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LONG ISLAND
631-273-7500
info@usgbc-li.org



Vice Chair
Vince Capogna
Synergy Green Building Group
New Hyde Park, N.Y.

Recycling and responsible stewardship of used electronics

mg Michael Gianchetta



GIANCO Environmental Services

While advances in technology give companies and individual users the opportunity and availability to upgrade to newer, sleeker and more energy-efficient electronic products, it is critical to remember that many electronic units such as computers and monitors, mobile phones, televisions, and other electronic devices contain hazardous and harmful toxins. These items include lead, mercury, cadmium, flame retardants and other hazardous materials, that when released into the environment these persistent, bioaccumulative toxins (PBTs) are known to cause birth defects and damage to our nervous and skeletal systems, as well as blood streams. Many of these outdated and unused devices also often contain sensitive and confidential information. Properly managing and disposing of these electronics by recycling provides generators with the opportunity for responsible stewardship. This enables both environmentally friendly disposal and security of all the information stored within

Original users, on average keep a laptop computer for only three years and will discard their cell phone after only 24 months. Many are still in good working condition and can be recycled, refurbished or donated to schools and charities. These efforts benefit both the environment and the communities they serve. Tax deductions for donating working electronics to schools or charities are also available.

There are also secondary markets for disposal of recent models of laptop computers, desktop computers and cell phones. These products retain value. Computer recyclers and asset management companies place outdated, unused equipment and electronics back into reuse or the recycling stream by refurbishing these devices and, in many cases, shipping them offshore to third world countries. Most companies will resell the equipment they receive or dismantle the parts of value. They separate the recycled materials, such as glass, metals and plastics and sell off these commodities and find

new uses for them. Unfortunately, however, anything considered with no value will usually end up in our landfills.

These secondary markets do help minimize the number of whole units that find their way into our landfills. Recent studies have estimated that although E waste accounts for only 5% of the total waste stream by volume it accounts for approximately 40% of the toxic materials disposed of in solid waste. Many municipalities are now also accepting E-Waste at S.T.O.P. (Stop Throwing Out Pollutants) programs or on specific days designated only for E-Waste. However, these programs will only accept items from verifiable, town residents. Commercial generators and business are not usually permitted to drop off electronic components at these events.

Electronics recycling is an excellent way to conserve valuable natural resources, save landfill space, and reduce the amount of toxins entering the waste stream. Strict guidelines and regulations are in place for the proper handling of these universal waste streams. Unfortunately, not all companies that recover and manage used electronics abide by these regulations. This often results in obsolete electronics being mismanaged in the U.S. and in other countries lacking proper facilities, training and resources to safely and appropriately process or secure the information found in these devices.

When it comes to computer recycling, each day businesses and individuals are finding the safe guarding of information, once stored on these systems, a major concern. Many of these personal and business electronic components contain both personal and corporate confidential information on financial transactions to employee information,

clients, trademarks and other sensitive information. This data is easily retrievable, if the equipment is not processed properly. As most computer recycling companies refurbish or dismantle units, they do not physically destroy the components to the extent that all information is not irretrievable.

There are a number of levels of stewardship GIANCO provides. Each disposal program is tailored to meet the specific needs of the clients and the level of information protection required. GIANCO Environmental Services recommends all data from a computer hard drive be removed before donating or recycling a computer or other storage devices. All media should be wiped clean before disposing of it. This includes computer hard drives as well as all other electronic and media formats. There are a number of ways to remove data from your hard drive. If the information is too sensitive to risk or you are unable to remove it before donating your equipment, GIANCO Environmental Services can provide a program that will ensure the highest level of complete destruction and proper handling of this sensitive information and equipment. This true end of life destruction program guarantees all electronic equipment is triaged and shredded. With a zero landfill policy and all shredded materials including plastic, glass, ferrous and non ferrous metals recycled into new products, this total destruction program provides the highest level of security, a certificate of destruction and an environmentally friendly disposal of all electronic equipment.

Michael Gianchetta is the vice president of GIANCO Environmental Services, Brentwood, N.Y.

Meet the USGBC Member

Vince Capogna is vice-chair of the USGBC-LI and a LEED AP+ (ID+C specialization). His company, Synergy Green Building Group, Inc. provides LEED certification consulting, sustainable design assistance, select green products, building systems, and construction services, all helping to build a more eco-friendly world. The company serves as a catalyst, augmenting a project team's resources with dedication, knowledge and experience regarding sustainable design, construction, and operation.



Vince Capogna • Synergy Green Building Group, Inc.
New Hyde Park, NY 11040
(516) 742-7229 • fax (516) 742-0911
vince@synergygreenbuildinggroup.com

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