycling centers in the state, said Mark Murray executive director of the environmental advocacy group Californians Against Waste. Now there are roughly 580, he said, ranging from governmental entities to nonprofits to private businesses.

The reason for the increase is a 2006 state law prohibiting people from including electronics with household trash. Electronic items contain hazardous materials like lead, cadmium, mercury and other chemicals that, if leaked into the ground, could contaminate water supplies. In 2005, the federal Environmental Protection Agency estimated that more than 1.5 million tons of e-waste was discarded nationwide. Of that, only between 345,000 and 379,000 tons were recycled. According to the EPA, roughly 70 percent of toxic materials found in landfills originated from e-waste.

Compounding pollution concerns, the number of electronic devices nearing the end-stage of their useful lives is staggering. Cathode ray tubes (CRTs), found in video-display devices—like TVs, laptops, computer monitors and cell phones—are, by far, the most dangerous, containing high concentrations of lead and other heavy metals. On Feb. 17, 2009, most TV stations will begin broadcasting in digital, meaning TVs from an estimated 13 million households will become outdated overnight, according The Nielsen Company.

To jump-start the e-waste recycling business, in 2005, the state imposed a fee on the purchase of all video-display devices—between \$6 and \$10, depending on the size of the device—to pay for dismantling and recycling of e-waste. Processing facilities get 48 cents per pound from the state for disposing of video-display devices.

Based in Fresno, Electronic Recyclers International is one of the state's larger for-profit e-waste recyclers. According to ERI's website, the company recycles more than 150,000 pounds of CRTs each day.

Not wanting to depend solely on people bringing e-waste to it, ERI recruits individuals who want to start their own e-waste collection business. The company pays 20 cents per pound for anything containing a CRT and pockets the remaining 28 cents.

Last July, LaChance responded to a letter from ERI looking for people willing to set up e-waste collection companies. As long as he found a location big enough to fit a couple of rigs and a workforce to run the event, ERI would send trucks packed with unassembled boxes, wood pallets and a pallet jack.

Shortly afterward, LaChance launched E-Waste Green. He held his first event at Tierrasanta Middle School, where he also runs a farmers market.

"We collected 16,000 total pounds, and the school made \$1,000 for four hours with only five volunteers," he said.

"They just loved me. My company is now on the San Diego School District's website for possible fundraisers."

Because of the success of that event, LaChance contacted other nonprofits.

Each organization's level of participation determines its share of the profits. A school willing to market the event and supply volunteers can get as much as half of what LaChance gets from ERI, while an organization that provides only a location gets 25 percent of the take.

"A few of my friends have called me crazy for giving them 50 percent, but, you know, it's for a good cause, and I'm doing all right," he said.

Mark Wilson, an assistant coach for Mission Bay High School's varsity baseball team, was pleased with the money the team earned from the collection drive. "We are totally self-supporting," he said. "We have to pay for everything nowadays, from the umpires to the balls to the maintenance on the fields. Shoot, just the other day we had to pay for 20 bags of Turface all on our own."

E-Waste Green's collection events aren't the only place to go to turn in your e-trash. There are some 15 other e-waste collectors in the county, like Recycle San Diego in Clairemont. Like E-Waste Green, it, too, runs fundraisers, such as a January event at Qualcomm Stadium held in conjunction with the environmental nonprofit I Love A Clean San Diego. Gates opened at 9 a.m., "and by 12:30, we had to start turning people back," said Recycle San Diego's 24-year-old CEO, Jeffrey Harding. "We collected around 280,000 pounds from 2,000 people; there were 14 semis, it was quite the turnout."

I Love A Clean San Diego got \$10,500 for its help with the event.

Harding said he's frustrated with new collection companies sprouting up throughout the county.

"There's no long-term investment to San Diegans," he said. "They'll do events until they can't do them anymore, and then get out of the business. Some aren't even from San Diego, and they just come down here and then take everything up north."

Recycle San Diego collects nearly 45,000 pounds of items with CRTs each week, in addition to 26,000 pounds of miscellaneous electronics and 15,000 pounds of computer towers.

While recycling companies are glad to take your e-waste, most charge a fee to collect any electronics that don't contain CRTs.

LaChance says this is the big difference between his operation and others. "Yeah, you can take your stuff to a few places, and they will take your TVs and monitors for free, but you have to pay \$8 to \$10 for them to take your other stuff. Other places charge you for pick-up. We take everything for free."

E-Waste Green's next drive will be at Sunnyside School in Bonita Springs on Saturday, Feb. 23.

Although Californians have options for disposing e-waste, Californians Against Waste's Murray believes the state is doing a poor job overall. "More than half of that material is continuing to be landfilled," he said. "We haven't created opportunities, and we haven't created incentives for citizens to recycle most of their electronic waste."

In 2006, state Assemblymember Lori Saldaña, who represents parts of San Diego, introduced a bill that would have required California to follow the United Kingdom in banning electronics manufacturers from using toxins like lead and cadmium, but Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger vetoed the bill. Saldaña plans to reintroduce it this year, her spokesperson said.