

The Great Exchange

Devens' business recycling program has expanded throughout New England and is about to go mobile



Tracy Pierce, the program administrator of the Devens Eco-Efficiency Program, and Dona Neely, the executive director, in the basement where donated supplies from companies are kept.

What's available?

A look at some of what's for sale at Devens' Great Exchange:

- Paper towel dispenser
- Six-shelf wooden bookcase
- Hard hats
- Work gloves
- Black and brown shoe polish
- Plastic test tubes
- Petri dishes
- Calculators
- Scissors
- Basketball hoop
- Funnels
- Thermometers

Source: The Great Exchange



Dona Neely, who runs the Great Exchange, compared its shopping events to Black Friday, with buyers rushing to find the best deals. Here, shoppers browsed an event on April 12.

PHOTO/COURTESY

BY GRANT WELKER

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Home to plenty of large industrial and commercial companies, Devens is a major creator of trash for North Worcester County.

It's Dona Neely's job to make sure as much of that bubble wrap, rolls of labels, clocks, chairs and other supplies as possible is kept out of landfills.

Certain objects are ripe for discount-seeking companies or nonprofits, like chairs, cabinets, wall clocks, shipping boxes or safety glasses. Others are geared toward schools with materials easily doubling as arts-and-crafts projects, like orange plastic trays, small blue caps or all types of ribbon, yarn or stamps.

The program known today as The Great Exchange started a decade ago when Neely arranged for a one-time event meant to help Devens companies avoid throwing out unwanted items. It took some adjustment for businesses to see Neely's vision.

"I went to the businesses and said, 'Please

bring me your trash,'" she said with a laugh. "I think they were more entertained than anything else."

What started as a one-time business service event strictly for Devens now encompasses nearly three dozen communities throughout New England. A new Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection grant for \$59,500 will help The Great Exchange grow further. That will cover costs for a new cargo van so Neely or others don't need to use their own vehicles to transport materials and for a part-time employee to help with operations.

"We'll just keep getting bigger and better," Neely said.

400 tons saved

The Great Exchange is part of the Devens Eco-Efficiency Center, a nonprofit at the military base-turned-commerce center also holding educational forums, technical assistance and other opportunities to help Devens's companies be more environmentally friendly.

That first Great Exchange event was supposed to last just two hours but was finally

halted after three when buyers and sellers kept continuing on. The event was held in a meeting room where the Devens Enterprise Commission, the legislative body for Devens, is based. It later outgrew that and went into a larger conference room at the adjacent hotel.

Today, The Great Exchange is planned to include five or six events this year – which Neely said have been likened to Black Friday for the rush of shoppers looking for bargains – and has grown to fill the entire 2,500-square-foot basement of the Devens Enterprise Commission building.

What started as a way to help Devens businesses go green has now grown to span companies in 32 area communities, including those in Connecticut, New Hampshire and Rhode Island. Last year, the program diverted 66 tons of material from landfills, and the nearly 100 recipients saved an estimated nearly \$300,000.

"So many teachers we interact with, they're buying this out of their own pocket" if not for the program, said Neely, the executive director of the Devens Eco-Efficiency Center.

Since its launch in 2008, The Great Exchange has found new use for more than 400 tons of materials benefitting more than 250 nonprofits and businesses and provided savings of nearly \$600,000.

Business advantages

Comrex Corp., a maker of audio and video broadcast equipment for TV and radio stations, has been giving material to The Great Exchange for the past five years.

The company gives foam sheets, bubble wrap and other shipping materials, along with unneeded CDs to be used for crafts projects. Comrex saves on disposal costs,

helps the environment and can give a hand to schools or nonprofits.

"If the opportunities are there, let's take advantage," said John DeLorme, the Comrex facilities manager.

The program has inspired Comrex to keep other materials out of the landfill, too, DeLorme said. Some shipping materials are reused when Comrex itself ships goods, and others are handed back to firms that ship to Comrex so that the other company can reuse them.

The Great Exchange can benefit from some companies' misfortune.

When Cains Foods closed its production facility in Ayer last year, Neely was left with an uncountable number of plastic jars and rolls of labels. In all, 48 tons of material was reused, Neely said, including bulk food items to local farms or food pantries. More than 50 entities were recipients of some Cains item, she said.

No limits

Much of the goods at The Great Exchange are office staples like desk chairs, clocks or reams of paper. But more useful to many recipients are little colorful gadgets that children can use for anything their imagination will let them.

"We definitely take advantage of some of the more unusual materials," said Alli Leake, the director of early childhood education at the Discovery Museum in Acton.

The museum is known for its hands-on activities like the da Vinci Workshop, which lets kids come up with any range of creations. The workshop uses packing peanuts, foam, felt materials and leftover plastic pieces of different shapes, sizes and colors.

"It's really just limited by their own imagination," Leake said. **W**