

ReStore resells building materials

Used and surplus items in new store otherwise would end up in landfills

By SCOTT HEWITT
Columbian staff writer

Green is coming to the construction industry in lots of ways these days, from nontoxic and recycled materials to weather-tight and energy-efficient building techniques.

Sounds pricey? But here's a new Clark County option that's all about affordability: a nonprofit retailer that resells used and surplus building materials that would otherwise wind up in landfills, and uses its revenues to support charity home builder Habitat for Humanity.

The area's first Habitat ReStore opens at 9 a.m. today at 5000 East Fourth Plain Blvd. — in the big central-city strip mall anchored by Albertsons. That makes 12 ReStores in Washington. There are also 11 in Oregon, including one in inner South-east Portland.

That store is a maze of towering shelves geared toward contractors, builders and skilled do-it-yourselfers — “hipsters remodeling their 1920s craftsman,” said Joe Connell, the Vancouver ReStore director. The new store, Connell said, will provide a much more customer-friendly experience — 25,500 feet of wide-open, well-lighted warehouse space aimed at an expanding market: everyone.

“Everyone likes a bargain,” Connell said.

ReStore sells most items for approximately half the price you might find in a regular retail store.

Connell said ReStores nationally bring in about \$75 million for Habitat for Humanity every year, and keep about 1,000 tons of waste out of landfills. Ten percent of the profits of the Vancouver store and one in Portland will go to build homes in El Salvador (where you can build 40 homes for the price of six here, Connell said); the rest goes to Habitat for Humanity organizations in the Portland-Vancouver area. Last year the Portland ReStore generated \$100,000 for Habitat.

The Vancouver store will provide two full-time jobs at first and may eventually build up to four, Connell said. As with beneficiary Habitat for Humanity, the bulk of the work is accomplished with volunteer labor. To learn about volunteering at the ReStore, visit www.pdxrestore.org or write to janell@pdxrestore.org.

Connell said the ReStore isn't capitalizing on the economic squeeze. Its business plan was written years before the economy began seizing up, he said.

“We've been serving the Vancouver community for seven years through



Photos by STEVEN LANE/The Columbian

Workers prepare the Habitat ReStore in Vancouver for its opening today. The nonprofit store sells used, recycled and discounted building materials to support Habitat for Humanity efforts.

the Portland store,” Connell said. “We felt we weren't serving it very effectively. It was time to move to Vancouver.”

The central, strip-mall location means easy access and plenty of parking, Connell said.

A stroll around the place this week turned up everything from surplus paint to plumbing fixtures, and picture windows and used file cabinets to a shrink-wrapped pallet of brand-new boxes of screws.

“This was going to go to the landfill,” said Connell. The screws were surplus from a local construction job, he said, and donated by the builder. They were made in China, the boxes said, but Connell guessed that they were made from American steel — meaning two trips across the ocean, there and back, only to get thrown away.

“What an incredible waste of energy and natural resources,” he said. “Consumers are more aware of this kind of thing than they used to be. They are looking for alternatives.”

Forty percent of donations to ReStores are from businesses, Connell said — unsold merchandise from retailers clearing their shelves, builders



Joe Connell
Vancouver ReStore
director

HABITAT RESTORE AND COMPUTER RECYCLING

■ **WHAT:** Nonprofit retailer selling donated used and surplus building materials. A separate nonprofit company recycles computers and other electronics.

■ **WHERE:** 5000 E. Fourth Plain Blvd., Vancouver.

■ **BENEFICIARY:** Habitat for Humanity.

■ **TO VOLUNTEER:** www.pdxrestore.org or janell@pdxrestore.org.

who've finished jobs with materials left over, demolition crews with good parts on their hands. The rest comes from just-plain folks.

Because ReStore's stock is entirely dependent on what happens to turn up, Connell said, he doesn't believe the store is a threat to other local retailers.

“You never know what you're going to find here,” he said. “The savvy builder will just come through three or four times a week. You can blow through here in three or four minutes and see what we've got.”

You've got to come in person, Connell said. ReStore staff won't answer questions about stock over the phone.

“Think of it as Goodwill,” Connell said. “You're buying as is. You don't always expect to find what you need, but it's worth checking.”

Computers, too

Also on hand in the same space is CREAM — the former city/county computer recycling effort that's now an independent nonprofit.

CREAM is Computer Reuse, Education and Marketing. Oso Martin, executive director, said the agency will accept and resell donated computers and electronic equipment that's in good shape.

“The equipment will be triaged and tested to see if it can be sent over to Clark College” for memory erasure and other preparations. Then it's boxed up and delivered to the Salvation Army, which has a waiting list for computers.

“CREAM is there to get working computers into the hands of people who need them,” said Jim Mansfield of Clark County Public Works.

Computers and other electronics that can't be returned to use are disassembled for parts and scrap, Mansfield said. CREAM will operate a small thrift store of its own, right alongside the ReStore.

And, a few doors down in the same strip mall, CREAM will operate a computer classroom and Internet cafe for students, senior citizens and others who may lack Internet access at home.

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