

WCSS Re-Use-It Centre 2007 How We Work and Why?



A Brief History:

Whistler Community Services Society is a registered non-profit society formed in 1989. Our *“mission is to promote and support social sustainability in Whistler, by providing programs and services which improve the ability of Whistler Community Members to meet their needs and enhance their lives”*.

The WCSS Re-Use-It Centre was first built in 2000 by the RMOW who contracts WCSS to run a thrift store operation.

Our Partnership with the RMOW:

The RMOW has partnered with WCSS to help keep useable items out of the landfill and help fulfill the community's 2020 Sustainability mandate. Due to the RMOW's environmental initiatives, including programs operated by WCSS, the Resort is an *award winning community* (winning a LIVCOM award in 2006). The Re-Use-It Centre then provides additional funding for over 25 social service programs and services provided to Whistler's population.

How does the RMOW benefit?

Goods are kept out of the landfill by re-selling, recycling and sorting; an average of only 16% of all goods donated end up in the landfill.

The WCSS Re-Use-It Centre helps the RMOW meet its commitments to the 2020 Sustainability plan.

As the RUI Centre supports 75% of WCSS's budget, there is no longer a need to rely on large, annual grants from Federal, Provincial and local government and in addition WCSS has been able to substantially expand programming. Every dollar the Re-Use-It makes as profit is fed back into WCSS community programming and social services.

How Does WCSS benefit?

Whistler Community Services society is able to fund over 25 programs and services that provide everything from emergency food, organic greenhouse gardens to interim housing, financial assistance and youth outreach for the community of Whistler! WCSS only needs to look for outside funding for 25% of the annual budget.

WCSS looks forward to additional partnership with the launch of the WCSS Re-Build-It Centre, which would provide recycling options for construction materials and provide even more funding and would increase our Society's self-reliance and ability to further meet the needs of community members.



We have many loyal customers who shop with us almost daily. We also help the community by donating goods in case of an emergency like fire and flood!

Who Do We Support?

We have ongoing relationships and make donations of merchandise to the following Community Groups:

- Emergency Preparedness for Lower Lakes Communities and Whistler
 - Whistler Emergency Social Services
 - Victim Services
 - Mount Currie Band
 - The Easter Seals Camp
 - Lillooet Community Group
 - Whistler Children's Centres
 - Pemberton Catholic Church
 - Howe Sound Women's Centre Society
 - Pearl's Safe Home Program
 - Zero Ceiling Society
 - Britannia Beach Community Group
 - Pemberton Community Centre
 - Clinton Church Store
 - Mission Outreach Vancouver
 - Squamish St. Joseph's Thrift Store
 - Whistler Art's council
 - Whistler Church Groups
- And many other community groups and world-wide relief efforts over the years

4 to 7 low-income families and individuals have credit accounts at the store.
 A homeless population of about 6 – 10 individuals identified by WCSS are given access to gift certificates, food and warm clothing on a regular basis.
 We regularly assist families and individuals who have been victims of a house fire, flood or any other natural disaster.

Small Grant Program:

Community groups can easily access free merchandise by applying in writing detailing the function of the group and the reason for the request. Through a similar process, local groups needing money can also apply for a small seed grant of up to \$1,500 or volunteer at the Centre in exchange for funds for their groups work.

Gift Certificate Program:

As of November 2007 the WCSS Re-Use-It Centre has distributed Gift Certificates in \$5 and \$10 denominations to the following organizations and programs for distribution in the community. This commits us to **giving away over \$34,400** worth of donated merchandise to seasonal workers and the needy/low income residents of Whistler:

Whistler Blackcomb Seasonal Workers:	2,000 \$10 Certificates =	\$20,000
WCSS Whistler Welcome Week Dinner:	1,000 \$10 Certificates =	\$7,000
Chamber of Commerce new Worker package:	1,000 \$5 Certificates=	\$ 5,000
WCSS Food Bank Certificates		\$800*

WCSS Youth Outreach
WCSS Emergency Assistance

\$800*
\$800*

* WCSS Programs receive unlimited funding from the store!

***Furniture that is hard to sell or overstocked is designated with a free tag
in an effort to keep it out of the landfill!***

Kept out of the Landfill:

We just keep growing!

In August of **2004** we received **136** bags of goods, 28 pieces of small furniture, 6 pieces of large furniture, sent 50 bags (37%) to other charities and sent 22 bags (16%) to garbage.

In August **2006** we received **892** Bags of goods, 228 pieces of small furniture, 120 pieces of large furniture, sent 413 bags (46%) to other charities and 116 bags (13%) to garbage.

In August **2007** we received **1,222** bags of goods, 162 pieces of small furniture, 249 pieces of large furniture, 487 (40%) of bags went to other charities and 305 (25%) to garbage.

January to Sept 31st, 2007 (9 months) the WCSS Re-Use-It Centre has processed over **11,683** donated bags, 1577 pieces of small furniture, 767 pieces of larger furniture, 4,209 (36%) bags donated to other charities and 1,850 (16%) bags to garbage.



We post our price comparisons to Vancouver Thrift stores, and advertise our pricing policies.

How Stock is Rotated:

Every price tag is dated, and after 2 weeks, the item goes on sale. By week 3 it is 50% off, then after it is culled out and given to another charity. Every month the RUI holds a 50% off sale that covers the entire store.

Clothing rotates through the store every 3 weeks, 40% of all donations go to other charities because we cannot carry that much stock!

Clothes: Clothing is on a 3 week rotation. After 2 weeks on the floor it then goes on 50% off. After that it is culled off the floor and given to other charities. The stored seasonal clothing is now fully rotated and the excess goods emptied every season. The WCSS Re-Use-It Centre was written up in the *Globe & Mail* in 2007 for having great deals on designer clothing and other valuable items.

Electronics: Electronics "in working order" are on the same 3 week rotation as other goods in the store. Limited non-working electronics are now accepted for the communities only e-waste recycling program. These are shipped weekly using Encorp, a reputable e-recycling company.



The Encorp donations are kept secured and are palletized in the new designated area.

Other Items:

All store goods are managed by **dated tickets**, except for bulk items which are monitored by staff responsible for their rotation. In spite of the quick rotation, the amount of donations to the store far exceeds the store's ability to stock them. While the demand is there, physically the four walls can only hold so much merchandise. Due to health liability concerns, the RUI is no longer able to accept mattresses. Upholstered furniture is also no longer accepted due to health issues and lack of space.



Challenges and How We Manage Them:

1. Move of Transfer Station:

The move of the transfer station to the Callaghan Valley has resulted in some unique challenges for the RUI. Customers refusing to drive the distance, or pay the tipping fees have felt it acceptable to drop off these larger, broken donations after hours, which has resulted in tipping fees for the store rising 4 to 6 times higher.

An aggressive public awareness campaign, including a plea to customers to stop making donations after store hours, has been launched. An attempt to dialogue with Carneys has been made, however to date, we have been unable to sit down and discuss further solutions with them. We are investigating solutions, which may include a security guard, drop box bins for securing donations, and increased RCMP drive-bys, or a combination of them all.

2. Criminal Activity after store hours:

The store has always been subjected to after hour criminal activities. The bin storing donations to other charities has now been broken into 5 times in 2007, once resulting in the entire metal door on the structure having to be rebuilt. An escalating issue, this now is reported to the RCMP whenever it occurs, and store policy now states that no staff are to approach or speak to any person taking items

from outside the store. Again, the public awareness campaign has asked customers to refrain from making after hour donations, and this problem has eased slightly, except for at month end. Other solutions may include an increased police presence, the addition of a secure bin for after hour donations and/or a security guard.

The furniture cage addition was completed in 2006 and allows for stock to be kept secure outside.

3. Monthly and Seasonal Donation Spikes:

While every effort is made to keep the store front tidy and free from items and debris, at certain times of the year, and at the end of each month, donations can overwhelm the store to the point that there is literally no-where to put them. In a single night the entire exterior front of the store can be filled with unwelcome donations, usually couches and large broken furniture, items which would not be accepted if it were during normal working hours. We manage this by trying to sell these items as soon as possible, and taking the remainder to the landfill.

Staff makes 2 trips to the landfill every week in high seasons; however, the addition of a one ton cube truck to the store would make this much easier to manage. We have a future application pending to the Whistler Blackcomb Foundation for help with this project. As further proof to our commitment to sustainability we will also be converting this vehicle to run on bio-diesel, setting an example other businesses may wish to emulate.

Unfortunately, in speaking with Salvation Army and other thrift stores, heavy dumping after hours and at certain times is an industry-wide problem. During the recent Vancouver garbage strike, the Salvation Army appealed on the evening news for Vancouverites to stop using them as a "Dump" and to quit giving them donations that should have actually gone to the landfill. When all the seasonal workers leave Whistler at once, the store can quite literally drown under donations, many of poor quality. The same happens when 4 garage sales donate all in the same late afternoon or after hours. This is managed as quickly and efficiently as humanly possible by the staff. "No Dumping" signs along the front of the store have also aided in keeping this area cleaner. The RUI staff really does an amazing job under highly difficult conditions. The largest barrier to managing this in a daily manner is access to a vehicle to transport goods to the landfill. It can often take us 3 or 4 days to be able to find someone who can donate this service to us!

4. The FREE To a Good Home Program:

Now unable to accept appliances, mattresses and couches, the RUI now runs a large bulletin board area that allows Whistler residents to post ads of any free items they wish to get rid of. In this manner, we hope to link people who need items with people who would otherwise take these goods to the landfill.



The Free bulletin boards link people who wish to get rid of items we do not accept with people who can use them!

What The Future Holds:

The WCSS Re-Use-It Centre is looking forward to a sister store, *The WCSS Re-Build-It Centre*. There is a huge demand from customers currently wishing to donate windows, doors, cabinets, sinks, bathtubs and other re-claimed items coming out of the renovations going on in the area. We usually have no problem selling these items, however, we tend not to be able to accept them at the RUI due to lack of space.

The Builder's Association of Whistler has been our biggest supporter as they have identified the need for a building materials recycling centre as urgent. Research from other stores indicates that the store would draw customers donating and buying from within the entire corridor. In Colorado, the Re-Store draws purchasers from a 100 mile radius. This store therefore, in theory, would be able to service Pemberton and Squamish customers as well. However, because Whistler Community Services Society's mission is to promote social sustainability in Whistler, it makes the most sense to locate the actual store within the community in a location easily accessible for all customers, as the money raised from the store stays in this communities program funding.

Of those surveyed 97% responded that the best location for such a new store would be in Function Junction or in town.

The Re-Use-It Centre has been called "Whistler's Favourite Store". Our current re-branding efforts are introducing it to a segment of the population that was still unaware of the store and the good work the store's funding provides for the community. Public education will continue. Increased sales activities such as auctions, sales, partnerships with employers of seasonal workers and expanding the ability to carry more stock will continue to generate more money.

The future continues to be bright for the "Best Thrift Store in Whistler."

What Do Our Customers Think of Us?

While it is impossible to please everyone all of the time, surveys and feedback tell us that over 90% of customers love the store and feel pricing is fair. We also do a yearly price comparison which surveys 4-5 Vancouver Thrift Stores like Salvation Army and Value Village, in all the categories of goods. This ensures that our pricing remains in-line and fair. Often we are priced lower than these stores. We post these price comparisons in the store for customers to see.

We have customers visit us from all over the world, here are some comments from our guest book!

"This place ROX" Lauren, Toronto, Ontario
"The store look great, very organized! Michael
"Love the prices! Laurie, Georgia, USA
"One of my favorite discount stores" Laurent, Utah, USA
"Great! Worth the drive" Wendy, Winnipeg, Manitoba
"Lots of stuff!" Colburne family, Phoenix, Arizona USA
"Friendly people, good bargains!" Ada & Ron, Langley, BC
"Best Store in Town!" Judy, Whistler
"Great Prices!" Gil, Nanaimo, BC
"It's been a lifesaver!" Bek & Brooke, Queensland, Australia
"Canada is so great, I'm staying" Jonathan, Tanzania, Africa
"My kind of place! Thanks, Mary, Westbridge, BC
"Thanks for the much needed warm clothes!" Marcy, San Francisco, USA
"Great Place!" Pala, Lil'Wat, Pemberton
"Cheap Stuff!", Michael, Chicago
"Cheap Stuff but good Quality!" Andrew, Vancouver, BC
"I think your store is cool!" Paula, Mt. Currie, BC
"Good service!" Ted, Vancouver, BC
"Best shopping in BC – Make it Canada!" Paul, New Zealand

One Last Word:

While the WCSS Re-Use-It Centre can sometimes be subject to controversy it can also generate unusual passion in the community, people genuinely believe in the purpose of the store, and want to support the cause. There will always be those individuals who do not understand the end purpose of where the funding goes to work in the community. However, the majority of customers understand the important role it plays in the community.

The WCSS Re-Use-It Centre ensures that funds are raised for vital social service programs, individuals and groups in need are helped both financially and with free product from the store, identified low income families and individuals are given support and individuals suffering from crisis like flood or fire are re-outfitted as soon as possible!

Seasonal workers and youth working in the resort are supported by low priced household goods and free merchandise through the gift certificate program, 50% off sale days and our social service programs like Whistler Welcome Week.

Other Charities benefit from the generous donations from Clinton to Vancouver and all points in between!

Goods are kept from the landfill as much as humanly possible!

All in all, the store has filled an unusually diverse role in the Whistler Community and is considered by many to be an example of a truly sustainable business model that should be emulated in other communities.