ON THE COVER

Supercomputer Computations Research Institute assistants, left to right, Lester Hightower, Krishna Nayak, Tom Green, Marc Eaddy, Brian Gentry and Joe Pasko. Dennis Duke, SCRI director, is center.

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Supercomputer Computations Research Institute assistants surround Dennis Duke, SCRI director.

COVER STORY

BUSINESS GETTING WIRED

Local businesses, organizations and schools are turning to the Internet for information around the globe and to post information on themselves for the rest of the world to see.

STORY BY WAYNE HARRIS

This week Tallahassee Memorial Regional Medical Center fires up a new computer that will enable the hospital to forge its own link to the Internet.

TMRMC will continue to provide health-care information via the Tallahassee Free-Net, but through its own computer system — not Free-Net's. The hospital has come of age electronically. TMRMC got heavily involved in the use of Free-Net from the beginning, creating a 30-member Internet advisory committee and appointing staff member, Lori McCall, director of Internet Services.

The effort has already begun to pay dividends.

The hospital has one of the most elaborate and up-to-date presences on Free-Net, with nearly 100 different listings ranging from job openings at the hospital to bulletins on what's new in health care and drugs from the TMRMC's pharmacy and four of its physicians.

Doctors and staff who confessed to being computer-phobic less than two years ago now routinely look to the Internet for quick answers to vexing questions, either from "wired" colleagues around the globe or from the many on-line databases put out on the Internet by government agencies and university medical schools.

This was supposed to happen. But there are other potential benefits and synergies no one foresaw when the hospital first made the commitment to becoming Internet-literate.

'No brainer': Using the Internet to get information

Florida State University's Supercomputer Computations Research Institute provides ongoing training for physicians and staff interested in the Internet and its capabilities, for example. Now, some of those doctors hope to work with SCRI to adapt its three-dimensional imaging software to clinical applications and medical diagnosis.

Hospital management also hopes that its developing telecommunications expertise will improve the quality of health care it delivers to rural communities in the region.

"For us, getting involved with Free-Net and the Internet for information retrieval was almost a no-brainer," said Jack MacDonald, senior vice president for medical affairs. "But these other possibilities are very exciting."

Indeed, TMRMC has almost precisely followed the path envisioned by Hilly Levitz and Dennis Duke when they helped launch Free-Net in May 1993. Levitz is a professor of computer science at Florida State; Duke is the director of SCRI.

"It was always our idea that Free-Net would serve as a catalyst in Tallahassee for the coming information revolution," Levitz said. "I thought that organizations would start by giving us information and end up with their own servers when they grasped the possibilities."

In Internet parlance, a server is a computer that serves up information to other computers that connect to it.

Local businesses using the Internet to advertise

In many respects, the growth of Tallahassee's telecommunications infrastructure has exceeded the Free-Net founders' initial expectations. Among the highlights:

■ Sprint/Centel has completed a fiber-optic network, called the Metropolitan Area Network, and is aggressively marketing high-speed Internet connections to public agencies, nonprofit groups and private businesses. Sprint already has 200 customers and is adding new ones at a rate of one a day, said Data Account Executive Mark Powell.

■ Homes & Land Publishing Corp., publisher of about 250 real-estate magazines, is another Sprint client, with more than 30,000 home listings — many with photos — on its own server on the Internet.

The database has been accessed an average of 19,000 times a week so far this year.

That translates to about 5,000 different users weekly, said Bob Horning, vice president for business development.

Sprint's customers also include a growing list of Internet-access "wholesalers" — intermediaries like SuperNet, SymNet and Polaris — that provide dial-up access to businesses too small or without the technical expertise to link directly to Sprint's fiber-optic network. Thus, for as little as $50 a month, entrepreneurs launching home businesses can gain access to an audience of an estimated 30 million Internet users worldwide.

■ Sprint is in the process of wiring 22 schools in Leon County and neighboring counties with Internet access as part of the Internet Reaching into the Schools project (IRIS). Comcast Cablevision, meanwhile, has committed to wiring 20 schools.

■ With help form SCRI, the Chamber of Commerce recently posted a well-organized sampling of demographic and economic information about the Tallahassee area. Companies around the world interested in relocating here can now call this up on their computers. But unlike the sophisticated home pages touting cities like Raleigh, N.C., the Tallahassee Chamber's pages lack graphics and pictures.

■ Leon County's page contains information of interest to builders and developers from its Department of Growth Management. The Tallahassee-Leon County Planning Department, meanwhile, has posted its statistical digest on Free-Net.

And the property appraiser's database, complete with a lightning-fast search engine, is available through a server maintained by SCRI.

■ More than 250 businesses and public agencies are among the approximately 15,000 local users of Free-Net.

■ With SCRI's help, a Gadsden County group has launched the Gadsden Community Network with a multimedia, Windows-like interface. The Gadsden network is probably the first public network in the United States capable of transmitting images and sound as well as text, said board member Carl Owenby.

Free-Net will be offering the same capabilities to Tallahassee residents soon.

Some slow to respond to technology

But there are some caution lights flashing on Tallahassee's on-ramp to the information super-highway. Among the negatives:

■ No ISDN. The Integrated Services Digital Network is a technology vastly superior to current modems in its ability to transfer vast amounts of data — and at a fraction of the cost of a commercial hookup to Sprint's fiber-optic Metropolitan Area Network.

ISDN offers data transfer along existing copper telephone wire on two separate channels simultaneously, enabling such technological marvels as low-cost video-conferencing on a global scale.

Regional Bell telephone-operating companies are offering residential hookups to ISDN lines in many parts of the country for as little as $30 a month. The least expensive hookup to Sprint's commercial fiber-optic network, by contrast, is about $400.

Sprint's Powell says the company hopes to offer ISDN in Tallahassee by the end of this year.

■ City indifference to Free-Net. While the county and school system have worked closely with SCRI and Free-Net to develop their presences on the Internet, the city of Tallahassee has chosen to go it alone. The only item the city currently has posted on Free-Net, for example, is an agenda for a public meeting — held last July. And only one city commissioner has been down to SCRI for a demonstration of the resources available on the "Worldwide Web" — a colorful, Macintosh or Windows-like interface to the Internet, which will be available to Free-Net users next month.

"We have invited the City Commission down for a demonstration repeatedly," said SCRI's Duke. "But so far the only Commissioner to take us up on our offer has been Ron Weaver."

But the city's lone-ranger approach doesn't mean the city is indifferent to the possibilities of the Internet, said Michael Di Paolo, head of the city's management information systems.

"We want to do both information delivery and business services
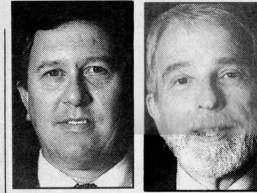
Please see WIRED, 4D

WIRED:
The Lottery posts its winning numbers on the Internet

related to our utilities departments, so we're approaching it systematically," Di Paolo said. That makes us look slow. In fact, we're launching our e-mail this week. And we hope to have our own server up on the Internet during the second quarter of this year."

■ A late start by the Convention and Visitors Bureau. While other Florida cities ranging in size from Miami to Naples to Destin have launched attractive multimedia presentations touting their home turf, the Tallahassee Convention and Visitors Bureau has continued to rely almost exclusively on more traditional public-relations such as brochures.

"You have to understand, this is all very new to us," said Colleen David, director of programs and services. "We have a bunch of old computers in the office. We're not even networked internally. That will happen in a few months. But we've seen what other cities like San Francisco have done, and we're impressed."

CVB is working with students from FSU's computer-science department to develop a Web page.

■ A lack of state-funding leadership. Among the agencies that have actively exploited the resources represented by SCRI and Free-Net are the Florida Lottery and the Agency for Health Care Administration.

The Lottery posts its winning numbers on a daily basis, and the health-care agency has cooperated with SCRI in putting up a database with information on hospital performance.

The Department of Environmental Protection, meanwhile, has

its own Web site full of useful information on state environmental regulations and links to other databases and environmental agencies.

And the Bureau of Labor Market Information, which has maintained a labor-data bulletin board for several years, is in the process of linking the board to the Internet.

You can also find Governor Lawton Chiles' proposed budget on Free-Net.

Technology links as vital as railroads a century ago

But Florida's investment in telecommunications infrastructure dedicated to business development is grossly underfunded, according to Rosalind Resnick, co-author of a book on doing business on the Internet. In an article she wrote for Florida Trend, Resnick estimated that in fiscal year 1992-93, only $556,460, or 0.2 percent of the state's telecommunications budget, went toward promoting business development.

Resnick calls the burgeoning telecommunications business the most important infrastructure investment since the railroads were laid in the 19th century and warns that Florida is in danger of becoming an "information backwater."

The Department of Management Services now is in the process of forming a Florida Community Network, said the city's Di Paolo. The network would link state government agencies and local governments to give Florida a more imposing presence on the Internet, he added. Tallahassee will be one of 11 cities included in the network.

SCRI's Duke thinks the effort can't come soon enough.

"People have been hearing about the information superhighway and how it's going to change their lives, but so far they haven't seen much difference," Duke said. "But that is about to change. This really is a revolution."

Duke
"People have been hearing about the information superhighway and how it's going to change their lives . . ."

Levitz
"It was always our idea that Free-Net would serve as a catalyst in Tallahassee for the coming information revolution."