

Student-Run ISP Faces Uncertain Future

Easy Reader - Mark McDermott - December 01, 2005

Beachnet has been down, and it might be on its way out.

The student-run Internet service provider, one of the few in the nation operated by high school students, experienced several crashes in recent weeks as district technical staff brought all RBUSD employee email and school business “in-house.”

Jo Basel, the district’s new chief information and instructional technology officer, said the move was made to segregate district business from Beachnet due to “security concerns.”

“Our traffic is not going to be traveling with the Beachnet traffic anymore,” said Basel, who arrived in Redondo from Beverly Hills Unified School District two months ago. “We are just going to be using another road, a different road, to email...In order to make this as secure and reliable as we could make it, we are moving those processes over to my staff and machines in my department.”

The ISP, which offers 56k dialup service, was created as a classroom project in 1994 and became a popular hands-on educational program for students interested in information technology. Along the way, it expanded to include the Redondo Beach Chamber of Commerce, all twelve RBUSD campuses, and the Hermosa Beach Unified School Beachnet also serves as an ISP for current and former employees and for a small number of other residents in the community.

The bigger question, however, is if the ISP will continue to exist. Although the district spent \$7,000 for three new servers this year, the service has largely been starved for resources throughout the lean budget times of recent years. And in the age of broadband, the service has become technologically behind-the-times.

Trustee Jane Diehl questioned whether Beachnet has outlived its usefulness.

“It’s going to cost us a ton of dough to be competitive with other services, so from that standpoint, what would be logical?” she asked. “It has to move along with the times. When [former superintendent] Beverly Rohrer put it in, she didn’t have the intention of it being ignored. We haven’t had the funds to evolve the way a real service would. We just patched things together.”

Basel said she is assessing what it would take to fully upgrade the system but hasn’t arrived a dollar figure yet. But she also questioned whether the service fulfills what was its original purpose – to give students an opportunity to learn about networking in a real world environment – and whether it is still a good instructional tool. The ISP is no longer a classroom project, Basel said, and the faculty adviser who oversaw through its early years has since retired.

“You know, when we started using the Internet,” Basel said, “I don’t think we had any idea how important it would be in our daily lives and in how we do our business.”

“It is very hard to expect students to provide the kind of support typically this kind of thing needs,” she added. “What parent sends a kid out on the street at 3 a.m. to bring a server back up?”

Board President Carl Clark is a strong advocate for the continuation of Beachnet. He has a son who was a student manager of the service but who recently resigned because he did not want to preside over the diminishment of the service. Clark said he has been in contact with other students who have been locked out of the rooms containing the Beachnet servers.

Clark said Basel’s actions have troubled him. He believes the board should have been consulted prior to recent actions.

“She has basically cancelled Beachnet on her own at this point,” Clark said. “I mean, she locked the doors to the students. What else does that mean?”

Clark argued that discontinuing the service would deprive students of just the sort of educational experience needed in today’s world.

“It seems to me we are kind of missing the boat when it comes to technology,” Clark said. “We need something to happen here. At this point, we are sort of allowing it to disappear without

any plan to replace it.”

Trustee Todd Loewenstein, an information technology professional, also supports keeping Beachnet.

“Whether or not we segregate the email of the district and the employees from the rest of Beachnet shouldn’t matter,” Loewenstein said. “In my view, there should be a Beachnet. It should not be dismembered. I would hope any decision made would rest with the board, and with the advice of the superintendent.”

Interim Superintendent Bob Paulson was unavailable for comment. He met with Clark on Wednesday to discuss the matter. Beachnet’s fate will be discussed publicly at a meeting of the district’s technology committee this Monday night at 6:30 p.m. at district headquarters.