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North Carolina Bill Could Reverse State's E-Cycling Progress

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Five years after a new North Carolina law lightened municipalities' financial load to recycle electronics, the state could face a radical change. A change that could threaten the state's 100 plus electronics drop off sites, now free to citizens.

While the 2015 law required electronics manufacturers to pay into recycling the products they churn out, they will be relieved of this responsibility if House Bill 169 is signed into law. It recently passed the state senate.

Bill opponents worry about financial and environmental repercussions of shifting the burden to municipalities. This past year, manufacturers paid over \$1 million into electronics recycling programs that would go away, according to the News Observer. Then there is the question, what would happen to the tonnage of e-waste that would continue to be banned from landfills?

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The Carolina Recycling Association and The Product Stewardship Institute call the proposed law a step backwards. The existing drop off sites through county and municipal programs, manufacturer and retail sites have seen 19,000 tons of computers and televisions recycled a year, according to a North Carolina Environmental Quality memorandum. The e-scrap industry generated more than \$55 million in capital investment and employs more than 600 people, the Stewardship Institute points out.

“Some of the hundreds of sites that will be affected will continue to collect electronics for recycling. They will just go from not having enough funding to having none at all if the law passes,” says Diane Davis, executive director of the Carolina Recycling Association.

She is hopeful that the move will not materialize, commenting, “The House does not support full repeal of the electronics legislation. They have been educated and encouraged by electronics recyclers in the state, recycling organizations, and environmental organizations.”

Wake County is not banking on the bill's death, and is among a few looking into their options should the law pass. They currently collect at five facilities countywide and contract with a Durham processor.

“The contract generates a small amount of revenue. However, we pay up to 30 cents per pound for other items—primarily CRT TVs. This fiscal year we collected more than 3 million pounds of CRT TVs, costing over \$1 million,” says John Roberson, Wake County solid waste management director.

The county will study three electronics disposal options should the law pass: disposing CRT TVs in their lined landfill; removing and recycling the plastic and back of the TV while landfilling the leaded glass; and continuing to collect and process CRT TVs.

“Should option two or three be chosen, the county would have to consider an increase to the current \$20 per year household fee in the near future,” Roberson says.

Greenville also has concerns, especially environmental ones.

Should the law pass, “I see it creating a big challenge to comply with the landfill ban. Illegal dumping could be a possibility,” says Delbert Bryant, Greenville Public Works sanitation manager. “You may have those not certified as recyclers trying to get recycled materials out of illegally discarded electronics—breaking open TVs and improperly disposing chemicals.” The city would have to clean it up and it would pose health and environmental risk to workers and the whole community, he says.

Resa Dimino senior advisor for policy and programs for the Product Stewardship Institute has seen programs work, depending on their structure.

“States like Vermont, Oregon and Washington who have centrally coordinated programs—for instance a central contractor managing a state program do well,” she says, though she emphasized financial backing from manufacturers is critical.

Dimino believes stakeholders should look at different financing alternatives and goal-setting structures for manufacturers to boost community programs.

“I think we need to recognize [cost-related challenges from programs and from a volatile market] are growing pains. And it would be short sighted to eliminate these programs. These laws need to be fixed, not trashed,” she says.

The Senate bill was spearheaded by Republican Senator Trudy Wade of Greensboro. Wade argues electronic manufacturers are passing their expense onto consumers. She and other proponents say the fees discourage them from doing business in states where they are imposed.

Davis disagrees. “We have a very strong recycling economy in North Carolina. If we keep the law, we will keep the jobs.”

Raleigh is among municipalities with no current plans for change, whichever way the

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pendulum swings. The city picks up electronics weekly and takes them to Wake County drop-off facilities, says John Boyette Jr., Raleigh's communication administrator.

"Discouraging recycling ... is not reflective of the city's strategic plan, SWS waste reduction initiatives, and [vision for] a sustainable future," he says.

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