

City puts old cellphones on hold for charity

To be refurbished. Program will help Habitat for Humanity raise money for needy

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It isn't often that Guylaine Grenier, a division manager in the city of Montreal's purchasing department, signs a deal that's a) charitable, b) good for the environment and c) won't cost a cent.

But a contract Grenier signed with Habitat for Humanity last month is all that, she says.

Under the deal, the city will turn over its employees' discarded cellular phones, personal digital assistants and battery chargers to the charity's Montreal chapter instead of chucking them into the trash or hoarding them in desk drawers, as usually happens.

Habitat for Humanity, in turn, will send the equipment to PhoneBack Canada, an Ontario-based company that refurbishes cellphones for resale. The company will donate some of the retooled cellphones to community groups, like women's shelters, for emergency use and to medical patients awaiting organ transplants. It also donates cellphones to developing countries.

PhoneBack Canada pays about \$3 per discarded phone, Habitat for Humanity spokesperson Louise Legault said. The money will help fund her group's projects to build houses for families in need.

Two homes are already under way in the Hochelaga-Maisonneuve district. Two more next door are planned for next year, she said.

Since spring, Legault's group has been collecting old electronic devices at its ReStore outlet in LaSalle to exchange with PhoneBack Canada. It has collected about 50 phones, she said.

But just yesterday, Legault retrieved about 20 cellphones at the borough office in Verdun, the first borough to put out a box to collect its employees' old devices. The box has been there less than a month.

Every bit helps, Legault said. It costs about \$150,000 to buy land and build a house, she said.

"So that's a lot of cellphones." When you're one of the region's biggest employers, you're bound to send a lot of cellphones to the landfill each year, Grenier said. It's impossible to say how many of the city's 23,000 employees have cellphones and PDAs, however, or how many can be recycled in a year, she said.

The city will have a clearer picture at the end of the year when it will assess the program with its partner, she said.

The deal was the brainchild of Liette Gagnon, a purchasing adviser, and Lucille Gourde, a purchasing agent, who work in Grenier's department.

While surfing the Internet this spring, Gagnon and Gourde discovered there are companies that recycle cellphones. The two bureaucrats were looking for innovative environmental practices for the city.

They wound up contacting PhoneBack Canada because it donates refurbished cellphones to good causes, Grenier said. To boot, the city gets to partner with a non-profit group and does not have to spend any money, she said.

Cellphones and other electronic devices contain a host of such toxic substances as arsenic, lead, nickel and zinc, which leach into the soil at landfills.

There are 18.6 million cellular phone subscribers in Canada, the Canadian Wireless Telecommunications Association reports.

Only a small percentage of cellphones are recovered for re-use, however, estimates Gordon Weis, a company director at PhoneBack Canada.

Mindful of the promises in Mayor Gerald Tremblay's sustainable development policy, adopted in 2005, the city's purchasing department has become an incubator of environmental projects, Grenier said.

"They're very imaginative," she said of the staff. "They're taking this very seriously. There are a lot of little projects like this one coming." Most, like the cellphone recovery program, are being launched without so much as a press release.

In May, for instance, Grenier's department worked out a deal with a Rimouski firm to supply the city with car tires made mostly from recycled tires. It's environmentally friendly and about 40 per cent cheaper than buying new tires, she said.

"It's a nice idea," Grenier said.

"We are thrilled ... so we're trying to find other nice projects."



Habitat for Humanity's Louise Legault (left) retrieved 20 old cellphones from borough of Verdun yesterday.

Montreal's new program, which was conceived by Lucille Gourde (centre) and Liette Gagnon, will help preserve the environment.

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