Melbourne PC User Group

6 July 2006

Paul Belin
Assistant Commissioner
Waste Generation and Resource Efficiency Inquiry
Locked Bag 2, Collins Street East
Melbourne 8003

Submission from the Melbourne PC User Group on the Draft Report on Waste Generation and Resource Efficiency

Dear Sir,

The Melbourne PC User Group (MPCUG) is a not-for-profit association of computer users run by volunteers who support each other with assistance and advice, and provide education and training about computers and their applications. It is one of the largest such groups in the world, with over 10,000 current members. One of our sub-groups maintains a longstanding interest in computer refurbishment (for transfer to deserving recipients in Australia and overseas) and in recycling.

MPCUG submits the following comments on the Draft Report:

1.   On Policy Principles and Data Collection.

MPCUG agrees with the Policy Principle that all costs and benefits in waste management should count. But we draw attention to the admission in the Draft Report that there are "substantial gaps and biases" in the data collection (Draft Finding 2.1), and that "comparisons between Australia's waste management experience............... and that of other countries should be made with caution" (Draft Finding 2.2).

Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that it is not possible to accurately forecast the projected future environmental and social benefits or costs of waste management options in Australia without giving potentially efficient and effective options adequate trial. Only then can sufficient "robust evidence" (as required in Draft Recommendation 10.2) be collected to enable a meaningful assessment of net benefit to the community in which the waste management method is being assessed.

2.   On Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) and Product Stewardship (PS3) Schemes.

One of the Draft Report's Key Points is that "residual levels of externalities from modern, fully complying landfills appear to be small". But Draft Finding 8.3 states: "Compliance with landfill licence conditions in Australia appears to be relatively poor, and enforcement somewhat variable and lax As computers are listed in Box 1.1 (Page 5 of the Report) as "items in the municipal waste stream that could, under certain circumstances, be described as hazardous", it would seem reasonable to divert them from burial if a suitable alternative exists. EPR and PS schemes have offered a means to avoid indiscriminate dumping of computer waste, most of which presently goes into municipal landfill. An additional concern for the future is the shortage of more land for waste dumps close to urban areas.

EPR schemes also recover much of the material used in computer manufacture for recycling. Because it is impossible to involve all computer industry participants in EPR or PS schemes, we submit that government intervention is desirable, probably necessary, for their establishment, but in collaboration with industry and in combination with user involvement.

MPCUG supports the establishment of government-private partnerships to set up such EPR

and PS schemes and to advertise them to the public, followed by careful evaluation of all costs and of user acceptance. The net costs and benefits should be evaluated over a reasonably long time span, and the results will depend largely on how much each community makes use of such schemes. To expedite end-user involvement MPCUG is prepared to support education and publicity about EPR and PS via its magazine (PC Update), in Group meetings and at Computer Swap Meets.

Among the potential policy instruments for EPR and PS schemes listed in Box 10.1 (Page 222 in the Waste Report), consumers could be targeted through education and awareness-raising ("moral suasion"), by product labelling about proper disposal and any take-back requirements, and by advance disposal or recycling fees to at least partially cover the cost of recycling. Advance disposal fees included in the purchase price are probably preferable to "Pay as you Throw" charges, as the latter may encourage llegal dumping. MPCUG is in favour of all these policy instruments and expects that such measures will lessen indiscriminate dumping and the amount of kerbside recycling.

3.   Example of an EPR scheme that is supported by MPCUG.

MPCUG has publicised a pilot Computer Waste Collection and Recycling Project called "Byteback" in the City of Boroondara which started in June 2005 as a joint public-private venture between the Victorian Government and three private enterprises. There is no charge to the user. It is situated in part of the City of Boroondara Waste Transfer Station and is clearing 5 tonnes of waste a week; most of that material is recycled. MPCUG hopes that similar schemes will be set up in other areas.

4.   Example of a Refurbishment Scheme in which MPCUG is involved

For several years MPCUG volunteers have worked in a refurbishment/recycling scheme run by Business To Community Recyclers (B2C) in Campbell Street, Collingwood. Redundant computers, given usually by corporations but also by individuals, are tested and refurbished, then given to various charities. A major partner in this is World Vision, which transports the computers to its stations overseas for distribution to schools, local government, aid agencies etc.

This operation has successfully sent thousands of computers to places where they play an important role in development. However B2C has had very limited assistance from government and their activities are always a financial struggle with severe limitations on how much can be achieved.

5.   Summary

For the management of computer waste, the MPCUG is in favour of EPR or PS schemes established through a co-operative approach between government, industry and end-users built on government initiative and support (described as "industry-government co-regulation" in the Report, Draft Recommendation 10.2). Organisations like MPCUG, World Vision and B2C are also willing and able to play a part, if offered a role and materially supported.

Sincerely

Ray Beatty, p.p
Dave Botherway
President
Melbourne PC User Group