Loss of Suppliers May Force Windsor's WinCycle to Close

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Windsor — The shelves are packed with computer keyboards. Stacks of Lenovo ThinkPad laptops sit on top of each other like slabs of cobalt black slate. Bins overflow with mouses, adapters and cables. A row of flat-screen monitors is lined up neatly across the top shelf, like sentries, reflecting the sunlight streaming in through the windows of the airy 19th -century building with shiny wooden floors and an antique brass cash register tucked in the corner of the showroom.

Here, in this former dry goods store, the ghosts of the Industrial Revolution and orphans of the Digital Age coexist. The red building on Windsor's Main Street houses WinCycle, the Windsor nonprofit that for 16 years has been taking discarded computers and electronic equipment from Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center and Dartmouth College, refurbishing it, and reselling the equipment to residents, municipal offices, libraries and small businesses for a fraction of what they would cost new.

It is a service that's been of immense value to any number of people and organizations. And its future is now very much in doubt.

Roger Ellison, WinCycle's resident computer technician and manager — "They wanted to call me 'general' manager but that's just silly for overseeing two people," he said — moves around a U-shaped table where he has connected more than a dozen laptops into a network to wipe their hard drives and install a new operating system.

The entire process can take a day.

"There's kind of a mad-scientist thing going on over there," said Tom Marsh, Windsor town manager.

Ellison, 64, "fed up with California," moved to Charlestown sight-unseen on a friend's suggestion in 2001 and went to work at WinCycle in 2004 after an acquaintance told him the organization was looking for someone who knew his way around computers. Ellison knew a thing or two.

"I was standing at the mailboxes at (the mobile home park) Windy Acres Cooperative where I live and this guy comes over and tells me about WinCycle and that they are looking for a guy

who knows Linux," the open-source computer operating system that is a free alternative to the systems developed by Microsoft and Apple.

A onetime auto mechanic, Ellison grew up in a town between Sacramento and San Francisco and returned to community college in the 1980s to study computer programming. Soon he was learning COBOL and other programming languages, "and I was hooked," he said.

For the most part, Ellison's computer expertise is self-taught.

"He goes to work, comes home, eats dinner and then goes on the computer," said his wife, Lois Bromley-Ellison, who met her future husband when she was hired as an assistant at WinCycle and now sits on the nonprofit's board and is its treasurer. "That's part of what you get when you get Roger."

People who have worked with him over the years believe that Ellison's knowledge of how computers work matches that of a Ph.D.

"Roger could be teaching computer science at Dartmouth," marvels Mark Glassberg, WinCycle's longtime president. "He's internalized the architecture of computers."

How inexpensive are WinCycle's computers? A professional grade Lenovo ThinkPad, the kind used by D-H medical staff, typically are sold for $200 to $250. (They can cost more than $1,000 for a new top line models). Those with a Linux operating system can go for under $100. And, customers facing hard times only need to fill out a single-page form and can buy a laptop at a big discount off the listed price.

Losing Dartmouth and D-H

Now, after 16 years, WinCycle is facing an uncertain future.

The medical center and college have informed the Windsor nonprofit that they will not be renewing the contract to supply so-called e-waste — laptops, desktop PCs, keyboards, printers, monitors, mouses and sundry electronics equipment and parts. The news has thrown the organization's future into question.

Unless it can enter into an arrangement with another supplier, WinCycle is in danger of closing, people involved with the organization said, a move that would end a reliable provider of affordable computers to low-income families, students, small businesses and nonprofit organizations throughout the Upper Valley.

"WinCycle refurbishes very low cost computers for people who can't afford them," said Bromley-Ellison. "If WinCycle folds, I don't know how these people are going to get computers. Some pay as little as $50. If they said 'we can't afford this but we need it for our child,' I would give it to them. There are times when you have to do these things."

The termination of the contract is the latest twist at WinCycle, which has seen its purpose evolve over the years from a funnel for the college and medical center to dispose of everything from electronic equipment, furniture and uniforms to primarily a refurbisher of professional-grade computers that it resells to the public.

But the nonprofit has been struggling in recent years as changes in Vermont's environmental waste laws upended the economics of recycling and people have shifted away from PCs and laptops to mobile phones, leading to a drop-off in sales and revenue for the organization.

WinCycle's revenues in 2016 — the most recent year for which information is available — totaled about $168,000, down from about $189,000 in 2015 and from about $257,000 in 2014, according to the nonprofit's federal tax filings.

(Ellison, one of the nonprofit's few paid employees, earned $43,412 in 2016, according to that year's tax filing).

"People who used to buy laptops now buy mobile devices. The mobile movement is affecting the whole computer industry and we are part of it," said Glassberg.

What's more, Glassberg pointed out, the cost for a basic laptop that doesn't do anything fancy but satisfies the needs of a user who simply requires internet access is now less than even the low prices that WinCycle charges for a much higher quality model.

"You can buy a new Chromebook for $200," he said.

WinCycle board members said they were called to a meeting with D-H and Dartmouth officials early in February and informed that the hospital and college were terminating the joint contract. They said they weren't given a reason for the decision other than the institutions had decided to move their e-waste disposal to another contractor effective April 1.

Although the decision stung and could deliver a crippling blow to WinCycle, Bromley-Ellison said there was no animosity between the nonprofit and hospital and college. "It's always been a good relationship and these things change," she said. "You could tell it was hard for them to tell us."

Zak Conaway, manager of waste, recycling and training at D-H, said in a prepared statement that he wouldn't comment on specific details but that D-H periodically reviews its vendor contracts and "make(s) decisions to not renew them based on a wide variety of issues including cost, service, quality and adequate fulfillment of business needs."

He added that "WinCycle has been an environmental and community partner in the past and we are exploring ways in which we may be able to continue to support their community mission in the future."

At Dartmouth, spokeswoman Diana Lawrence said in an email that the college since 2014 has been using WinCycle to "process its older electronic equipment" — printers, monitors, VCRs,

and other electronics — while contracting with Castaway Technologies of Methuen, Mass., to recycle the college's computers.

"After careful analysis and reviewing proposals from several firms, Dartmouth made the decision to move all of its electronic recycling to Castaway because the firm provides a more effective program," Lawrence said in the email.

She added that Castaway has indicated it would be interested in talking with WinCycle to find out if there is work they can do together, and Ellison said they have a meeting on Monday.

Started in a Church

WinCycle traces its roots to the 1990s when Bill Hochstin, a materials manager for Dartmouth's procurement services, helped to launch Good News Computers, a program run out of St. Barnabas Church in Norwich that distributed more than 1,200 computers cast off by college offices to schools, senior citizens and others.

Then in 2002, Hochstin and others formed WinCycle as a nonprofit regional recycling center and folded Good News Computers into it to take electronics gear the college no longer wanted. The idea was to salvage computer equipment that could be refurbished and resold and to break down what couldn't be utilized and sell it to downstream e-waste processors.

It wasn't long before WinCycle was accepting nearly anything Dartmouth was seeking to get rid of, including desks, beds, sofas, stuffed chairs, lighting fixtures, file cabinets, card catalogs, laboratory equipment, typewriters and uniforms — on top of electronic equipment, which would be collected in industrial-size bins and carted down to Windsor where Hochstin had leased space.

"During the 1990s and early 2000s Dartmouth was going through a significant construction phase and they were taking down and renovating buildings, and it was my job to get the most value out of those materials," said Hochstin, who is now retired and lives in Windsor. "I couldn't keep up with it, they were taking down so many buildings."

He eventually signed a contract with D-H to recycle and dispose of the hospital's computer equipment and e-waste.

At one time, at its peak, WinCycle had nine full-time employees, Hochstin said. Needing more room to store the trailer-truck loads of cast-offs from Dartmouth and D-H, WinCycle in 2008 leased 15,000 square feet of space in the old Goodyear Rubber & Tire Co.

Small businesses say that WinCycle has often served as an ad hoc IT department by not only selling them computers at a low cost but helping to set up the system.

Gina Wenz, owner of the Windsor gift shop Friends & Co., has used WinCycle's computer for her point-of-sale system in the front of the store as well as another computer for payroll and bookkeeping. She called the organization a lifesaver.

"I once had one crash on me and they rebuilt the hard drive. Every computer we bought since they've been in existence has come from there."

"I've bought computer from them for my personal use; so has my brother in Pennsylvania when he comes through, and my brother in Granthem has bought two," she added.

Steve Mongeon, who has his own surveying business in Claremont, said "on three occasions I've had equipment fail (and) Roger was able to salvage the hard drive and restore the data that was there."

Moreover, Mongeon said, he has intentionally not kept up with new generations of software.

"(H)e got me up and running (on) a new Dell XP operating system that I am still using six years later and it's been phenomenal." By resisting pressure for new upgrades, he has been able to hold down expenses.

WinCycle's computers are even operating in the Windsor Town Hall.

"We've bought several laptops from them," said Marsh, the town manager. "They've basically been our go-to place for monitors. We bought Laserjet printers from them for $50 — I would have paid $75 or $100 for it. … (When) my daughter went away to college, she bought a new Apple there for a couple hundred dollars that would have cost $2,400, and it's still working."

Pivoting Mission

For a period, in 2012, WinCycle had taken over the town's recycling business, but the expansion of Vermont E-Cycles, which provides free e-waste recycling for residents, charities, school districts and small businesses, undercut the economics of the service for the nonprofit.

Around the same time, some of WinCycle's volunteers had a falling out with other members of the organization, inspiring them to start a for-profit business, Computer Recycling of Claremont, to focus on dismantling and recycling e-waste. The rival enterprise, which is still in business today, picked up several of WinCycle's former accounts and is now a major e-waste recycler in the Upper Valley. But owner Ken Burke said he took down that business' website and himself is now "looking to sell and retire."

In 2014, WinCycle moved from its location on River Street into an 1887 building on Main Street that had once been the Tuxbury and Stone department store.

With the downstream sale of e-waste no longer economically viable for WinCycle, the nonprofit in 2015 pivoted to concentrate on refurbishing laptops discarded by Dartmouth and D-H. The nonprofit has also done a smaller business in refurbishing Apple laptops, which it occasionally gets from Dartmouth, which are handled by WinCycle's resident Apple expert, Dean Hare.

Hare likens the process of sorting through the incoming bins of electronics and computers to discover what is usable to "kids walking down the street and looking through boxes that are left

out for trash." Originally a printer by trade, Hare's workbench at WinCycle is covered with computer tools that look like dental instruments for taking apart and rebuilding Apple MacBooks and other products. About half the laptops he receives are salvageable, he said.

Bromley-Ellison said that if WinCycle is unsuccessful in entering into an arrangement with Castaway that might channel Dartmouth and D-H computers its way, then the nonprofit would be facing dwindling options.

"We could become a smaller niche service that does IT support for other nonprofits or small businesses or choose to just close the organization and dissolve as a nonprofit. … It would leave a lot of people in certain economic circles, for kids going to school, small businesses and nonprofits without something affordable for their computer needs."

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