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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 most Wisconsin residents, that clutter includes old electronics like computers, cellphones or TVs.

While it may be tempting to toss old 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.

Recycling your electronics is important because they contain valuable materials, including plastics, steel, glass and precious metals like gold and copper. More than 90% of the materials in most electronics can be recycled or reused.

Many devices also contain harmful materials such as lead, mercury, cadmium, chromium and chemical flame retardants. If disposed of improperly, these pollutants can harm human health and the environment. Lithium-ion batteries in electronics can also cause fires if not handled properly during recycling.

Many collection sites charge a fee to help cover the full cost of responsibly recycling some electronics, especially TVs and monitors. Electronics manufacturers help pay for recycling under E-Cycle Wisconsin, but their payments do not always cover the full cost of collection and recycling.

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

The Department of Natural Resources maintains an up-to-date list of collection sites, upcoming collection events and free mail-back programs registered with E-Cycle Wisconsin. Go to dnr.wi.gov and search "ecycle" for details..