

How a warehouse full of random stuff in MA is helping the environment

USA Today, by Hadley Barndollar, April 22, 2022

(part of a larger story, These 4 MA communities are uniquely tackling climate change, published in USA Today Gannett newspapers across the state)

When corporate offices opt for new furniture, or close up shop entirely as remote work culture persists, where do the discarded chairs and desks go? The filing cabinets, manila folders and cubicle panels?

Think about what happens when a manufacturer of medical supplies tosses all of its plastic waste. Or when a department store shutsters — leaving display cases and racks across thousands of square feet.

If not for The Great Exchange program in Devens, Massachusetts, "it would be in the landfill," said Dona Neely, the program's founder.

At the former U.S. Army base, now a burgeoning commercial hub guided by aggressive sustainability goals, unwanted materials are repurposed via a large-scale operation that sends them back out into the community for use.



Dona Neely, executive director, and Amanda Lansing, program administrator, posed for a shot at The Great Exchange in Devens, April 19, 2022. The program makes recovered resources available for schools, nonprofits, businesses and others. By doing this, the material stays out of landfills. Wicked Local Staff Photo/Ann Ringwood

With Earth Day approaching on April 22, the USA TODAY Network is highlighting four Massachusetts communities implementing unique solutions to remedy the climate crisis.

Last year, the Bay State enacted first-in-the-nation climate legislation, establishing emissions goals that it's now obligated to reach by law. Many cities and towns have stepped up to supplement state-level action, taking local responsibility for the grim climate reality: New England is warming faster than the rest of the country with sea levels rising more quickly than the global rate.

A recent report from the United Nations reiterated a frightening timeline. Global greenhouse gas emissions must be reduced by 43% by 2030 to limit global warming to around 1.5C, or 2.7°F.

Just 7 square miles, Devens has around 500 residents, and yet, it boasts more than 6,000 jobs across 120-plus businesses. That could mean a major environmental footprint for the employment nucleus that occupies pieces of Ayer, Harvard and Shirley. But at this "premier eco-industrial park," said Peter Lowitt, director of the Devens Enterprise Commission, "one firm's waste stream is another firm's source of raw materials."

On site at The Great Exchange, bins are overflowing with unused translucent orange prescription pill bottles. There are outdated interior design tile and fabric samples, rows of three-ring binders, and packaging supplies such as foam and bubble wrap. One shelf is lined with stacks of ring slot trays and jewelry boxes, recovered from counters at closed Macy's and Sears stores.

"Eco-industrial means that you're looking at businesses as a symbiotic relationship," said Lowitt. "Instead of the traditional linear model of 'take raw materials, make a product, throw stuff away,' we're introducing the concept of return. The circular economy."

Consulting with Boston-based climate action firm Kim Lundgren Associates and advocacy group Environment Massachusetts, the USA TODAY Network identified municipalities, like Devens that offer inventive green ideas.

A 'circular economy' in Devens: Repurposing furniture, supplies and more

Fort Devens U.S. Army Base officially closed in 1996 and came under the ownership of MassDevelopment. Devens today is not a town or city, explained Lowitt, but rather "a quasi-municipal state agency that acts as a municipality."

Dominated by businesses and light on residents, Devens is home to an array of industries – biopharmaceutical company Bristol Myers Squibb, the Northeast's largest lettuce producer, a sustainable-certified golf course, and robotics and plastics manufacturers. There's a veterans services agency, and a 47-acre commercial fusion energy campus is in the works. Dunkin' Donuts has a central bakery on site, and many movies and streaming shows are filmed locally at New England Studios.

"In a traditional industrial park, you have businesses doing their own thing," said Neil Angus, Devens Enterprise Commission's environmental planner. "The concept here is working to bring those businesses together. The glue that connects the businesses and helps them work together to maximize efficiencies, share resources, collaborate and exchange information."



Program Administrator Amanda Lansing put items on the shelves at The Great Exchange in Devens, April 19, 2022. Wicked Local Staff Photo/Ann Ringwood

Devens has been recognized nationally for its sustainability and environmental efforts, which include the work done by the Devens Eco-Efficiency Center through The Great Exchange program. By collecting unwanted, usable materials and distributing them back into the community, the program diverts thousands of pounds from landfills each year and creates a self-sustaining system within the old Army base.

Landfills are collectively one of the nation's largest sources of methane, a greenhouse gas more than 25 times as potent as carbon dioxide at trapping heat in the atmosphere, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

In 2021, staff and volunteers recovered nearly 19,000 pounds of unneeded resources, which later went to businesses, municipal departments, nonprofits, schools and libraries in more than 50 towns for 50% of retail price.

"We've been able to facilitate a lot of really creative partnerships," said Neely, executive director at the Devens Eco-Efficiency Center.



The Great Exchange, in Devens, makes recovered resources available for purchase by schools, nonprofits, businesses and others. By doing this, the material stays out of landfills. This was their furniture storage area, April 19, 2022. Wicked Local Staff Photo/Ann Ringwood

Neely and her small team are working with a realty company that is repurposing all of Becker College's buildings in Worcester after the school's closure last year. So far, they've recovered 4,000 pounds of materials that, as a result, won't be thrown away. When Learning Express Toys closed its Devens location, the Great Exchange was able to recover nearly 10 vanloads of brand new toy samples. Health care provider Reliant Medical closed 18 of its offices in a consolidation move a few years ago, yielding more than 20,000 pounds of items to be repurposed, one of the largest hauls to date, said Neely.

"More businesses are becoming aware of the need to operate in a more sustainable manner and minimizing their footprint," she said. "And our motivation is how grateful our target audience is to get access to these resources."

The program has a significant social impact, too. Trays from a food manufacturer went to an initiative supporting immigrant farmers, and teachers struggling to afford supplies for their students can mine the vast collection of supplies.

The Great Exchange is among a multitude of climate-oriented efforts occurring in Devens. Included in its climate resiliency plan are more than 70 "ambitious and achievable actions" to reduce environmental impact and improve community resilience in the face of climate change.

Watch related video: <https://www.wickedlocal.com/videos/regional/2022/04/21/great-exchange-former-devens-army-base-promotes-reuse-recycle/7371149001/>