

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Only 35% of electronic waste is collected. Minnesota legislators think we can change that. 01GQQR0NKS65H6Y84R9DE0ZQ5D

CATHY WURZER: Well, right in front of me right now are two desktop computers, a microphone, a cell phone, and my iPad is just an arms length away. I am planted in the midst of a forest of technology. It is clear that we cannot live without our tech.

But what do you do with your old laptops and such when it's time to upgrade? Well, only about 35% of electronic waste is collected, which means a lot of it ends up in a landfill. Could legislation change that? DFL Representative Athena Hollins thinks so.

She's a DFL Representative, and among her committee assignments, she's the Vice Chair of the House Climate and Energy Finance and Policy Committee. And she is on the line. Welcome, representative.

ATHENA Thank you so much. I'm so excited to be here.

HOLLINS:

CATHY WURZER: Glad to have you here. So that number I mentioned-- only, what, 35% of e-waste is collected. That's just a drop in the bucket. What's the issue at the core here?

ATHENA HOLLINS: Yeah. So, actually, per the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency score report, only 23.7% of e-waste is being collected. And, really, what it comes down to is the ease and ability for the collection of e-waste, for it to be recycled or disposed of correctly. And, really, the facilities that are available right now are not very well-funded.

And so we need to increase funding to those folks to be able to handle the amount of e-waste that we are currently generating.

CATHY WURZER: Back in 2007, I guess I'm old enough to remember that, the legislature passed what was then one of the toughest e-waste bills in the country, requiring that electronics manufacturers pay for electronics recycling. Has that not been working?

ATHENA HOLLINS: So it works to some extent. I think the reality is our e-waste statute is grossly outdated. So a lot of it is specific to particular types of electronics. For example we have fax machines listed in there. And while that's wonderful and we certainly do have fax machines in office buildings and probably in some folks' homes that still need to be recycled, the reality is the type of electronic waste that we are generating currently and that has sped up enormously within the past 10 years is not tube televisions or fax machines. It's incredibly different.

And so part of what we want to do is really update that statute to make sure that it's including all technology and electronic waste, and not give specific examples of what that waste is. Because we know that technology is moving much, much faster than we could even anticipate. So we don't want to try to predict what's coming next, we just want to make sure that we have the facilities and capacity to take care of it when we need to.

CATHY WURZER: OK. So someone's saying, I got an Xbox, do I recycle this or not? Oh, I guess it's not on the list. I'll just throw it out. Is that what you're kind of saying in terms of education of individuals?

ATHENA HOLLINS: Yes, absolutely. So education of individuals is very important, but also the geographic locations for free drop-off of electronics to be recycled is another really critical point. So I represent part of St. Paul and I live in Ramsey County, and we definitely have times when you can drop off electronics to be recycled. But the other part of it is in greater Minnesota, in rural areas, and, frankly, in a lot of areas that are major Metropolitan areas but don't necessarily have the same infrastructure as the Twin Cities, there isn't opportunities to drop those off.

And I don't think a lot of people are interested in driving two hours to a Best Buy or to a Ramsey County drop-off location to be able to drop their old Xbox that no longer works. And so because of that, it ends up going into landfills and, frankly, it goes into incinerators as well, which is especially toxic.

CATHY WURZER: So what does your bill propose? So, obviously, you've got, I would think, some money attached to this bill to pay for recycling, right? Run it down for us here.

ATHENA HOLLINS: Yeah, absolutely. So the first thing we want to do is increase the geographic locations and drop-off spaces for electronics. And by doing that, we anticipate that we are going to also have an increase in the number of electronics that are being recycled. And so part of that means that we need to make sure we're funding these facilities to make sure that they are able to keep up with the increased flow of old electronics that are being recycled. The other aspect of the language that we're working on is to try to set up Minnesota to be a leader in electronic recycling.

My long-term vision is to provide an influx of funding to Minnesota, and particularly the Iron Range, to really open some new facilities that will do a more in-depth electronic recycling. So currently, we have some electronic recycling that happens here, but not the most intense kind where we actually break everything apart and we can take out the pieces that we need.

So right now, what we do is we can break it apart and then we ship it, either to Wisconsin or across the sea to China to have them break it down further and take out the bits and pieces of the precious metals that we need and use in our new electronics. And then we end up buying those metals back from foreign countries.

And so what I would really love to see is Minnesota being a hub for electronic recycling in the entirety of the Midwest and have folks send their electronics here to be processed so that we can then create jobs and revenue for the state and for the people of Minnesota.

CATHY WURZER: Why are you passionate about this?

ATHENA HOLLINS: Well, it's interesting-- so I've always been passionate about climate and energy. And in particular, we have a lot of conversations around solar panels, and windmills, and various ways of producing energy. And one of the things that my colleagues across the aisle would always talk about is how much we need to mine in order to get the materials to make these solar panels, these windmills, and things like that, which I think is a fairly good point.

And it made me start thinking about where else can we find these materials? Because we know we're using them in all of our electronics on a regular basis, but where do they go after that? And it got me sort of digging into, how can we do better using the materials that already exist, that we've already dug up?

One of the advocates that I am working with on this likes to say, it's like your grandmother says, you use up what you already have. And then you can start looking for something new. And, really, we're hoping and we're asking Minnesotans to use up what we already have and to sort of rely on that as a huge source of precious metals and metals that can be used in all of our electronics, and, frankly, also in our solar panels and our wind turbines.

CATHY WURZER: And, of course, as you say earlier in our conversation, to make it easier for Minnesotans to drop off their electronic waste to get this process started. I appreciate your time. Thank you so much.

ATHENA

Absolutely. Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it.

HOLLINS:

CATHY

Athena Hollins is a State Representative for District 66B in St. Paul.

WURZER: