

# Monterey County dump store offers endless bargains

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Public education and recycling manager Jeff Lindenthal stands among piles of trash being recycled Monday at the Marina Landfill. The landfill has started many successful recycling programs including the Last Chance Mercantile Store. Conner Jav/The Salinas Californian

MARINA — Serviceable items that people no longer want often end up in a landfill with the egg shells and coffee grounds.

If they're lucky, though, they get diverted to the Last Chance Mercantile, which gives them hope for a longer life. Could be an old tennis racket, a fur stole in great shape or a piano with a broken leg. Items from the back of the closet or the storage shed, in other words, might find a place at Last Chance Mercantile, an unusual store in an unlikely place. "It's the only store that I know that's associated with a landfill," Jeff Lindenthal said.

A public education and recycling manager, Lindenthal works for the Monterey Regional Waste Management District. The district runs the store and the nearby 315-acre Monterey Peninsula Landfill.

Last Chance Mercantile began in the early 1990s. "From auction to flea market to part-time store to full-time store, we've grown the program slowly," Lindenthal said. "That's why we're still around."

## LPs and CDs

Last Chance Mercantile today encompasses an 8,000-square-foot building. At 11 a.m. Monday, cars filled its parking lot. People also browsed in the store's outdoor lot. They were in search of furniture, construction and garden materials, mulch and compost, and more.

People bring in items to donate — golf clubs, tennis rackets, coats, books, LPs, CDs, even exercise machines. Last Chance Mercantile fits into the district's mission "to reduce, reuse and recycle" as much of the waste bound for the landfill as possible, Lindenthal said. To keep reusable materials, in other words, out of the landfill.

On Monday, salesperson Nancy Novoa sold a gray and green bowling ball with a watermelon pattern to a customer. Novoa, who has worked at the store nearly a decade, charged him \$1. "He told me he has 147 bowling balls," Novoa said. "He uses them to help landscape his garden."

## A diamond in the rough

Many customers drive over from Salinas, north county and points beyond, Lindenthal said. Richard Fernbaugh of Santa Maria, for example, stops by the store whenever he's visiting the area. You might find a little treasure, he said. On his last trip, he bought a pair of sturdy old doors fit for his 1930s house.

"We always stop by here looking for that diamond in the rough," Fernbaugh said. John Norman of Seaside poked through a bin of golf clubs for \$1 each. "If you know what you're looking for, there's a lot of stuff that has value here," Norman said. He held a club to the light. "This is titanium steel, worth a lot more if you bring it to a scrap yard," he said.



Salesclerk Nancy Novoa holds up a billion dollar bill that someone brought to the store. Conner Jay/The Salinas

## Surviving the times

Last Chance Mercantile is one of the first publicly owned and operated resale stores in the whole municipal solid waste industry, the waste management district's website says. It touts the store as "a magic place where trash turns to treasure. "Bring your reusable items to the Last Chance Mercantile and let them become a treasure for someone else," the website says.

Money made at the store goes back into the operation. In fiscal 2011, revenues were \$758,000. Those revenues — they've been inching up 15 years in a row — are used to cover expenses, Lindenthal said. The store just keeps going, despite what the economy around it is doing. "It defies the odds," he said. Not that Last Chance Mercantile has escaped unscathed. The store is authorized for 15 staff positions, but only 13 are filled. "We've had some employees leave, and we have not replaced them," Lindenthal said. "We've had a freeze on hiring for several years due to the economic slowdown."



Clothes are sold at the Last Chance Mercantile Store on Monday in Marina. Conner Jay/The Salinas Californian

## Other services

Items for the store are donated by citizens who want to unload an old desk or the dining-room chairs. Or an item may arrive in a rumbling cavern of a processing building near the store, the Materials Recovery Facility. In it, eagle-eyed workers in hard hats spot and salvage serviceable items, pulling them from the waste stream. They load the items on trucks that haul them to the store for sale.

Last Chance Mercantile also offers free electronic-waste recycling — TVs, computers, printers and faxes.

The store has a buy-back area for bottles and cans. If it is an expensive item, the staff checks out eBay for comparison's sake. A pair of pottery wheels arrived. Nearly new, they were worth \$1,200. The store resold them for \$300. In some cases, an item, such as a child's bicycle, may be fine except for a minor defect.

"All it may need is a little TLC," Lindenthal said. "Maybe all we have to do is put a little steel wool and lubricant to it." Hiring a person to repair items so they can be sold is a goal. "We don't have people doing repair work now," Lindenthal said. "That's the next frontier."