

RUHS Student-Run ISP To Be Revamped

Easy Reader - Mark McDermott - December 08, 2005

BeachNet is still down but it's not permanently out.

The Internet service provider operated by Redondo Union High School students has been mired in technical difficulties since district officials took control of its servers more than three weeks ago. The intent of the takeover was to improve security and reliability by "segregating" district email and other business from the ISP, which primarily serves current and former employees of the district. But the manner in which the change occurred – students were locked out of the room with the servers at RUHS – created concerns among students and BeachNet advocates that students would no longer be in control of the service.

At a meeting of the district's Business and Technology Committee Monday night, committee members and district officials reaffirmed their support for the network, which at the time of its creation a dozen years ago was the first student-run ISP in the nation.

Interim Superintendent Bob Paulson said the district hopes to "rekindle" interest in a program that began as a project in an Advance Placement Computer Science class in 1993. He noted, however, that BeachNet no longer has a classroom affiliation, nor does it have a faculty member overseeing it. He said that as a result students end up overburdened with responsibility, particularly since Internet use has become such an integral part of daily life.

"What we tried to do is draw a line," Paulson said. "I think the commitment on our part is BeachNet will be here, but it may not be in exactly the form it was before."

"It's a different world we live in today," said committee member David Goodman. "Everybody is concerned with the issue of cyber-security and it's irresponsible to think we can ignore that..."

The idea of a separate network for student information – for district information – is very prudent. I think anything else would be foolish."

School board trustee Todd Loewenstein, a member of the technology committee, said that BeachNet should be revamped, and the best way to do that would be to treat it as a true business, with its own budget – one that would include money for a faculty adviser, regular equipment upgrades, and classes that teach advanced Internet technologies and skills. He said students should have their own email accounts, host websites – including the RUHS school paper, The High Tide – and learn how to market the service and turn it into a real-world, revenue generating service. He said the service could even make the jump to high-speed Internet access.

"I'm hoping BeachNet can come back bigger and better," Loewenstein said.

As for the more immediate future, Jo Basel, the district's new chief information and instructional technology officer, said she hoped to have the service back up and running by Dec. 20. But she said it could take longer, promising that at the worst it would be back in service by the end of Christmas break.

"Every time we think we have the problem solved we have a new issue with it," she said.

Several people came to defend BeachNet and question how its decline and recent fall came about. Former RBUSD technology director Pat Hosken was particularly incensed.

I find it absolutely abominable that the leadership of this district has acted so unprofessionally," Hosken said. "BeachNet is an ISP...If you are going to make a change, you need to take into consideration that there are a lot of people counting on this service, who are using BeachNet. You don't just pull the plug."

Hosken lamented at how BeachNet has been allowed to languish due to lack of resources. She said the problem has never been in how the students have managed the service, but rather how the adults overseeing it neglected its needs.

"Where is the support for this program?" she asked. "It was a key program. It was the only one [like it] in the nation. BeachNet was established as an ISP before AOL."

Several former student managers spoke in defense of BeachNet. Two of the former managers, Louis Barnes and Matt Vlasach, took the skills they learned at RUHS and established a successful business, Pacific Swell Networks, as freshmen in college. Barnes said that when he

started at RUHS in 1998, the school was more technologically oriented than it is now.

“It was really sad for me to come to BeachNet today and see a sign that said BeachNet is closed,” Barnes said. “That someone closed the door to a business – that really worries me.”

Both Vlasach and former manager Kevin George said they were Hermosa residents who came to RUHS – rather than Mira Costa – because of the opportunity to work on BeachNet. Vlasach, now a senior at UC Santa Barbara, said he understood that changes needed to be made to enhance security and lessen student responsibility. But he stressed how invaluable the experience he had working on the ISP had been.

“It’s amazing how much you benefit with just some simple computer knowledge,” he said. “It’s one of those things that BeachNet can provide unlike anything else.”

Current student manager Andrew Kim said he’d been doing a lot of thinking since being locked out of BeachNet.

“I’ve come to realize it’s foolish and ignorant to think students can run a network now and be left alone,” Kim said. “Because dependence on the Internet has grown exponentially. I don’t think students should be running it altogether. I understand [the need for] segregation. While in class I cannot be tending to an email problem.”

But Kim said he was offended at how BeachNet students were not informed of recent decisions to change BeachNet – both when they were locked out of the server room and earlier this year when new filters were abruptly installed. He said the district needs to foster better communication.

“I believe I have been kind of left in the dark about this whole thing,” he said.

Committee member Pam Stanton said that shutting the students out of BeachNet risked breaking the link to the institutional knowledge of the network that has been passed down by each successive generation of student managers.

“I’m just concerned we don’t lose what we do have,” she said. “We have a few students who are the remaining link. They need to be nurtured and taught, and locking them out is not the way to do it.”

Board president Carl Clark, whose son is a former manager, said afterwards that he was suspicious of how much support really existed administratively to continue BeachNet in a way that maintains some semblance of independence for students. He also said he was angered at the way recent events had been handled.

“There was no notification of students, staff, or patrons,” he said. “All of a sudden technical people started making changes. They have not apologized to anybody and made any announcement to anyone they are doing this stuff. There was no planning, no information dissemination. It was very poorly handled.”