Stewardship solutions

By reaching out to the private sector, local governments can make a big difference in e-waste recycling efforts.

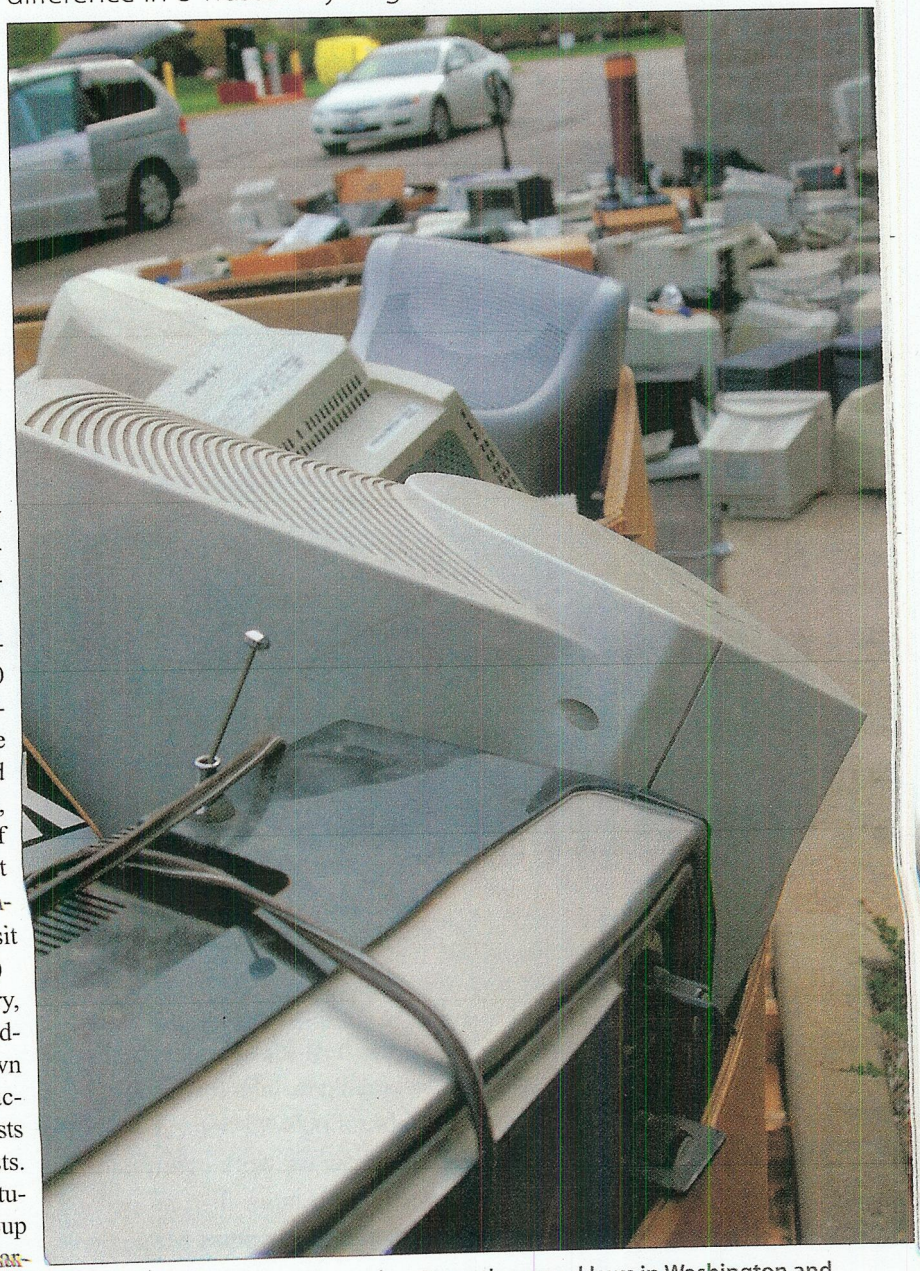
The June 2006 cover article, "The Cost of E-Waste," nicely spells out the burden local governments face in addressing the issue of electronic waste. However, in focusing on traditional solid waste management practices, the article misses an important tool available to local and state governments for managing e-waste.

That tool is product stewardship: a management strategy where whoever designs, produces, sells, or uses a product takes responsibility for minimizing its environmental impact throughout all stages of its life cycle. Typically, the greatest responsibility lies with whomever has the most ability to affect the product's lifecycle environmental impact.

When governments began providing solid waste services some 100 years ago, the impetus was protecting public health. The residential waste stream was largely ash, sawdust, and oyster shells. Products—bottles, rags, old shoes—composed only 7.5% of that stream. The remainder at that time—organics, or biowaste—comprised 20% of the waste stream. (Visit www.productpolicy.org/resources.)

By the end of the 20th century, the proportion of manufactured products in the waste stream had grown to 75%. Local rate payers grew accustomed to covering all disposal costs associated with these products' costs. Manufacturers were left in the fortunate position of only having to recoup their costs for production and marketing. From the perspective of a manufacturer's bottom line, disposal costs are an externality that need not be dealt with.

More to the point, public agency responsibility for disposing of household products now extends to a whole range of products—such as electronics that contain toxic materials and require special handling—that pose a real burden on society when disposed. These



Recently passed laws in Washington and Maine are making manufacturers bear more of the burden of e-waste than they've had to. Photo: Jenni Spinner

products are a growing percentage of our garbage.

"The Cost of E-Waste" article does a great job of describing the current situation in which local governments feel the pressure to collect electronics, but see little upside in doing so. No one doubts that local and state governments have an important role to play in managing the electronic waste stream. But the "cost of e-waste" is also about "who pays?"

Recently passed product stewardship laws in the states of Washington and Maine—and the law of the land in Australia, Japan, Europe, and growing parts of Canada—are making manufacturers much more responsible for paying and arranging for the environmentally safe collection, transport, processing, and recycling of e-waste. This provides a free-market incentive for manufacturers to make products that are less toxic, managed more efficiently (read: less expensively), and perhaps even longer-lived.

The Northeast Recycling Council (NERC) model legislation mentioned in your article also takes the product stewardship approach. Manufacturers can either pay a fee to the state that will cover the costs of collection and recycling of electronics or they can set up a collection and recycling system on their own. If a local government wants to collect e-waste it can do so and be compensated for it—as can retailers or non-profits that also may wish to collect.

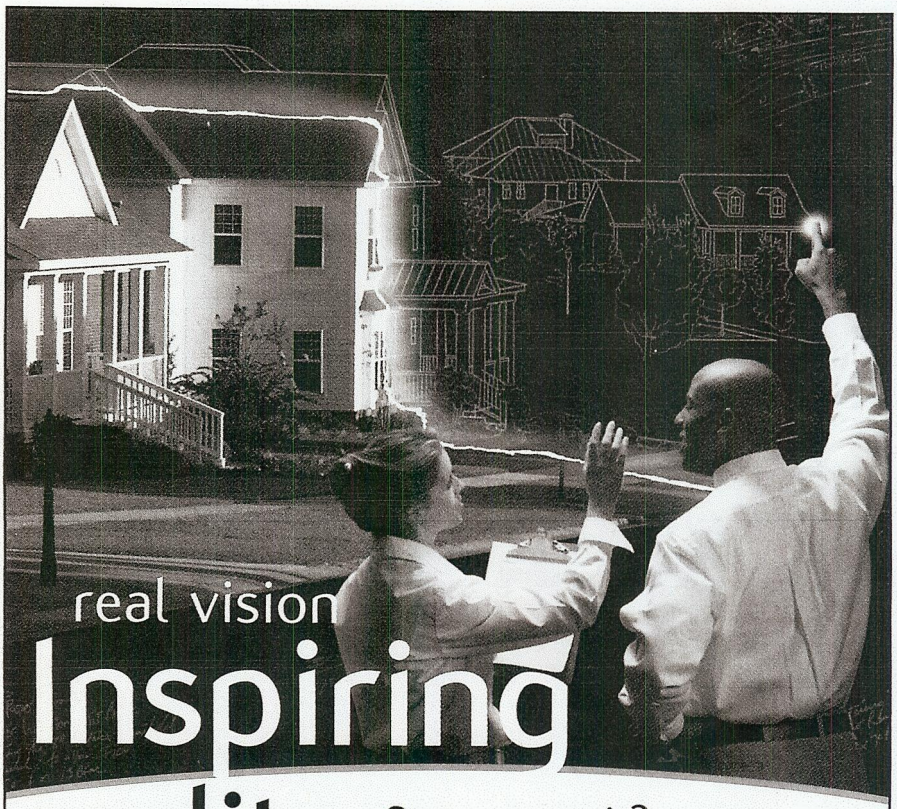
The salient point is that while local governments may feel they have to act right now to address the e-waste issue, they should consider actions that promote, rather than impede, product stewardship solutions.

For ideas of how local governments can establish e-waste programs while paving the way for product stewardship, read the Northwest Product Stewardship Council's "Consideration for Local Communities Related to the Collection of Used Electronics" at www.productstewardship.net.

One example of this approach is the Take It Back Network currently active in several Washington State counties (www.takeitbacknetwork.org). Under this program, government helped establish a level playing field and provided marketing and recycling guidelines for a network of private sector collectors that accept electronic waste from the public. Significantly, this now-established body of collectors will be able to segue seamlessly into the manufacturer-funded program mandated by the recently passed Washington state law.

Local governments were one of the chief engines behind the passage of this bill. Indeed, there are many ways that local governments can work with the private sector to establish product stewardship programs that share the responsibilities and costs of managing these difficult waste streams. Municipalities owe it to their ratepayers to start moving toward such product stewardship solutions. **PW**

— David Stitzhal is coordinator, Bill Smith is co-chair, and Scott Klag is co-chair of the Northwest Product Stewardship Council. Contact them at info@productstewardship.net.



Can you see it?

The better way ... the next step to innovation ... the small improvement that makes the big difference?

In our 46 years of service, we've found that the best ideas come from effective partnership – talented people collaborating with respect and trust. This is how we work every day. And it's why more than 80 percent of our business comes from clients who have worked with us before.

PBS&J

Visualize the future. Then call PBS&J.

Offices throughout the US • pbsj.com • 800-477-7275

Circle 236 on reader service card