

Eye On The Board

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Board Highlights April 25, 2006

Reported by Mariann Klinger

Tech needs up against \$\$, details

Students and teachers can expect to see a reemerging emphasis on technology at least by next fall, if the district's technology department makes good on its promises.

In a lengthy report, **Joe Rice** and **Joe Zeligs** outlined the department's ongoing work, deadlines and future plans. The Information Service Department's long awaited report addressed many of the litany of complaints from teachers, students, and staff over the past few years.

The IS presented an elaborate PowerPoint slideshow listing problems, work completed and goals, nearly echoing the school site lack of technology mantra.

(These paragraphs moved to end of article, to separate more from District's presentation...)
Rice, IS director, suggested actual costs could approach \$900,000 without staffing consideration. He estimated 25 percent annual computer replacement costs at \$750,000, file storage space at \$98,000 and an already negotiated deal for increased Internet speed at \$46,000. He put the shortage of funds at the top of the list. "We are in an environment where numerous needs are chasing after a few resources."

Trustees **Margaret Serna-Bonetti** and **Kathryn Ramirez** made the only remarks that spoke of funding. "Dollars are an issue here. I'd love to say write a check right now," said Serna-Bonetti, adding that she was willing to look for funding.

Ramirez took on the staffing and training issue broached in both reports. "We are understaffed. We need to make staffing our number one priority." She put the two issues together; suggesting that teachers could be trained at school sites to handle some of the smaller problems and leave more complex issues to the ten-person IS staff.

The reports seemed to offer a pressure valve for frustration. "I'm frustrated and we have parents, students and teachers who are frustrated because we can't meet the needs," said Rice, prefacing the district's report.

He acknowledged a severe lack of planning, upkeep, replacement and support resources on the part of the district. "We have an environment where users can't get what they need most," Rice said. "We can't go through feast or famine with technology. We need to plan."

Rice and Zelig said IS staff has been working to the max during the past school year to repair and replace aging and failing infrastructure, take on technology projects, and create better procedures to meet user requests. "We're working when no one else is," said Zelig.

The IS report listed infrastructure, operations and user requests as work either underway or completed.

Infrastructure:

- New high speed connections in all schools and improved wide area network
- Many new educational computer labs
- New data center facilities
- Hundreds of new servers and PCs
- Increase by 20 the number of reading intervention labs
- New phone lines
- New Internet filtering and firewall systems
- New web use monitoring and reporting systems
- Cleaned up wiring systems

Procedures:

- Tech committees and subcommittees
- Three-year technology plan to meet state and federal requirements
- Web site requirements set
- Gradebook program selected

Short-term Goals:

- Help desk to speed problem-solving
- 600 gigabytes of storage space per site (2 gigabytes of storage space per teacher)
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- Reliable backup of all network files
- Increase Internet speed
- Create printing centers and inventory printers
- Maintain workstations
- Create new district and school web sites

“I saw a lot of good things in the district report. I know how hard the district is working,” said **AHS teacher Pat McNeil**. “We need to help them (IS staff members).”

While admitting problems seemed overwhelming at the start of 2005-2006, Rice told the board that the picture “is not bleak.”

“Things are looking better. Much of the work is not visible to our users, but [the situation is] looking better,” added Zelig.

McNeil agreed. “The district can have a leading edge technology program.”

As a response –and perhaps counter-perspective—to the IS presentation, representatives of the SVFT-sponsored Technology Advocacy Task Force spoke of the need for updated technology in the 21st Century with a PowerPoint of their own. Opening their presentation with the “SUHSD Access has been denied” symbol, teachers **Natalie Bernasconi**, LPMS, **Ted Altenberg**, WMS, and **Pat McNeil**, AHS, gave voice to the widespread sense of frustration felt by teachers and other staff, and called for what is needed to improve technology at the schools:

- Technology in every classroom
- Technology school-wide
- On-site technical support
- Technology training and coaching
- A properly funded “technology cycle”

Their call for improved access to and support of technology, including increased staffing, did not get an answer.

Unions seek end to talks, pay raises

Union members gathered outside the district office prior to the meeting with signs drawing trustees’ attention to bargaining talks.

In open forum at the meeting, CSEA and SVFT representatives asked trustees to support COLA pay increases and health benefits during the ongoing negotiations.

Patricia Saenz, with CSEA, emphasized the role of classified staff in operating and maintaining district schools. Classified workers want the state-contributed 5 percent COLA and fully funded health benefits, she said. “We deserve the full state COLA.”

“The state intended the COLA for a pay increase, not for it to cover Worker’s Compensation or the district budget,” she added.

ESMS teacher **Richard Cranston** also called on trustees to pass along to teachers the 5.1 percent COLA from the state. “It’s expensive to live in our community,” he said.

SHS teacher **Kyle Samuels** elaborated on a staffing problem already facing the district. Beginning and middle level teachers, he said, can’t pay to rent or by homes in the area. “We have to have raises to live here.”

SHS teacher Phil Moore suggested cracking down on truancy as a moneymaking strategy for the district. The district could make hundreds of thousands of dollars, even if it returned a modest percentage of truants to class, he said.

Special Reserve Fund healthy, but spoken for

Funding needs and money management brought attention to the district’s \$9.2 million Special Reserve Fund.

“I know the district has a \$9 million cushion,” said Samuels, who spoke for staff pay raises.

The fund is earmarked for construction cost overruns, building system upgrades, school buses, technology, and debt liability, according to Chief Business Officer James Earhart.

Earhart made short work of ideas for reallocating the money. “It’s basically spent,” he said, “what is not spent should go to pay the debt.”

The fund, which has grown from about \$2.6 million in 1999 to \$9.2 million at the end of 2005, is fed by interest earnings, construction savings and property purchase savings from General Fund monies.

It is expected that the Special Reserve will finance construction projects and the AHS Phase II modernization project when Measure F and M monies run out. In addition, Earhart turned attention to the potential use in paying on the \$6.5 million Certificate of Participation debt owed by the district.

Later, in speaking to the 5-year facilities plan, Earhart reminded trustees of yet another need for

funding. “We have a whole lot of portables. They are starting to wear out,” he said, promising that district officials “will look closer at those.”

Student numbers likely to decline

Ever-increasing student numbers – the growth that powered the district – can be expected to slow down in the next few years, according to demographer **Jeanne Gobalet**.

Despite plans to continue building in the area, the families of young students seem to be moving out of the Salinas area, she said, speculating that the issue could be high housing costs. “There is evidence of people moving out of the community,” she added.

Gobalet told trustees that student population is already in decline in Salinas City and Alisal Union elementary schools, the district’s feeder schools.

Both of the elementary school districts hit student population peaks a number of years ago. In recent years, Salinas City experienced a 14 percent loss of (1300) students, and Alisal Union declined 6 percent, a loss of 500 students. The Santa Rita district didn’t lose student population, but has not increased student numbers for the past few years. The numbers eventually will translate into fewer students entering district middle and high schools.

The district experienced a 20-year growth spurt that brought funding along with increased student numbers. Student population kept pace with the constant construction, but said Gobalet, housing growth has been down for the past four years. Although new housing starts are planned in Monte Bella, Rancho San Juan and North of Boronda, it may be several years before completion, said Gobalet.

She estimated a possible student population increase down the road of more than 600 middle and high schoolers.

Consent Agenda

The board approved the following by a vote of 6-0
(Trustee **Anne Brown** was absent.):

- A notice of completion of SHS Performing Arts Center with exceptions, indicating work still needed.
- A bid by Southern Bleachers to construct home side bleachers at the AHS stadium. The company came in with the low bid of \$311,700.
- Authorize the Wald Ruhnke Dost Architects to begin planning work on the SHS student parking lot project at a cost of \$25,300. The firm estimated a total project budget of \$281,160.

Teachers' Letter Forum

Teachers are invited to send letters-to-the-editor style comments or questions about newsletter topics or other concerns of general interest to the SVFT membership.

Letters will be printed on a space available basis. Letter writers should include a name and phone number with any submission.

All letter writers must be identified. Letters may be edited for space considerations. Letters can be sent by email to mklinger@salinas.k12.ca.us or to jdnolan@sbcglobal.net.