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An e-junk traffic jam

By Adam Silverman
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The Ford pickup rounded a corner Saturday, and volunteers knew they had a doozy on their hands. Worker Geoff Blanck shouted a warning ahead to his colleagues: "Very full!"

The truck pulled forward, and green-shirted helpers swarmed in. One volunteer stripped off a tarp covering the contents of the truck bed. "Lordy!" he exclaimed. The inside was brimming with unwanted electronics.

"You name it, I got it," said Rick Sysko, 50, of Waitsfield. "I got computers. I got mo- dems. I got VCRs. I got printers. I got copiers."

Volunteers wearing thick work gloves heaved and dragged the items onto large piles of similar electronic castoffs. Sysko was among several thousand people who deposited tens of thousands of items -- perhaps reaching 100 tons -- during an e-waste recycling event at Small Dog Electronics in South Burlington. The collection, co-sponsored by seven other organizations, coincided with Earth Day and offered people a fee-free way to dispose of unwanted material that for environmental reasons can't or shouldn't wind up in a landfill.

"We're taking more out of the environment than we're responsible for putting in," Blanck, Small Dog's chief of marketing and sales, said as he surveyed the company's second annual e-cycling day. "We're going to dwarf last year, which is phenomenal."

The first year, 50 tons of electronics were collected, according to the company.

Saturday was managed chaos. The event was set to begin at 9 a.m., but so many cars queued up on adjacent Dorset Street, blocking traffic, that work began nearly an hour early. At the program's peak, vehicles backed up in both directions on the street and wound through the shopping center's parking lot, where volunteers and employees directed cars into a drop-off drive-through like managing cattle chutes at a county fair. Drivers reported waits of an hour or more. Police were aware of the event but did not provide traffic control, Blanck said.

Recycling electronics typically costs consumers \$10 or so per item, people said Saturday. The no-charge event, coupled with environmentalism, seemed to spur the crowds.

The congestion prompted some participants and others in the vicinity to grumble about delays, but most were friendly and relaxed. With so many idling vehicles, a few people wondered whether the event truly benefited the environment.

Blanck said it did.

"Two hundred thousand pounds of e-waste? I'd certainly think so," he said. Small Dog is considering a new location for next year, he added.

Dozens of people abandoned the auto line and schlepped their items across the parking lot. Most of the recyclables appeared to be PCs; only a few brightly colored Macs dotted the mounds. There also were stacks of televisions (some with knobs!), cell phones, printers, copiers, coils of cables, even satellite TV dishes.

Volunteers loaded box trucks and semis with the collection; by noon multiple loads had departed and still the piles grew. The waste was bound for processing centers, where a small percentage can be salvaged but most is broken down so elements can be reused. Hazardous waste such as mercury is disposed of.

Sysko's haul represented the leftovers from an Internet start-up he sold a few years back. He'd been waiting for a recycling event such as Saturday's to discard all the supplies. The environmental benefits were his motivator, he said: "I couldn't throw it in a landfill. Cost -- I don't care. I sold my Internet service provider. I made a lot of money."

As the 1 p.m. stopping time neared, Gina McLean, 49, of Burlington and her family arrived in a caravan of three SUVs, all brimming with electronics, the remnants of her father's computer business. "Why today? We didn't want to pay to get rid of it," she explained.

After volunteers cleared out the vehicles, a worker peered inside and asked, wearily, "Did we get everything?"

No, McLean responded. They had missed a small remote control.

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