

February 09, 2023

Senator Janeen Sollman
Chair, Senate Committee on Energy and Environment

Re: SB 542 Right to Repair (Support)

Chair Sollman and Honorable Members of the Senate:

I support SB 542 and its clearly needed intentions, though my deep experience with the evolution and current state of the digital technology industry tells me that its Right to Repair goals are symbolic at best.

Through my work in media production, as a digital communications professor at Montana State University, and over a decade as Web Master for Blue Cross Blue Shield of Montana, I saw first hand how profit driven tech giants, with Apple at the forefront, guaranteed their revenue stream through well-planned obsolescence.

With a business model that thrives on the newest next thing, there is no reason to repair something that has been designed to become useless. Indeed, product design itself precludes any chance of repair such as seamlessly integrating batteries into the body of a product or when software alone controls essential functions. The opaque nature of software controls came to light just before the pandemic when it took a class-action suit to stop Apple from killing its old well functioning phones through software updates just to sell new models.

The European Union is beginning to address this issue through setting design standards. Consumers welcomed its first mandate, a universal connection on device cords, but tech companies, with Apple objecting the loudest, claimed this small but logical change would significantly stifle innovation. More likely its concern was about lost revenue from upgrading necessary accessories.

Of course, no single US state can effectively mandate corporate design standards but a coalition, such as a west coast WA, OR, and CA “design at the cutting edge group”, could at least suggest them. A great organization in Portland that refurbishes old computers, called Free Geek, may be a good starting point for such an effort.

The ever-increasing burden of electronic waste was born of unbridled greed and will not be readily reined in. I support SB 542 for the message it sends and the foundation it lays for further, more substantial, intervention.

Thank you,

Cynthia Gaffney