

BeachNet Advisers Make Pitch

Easy Reader - Mark McDermott - January 26, 2006

BeachNet is going to get some help.

The Redondo Beach Unified School District Board of Education Tuesday night hosted a rather unusual public interview of two IT firms, each who promised to help the dormant student-run Internet Service Provider come back to life. BeachNet has been down since last September, when district officials moved to “segregate” official school business – and emails – from its servers and essentially pulled the plug on the student-run service.

BeachNet had been mired in technical difficulties for the better part of a year. The ISP was founded a dozen years ago and was the first student-run service of its kind.

At the Jan. 10 school board meeting, Interim District Superintendent Bob Paulson vowed to find a faculty adviser who would help revive the ISP. Sometime in the intervening two weeks, district officials evidently decided that help from a private firm with Internet expertise would also be necessary.

On Tuesday, Mark Metzner made the pitch on behalf of his firm, Intelligent Computer Concepts, while Chris Riley of NowVox Communications likewise offered his firm’s services. The firms would each install a new operating system on the BeachNet servers and then provide technical support and mentoring to students.

Metzner said that ICC is already familiar with BeachNet, since President Daniel Garza served as one of the ISP’s early mentors and the firm has recently done work on BeachNet servers. He said ICC would serve as a project lead and help students learn IT “best practices,” such as documenting all work done on the servers. But he stressed that the ultimate responsibility for the ISP operation would reside with the students.

“That way they will actually be learning with a backseat driver,” Metzner said.

Riley said he envisioned his role not only as a technical adviser but as someone who could broaden BeachNet to attract more business-minded students. He said the ISP should serve as a real-world training ground for both future IT managers and for future entrepreneurs and suggested that this would make the service both more successful and more broadly attractive to students. He said he has extensive experience both in the technical and business sides of Internet services.

“You are not just potentially training IT staff,” he said. “You can also bring in the kids that have their minds on the business side of things... [BeachNet] was being run as a network and that is great, but there is a whole other side of it you can attract students to.”

Trustee Jane Diehl suggested that perhaps the district could hire both firms in different capacities – ICC for its technical familiarity with BeachNet and NowVox as a potential business mentor. But she cautioned that the ISP should not adhere too strictly to business world practices, such as 24/7 services.

“I do like the business concept, but we have to remember these are students,” she said. “There have been cots in that [server] room. People have not slept in order to fix servers.”

Trustee Arlene Staich estimated that that ICC would cost roughly \$22,000 per year and NowVox \$25,000. It isn’t yet clear whether the service could provide that type of revenue or whether the board would have to authorize general fund spending.

Trustee Todd Loewentstein, himself an IT professional, was optimistic that the ISP could generate significant income. But he also said that the learning opportunities it would provide would be invaluable.

“That kind of thing, real world work experience, is something you can’t get out of a book and you can’t get just staring at a computer,” he said. “They will learn the basics of business. I wish I had this opportunity growing up.”

Board President Carl Clark said that BeachNet could help revive the technological curriculum at the high school.

“Right now, we don’t have a technical curriculum,” Clark said. “Right now, in this day and age, to not have a technical curriculum, to me, is absurd.”

Parent Jerry Shaw, another IT professional who has worked closely with BeachNet, questioned whether the district needed to hire an IT firm. He said the district needed a corporate sponsor. "This is pretty important," Shaw said. "Why can't we find a corporate or community expert to take this on? Why does the board have to spend educational money?"

Interim Superintendent Bob Paulson said that he'd found "a half a being" to help serve as student adviser for the service – a former BeachNet student manager, now 21-years-old, has offered his services. He said he is still looking for the other half – a teacher at the high school. "One bringing the technical aspect," Paulson said. "And one bringing the teaching part of it."