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Aspen Thrift Shop no longer accepting after-hours donation

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The Aspen Thrift Shop recently implemented a policy requiring that all donations be dropped off during business hours, after long deliberations about how to tame what had come to resemble a free-for-all intake protocol in the alley behind its building.

The compact discount department store, which is run entirely by volunteers and donates all revenue after expenses to worthy community causes, has seen the volume of donations increase over the years. That's great, thrift shop board members say, and reflects the community-partnership nature of the enterprise: donations come in, shoppers score deals and grants are made. Treasurer Lynda MacCarthy said it felt quite good to write \$64,000 in checks last month to service organizations that had applied for funds through the thrift shop's grant program.

The Aspen Thrift Shop is on track to give over \$600,000 this year and it couldn't happen without support in the form of donations, which are dropped off in the alley behind the storefront that is adjacent to the Hopkins Avenue fire station.

"Imagine the amount of sorting through [the donations] it takes" to get to that number, MacCarthy said.

Historically, those donations have been allowed to be dropped off nearly at all hours, which made the Aspen Thrift Shop unique among its peers that normally have a more structured intake system. In recent years, the organization installed a gate that locks off the drop-off zone that a security service closes between the hours of 9 p.m. and 3 a.m.

That gate will now be locked from just after the thrift shop closes until volunteers arrive the following morning. The new donation intake hours are Monday through Saturday, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Items outside of those hours are subject to weather damage or could interfere with snowplowing and may become unusable.

It was a difficult decision to arrive at the new policy, said Patti Stranahan, the thrift shop board's secretary, knowing there are some folks who may have a hard time meeting those hours in order to make a donation.

"We didn't want people to feel like we are not there," Stranahan said.

As such, if someone has a donation they would like to make that they cannot deliver during business hours, they are invited to email the organization to see if alternate arrangements can be made (info@aspenthriftshop.org [1]).

Requiring that donations are made in the light of day and hopefully involve an interaction with a staff member will cut down on unsaleable items and boost staff morale, thrift shop officials believe, making it easier to sort through the incoming.

Stranahan estimates that as much as 20 percent of donated items are in too poor a condition to be sold or are among items not accepted by the thrift shop. Egregious offenders drop off mattresses and old washers and dryers. Such items are often dropped off during the after hours.

Shipping unsalable items off to the landfill is the thrift shop's largest expense. The organization typically fills up two dumpsters a day.

Surveillance cameras are in place in the alley to deter dumping and rummaging through donated items.

Stranahan and McCarthy noted that the thrift shop has agreements with many local organizations to directly send donated items. For example, crutches and wheelchairs are sent directly to an organization that pairs them with injured persons who are in need. Some donated sporting equipment is sent directly to AVSC or the youth hockey league. The homeless shelter will provide its clients with vouchers to purchase winter clothes from the thrift shop.

All of that is reliant on donors giving items that the thrift shop can sell. Please be thoughtful about what you are donating, Stranahan said, and remember that the Pitkin County Landfill is able to accept most items that the thrift shop cannot.

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A volunteer with the Thrift Store of Aspen sifts through fresh donations on a recent morning. The beloved shop recently changed when it will accept donations.

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[1] <mailto:info@aspenrftshop.org>