The Cursor

Monthly Newsletter of the
Washington Area Computer Users Group

Meeting Location:
Fairfax County
Government Center

Next Meeting:
February 26, 2005

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Presidential Bits

February Meeting

By Paul Howard

After all the hype from the weather forecasters, we were a bit disappointed with only two inches of snowfall on the January meeting date. Several WAC officers were seen doing a 'snow dance' when the white stuff didn't start until noon, fearing they'd be classified as [cue 'Arnold the Governator' voice] "Girlymen!" for canceling the meeting.

With fingers crossed that the weather cooperates, our February meeting will be held on February 26th, the 4th Saturday, and will be held in Room 2/3 of the Fairfax County Government Center's conference facility. The session will include a brief WACUG Annual Meeting and election of the 2005 Board of Directors.

Join us for a demonstration of Mozilla, Firefox and Thunderbird software, find out about the similarities and differences between Mozilla, Firefox and Thunderbird, and learn how to setup Internet newsfeeds, customizable themes and additional features through optional extensions. Our presenters will include Geof Goodrum and Scott Hanak.

Mozilla is a free network application suite integrating a web browser, e-mail/news client, Internet Relay Chat (IRC) client and web page editor. The Mozilla Organization separately developed the Firefox web browser and Thunderbird e-mail/news client as standalone applications. These programs have received high marks for better security, features, performance and standards compliance than Microsoft's Internet Explorer and Outlook Express software.

If time permits, there will also be a video presentation and report about the January 2005 Consumer Electronics Show.

Don't forget – annual WACUG membership dues are now payable. See our membership page for details - http://www.wacug.org/membership.html Donations are welcome and tax deductible. Your continued support of WAC is greatly appreciated.

Lu Spriggs Web Sites for February 2005

http://www.wacug.org/ – This is the URL for the Washington Area Computer Users Group. Visit it for past versions of Spriggs Web Sites w/hyperlinks.

1. http://hoaxbbusters.ciac.org/ – Visit this Dept. of Energy site to learn about internet related scams.
2. http://www.JibJab.com/ – Irreverent political satire movies! Long download times for dial-up.
3. http://www.grisoft.com/ – Download a free trial version of the Grisoft AVG 7.3 Virus program. This is a 13.88 Mb download. Program is free to individual users, auto updates are available.
4. http://picasa.com/ – Free download of the Picasa 2 image editor program, provided by Google. The setup file download is 3.1 Mb.
5. http://dailyanswers.org/ – Sign up for free mail delivery of the monthly "Our Daily Bread". With daily guidance for spiritual meditation, along with a verse of Scripture.
6. http://my-redcross.org/ – Help save a Life! Donate blood to the Red Cross. Details found here.
7. http://www.worldmag.com/ – Find current news reports online in World magazine.
8. http://www.safekids.com/ – Tips for child safety are found at this site.
9. http://totallypetstv.com/ –Visit Totally Pets for information about your pets, and their needs.
10. http://wusatv9.com/ – For local news as it is happening, visit this channel 9 site.
11. http://soloshideaway.home.att.net/471/this_is_what.htm – Cute Dog photos here!

NCTCUG

Visit our "sister" user group. The National Capital Technology and Computer User's Group meets the first and fourth Wednesday of the month. They meet in Carlin Hall in Arlington at 5711 South 4th Street.Visit their web site for more information, a map and directions:

http://www.nctcug.org/

APCUG Annual Meeting

By Geof Goodrum

I attended the Annual Meeting of the Association of Personal Computer User Groups (APCUG) in Las Vegas from January 3 through 7 (note I do this at my expense, not WAC's). As in previous years, there was plenty of information sharing between user group volunteers at roundtable sessions, and many vendors stepped up to support the event at significant cost.

AMD (http://www.amd.com/) treated approximately 300 attendees to breakfast and a presentation by Athlon 64 Product Manager Jonathon Seckler on what lies ahead. Mr. Seckler identified multicore processors as the future direction for microprocessor products. Expect to see multicore processors from AMD beginning this year.

CompUSA provided a Texas-style BBQ lunch and expressed their regret over the elimination of business representatives in their stores in 1999. This decision cost the company, both financially and in their customer relationship. CompUSA is looking to reconnect with their customers by putting over a thousand representatives back in the stores and has a web site at https://www.compusabusiness.com/. Later this year, the company will invite user groups to use the training rooms in their stores for meetings and create a central point of contact in Dallas. The presentation also noted that CompUSA technical services will support Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), Smart Home, and computer security. The company expects VoIP to be a very hot product this year, and partnered with Packet8 (http://www.packet8.net/) to provide discount offers on VoIP products to attendees.

Adobe Systems, Inc. hosted a dinner and gave a demonstration of Adobe Premiere Elements, an impressive consumer video editing application that can be used to make DVDs and export videos to multiple formats. Adobe also demonstrated the new version of Photoshop Elements, which now incorporates some of the features from their Photoshop Album product to help organize digital photos. Of note is that Adobe is concentrating product support on Microsoft Windows XP, now.

Marcy Gunn of Smart Computing Magazine (http://www.smartcomputing.com/) had some big news after their sponsored breakfast. Anyone can use Smart Computing's free Tech Support phone number (800-368-8304, M-F, 7am – 8pm Central Time)for help with any computer question or problem. However, users are encouraged to check out their free tech support web site first, which has an extensive library of error messages with solutions, troubleshooting and maintenance tips, installation directions, driver information, and definitions of computer terms. Subscribers to Smart Computing, CE, PC Today and Computer Power User (CPU) magazines can also choose to subscribe just to the web site, which has all articles from all publications and many new features to keep a personal library of favorite articles. Ms. Gunn also noted that the "Buy 5" program that gives user groups free subscriptions can be used by non-members. However, subscriptions must be placed through the program's web site (follow the User Groups link on the home page) and identify the user group.

Intel (http://www.intel.com/) provided lunch and announced a new seminar in a box – Build Your Own PC – that includes step by step instructions for a user group demonstration. The Intel presentation covered the connection between consumer electronics and personal computers, and the latest trends in computer form factors (media PCs). Intel reaffirmed the industry roadmap for multicore processors, also with plans to ship dual core units in 2005.

Corel treated us to breakfast, and heralded 2004 as their most profitable year in ten years. Corel noted that their software is bundled with Dell's bestselling PCs. We were treated to a demonstration of WordPerfect Office 12 Home Edition, which includes seven applications included WordPerfect 12, Quattro Pro 12, Brittanica Encyclopedia, templates, photo album, Pinnacle System Backup, and Norton Security Suite 2005 (full edition, 60 day antivirus update subscription). Special pricing is available for user groups. For those who haven't heard, Corel acquired Jasc Software (publisher of Paint Shop Pro). The Jasc product line will continue. We saw impressive demonstrations of Paint Shop Pro 9, CorelDRAW Graphic Suite 12 and Painter IX.

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Of note is that Ventura Publisher is being maintained, but no new releases are planned.

Microsoft provided lunch and presentations on their user group Mindshare program, demonstrations of Digital Image Suite 10, PhotoMail, and an introduction to the Windows Marketplace web site (http://www.windows-marketplace.com/). Microsoft was eager for user groups to update their information on Mindshare, and is soliciting input from user on the top ten likes and dislikes about Windows XP, which will be used to guide development of the next Windows operating system, Longhorn.

Let me make a special note that WAC member Rich Schinnell won Microsoft's door prize Plus! Superpack for Windows XP, and contributed it to WAC's door prize pool. Another good reason to show up for the February meeting! Thanks, Rich!

Many other vendors contributed to the event, providing special pricing and support for user group members. These include ADS Technologies, Alawar Entertainment, Computer Outlook, Firetrust Limited, Have WiFi Will Travel, HM System Software, InterVideo, Logitech, National Cristina Foundation, NewTech Infosystems, O'Reilly, PPP Infotech, PC Club, Pexagon Technology, Solid Documents, TechSmith Corporation, The Digital Photo Guy, The Healthy PC, Trend Micro, User Group Relations, Verbatim, Windows IT Pro, Yes Software. I will provide more information on special offers and vendor products to our members at the February meeting (be there!).

Between assisting with video project setup in the meeting rooms, I attended roundtable sessions on obtaining foundation grants, attracting younger members to user groups, computer interests for seniors, the effect of technology on aging baby boomers, leadership and communications, recruitment and retention of members, the "Death of E-mail Marketing" and how to be an ambassador for your user group. Unfortunately, schedule conflicts and volunteer duties kept me from many other interesting sessions. I plan to discuss some of the ideas from the meetings with the 2005 Board of Directors. I encourage you to visit the APCUG web page for the conference at http://www.apcug.net/Events/Conference_2005_wrapup.htm, which has copies of some of the presentations. You may want to consider attending next year's APCUG event, as all user group members are welcome (register early for significant discounts).

CES 2005

By Geof Goodrum

I spent the afternoon of January 6 at the 2005 International Consumer Electronics Show (CES), which was held at the Las Vegas Convention Center (North, Central and South Halls) and other showcase sites around town. As expected, the show was huge and crowded with exhibitors and guests. I methodically zigzagged aisles for over four hours and only covered the North and Central Halls. As a result, I saw more automotive electronics and audio and video equipment than computers and games.

There were many "tricked out" cars and trucks at the show, sporting complete video and audio systems. Expensive sports cars, classic cars and SUVs had video screens that dropped down from overhead, were embedded in the dash, on the visors, backs of headrests, and in the trunks (and usually all of the above). There were license plate frames with hidden video cameras. Audio systems filled cars with huge amplifiers (the largest I saw was a suitcase-sized 10,000 Watt unit), racks of batteries and cables, and impressive light displays. As if cell phones weren't enough of a distraction to drivers!

Continuing the theme, there are now digital satellite TV receivers for automotive use with roof mounted antennas that track the satellite while the vehicle is in motion. At least one also provides high-speed Internet access!

Both Sirius and XM satellite radio had a strong presence (two members of the rock group Styx were giving a live interview for XM while I was there). In the Sirius display area was a mobile GPS navigation system that receives real-time traffic updates – something Washington area drivers will certainly appreciate!

Aside from satellite radio, I discovered that terrestrial radio stations are beginning digital broadcasts. The Clear Channel Radio network (http://www.clearchannel.com/) announced that sixty-five of their stations were already broadcasting with iBiquity Digital Corporation's HD Radio™ technology.

The Blu-ray Disc Association had an area in which they displayed prototype video recorders and PC drives. With a storage capacity of 25 to 50 gigabytes per disc, Blu-ray is promoted as the recording medium for High Definition digital video. Find out more at http://www.bluraydisc.

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com/.

As a long-time owner of a TiVo digital video recorder, I stopped by their room at the show. One of the products in development and on display was a TiVo for digital cable and HDTV programming. TiVo has also been integrated with a DVD video recorder to make saving favorite shows easier. TiVo also announced "Tahiti", an open software platform to allow third parties to deliver applications and content to the TiVo subscribers beginning this year.

I will have some video and printed material from the show at the February WAC meeting. Please stop by and take a look!

More information about the 2005 CES and a schedule for the 2006 show can be found online at http://www.cesweb.org/. CES is organized by the Consumer Electronics Association, which is headquartered in Arlington, Virginia.

GNU/Linux SIG

By Geof Goodrum

Sun Begins Release of Open Source Solaris 10

After many months of speculation and urging by the Open Source community, Sun Microsystems announced that they will release buildable source code for their Solaris 10 operating system by the second quarter of 2005. On January 27, Sun rolled out the OpenSolaris.org web site (http://www.opensolaris.org/) and made the source code for their Dynamic Trace (DTrace) software available. The code is being released under the new Common Development and Distribution License (CDDL), which has been accepted as a valid Open Source license by the Open Source Initiative (http://www.opennsource.org/).

Sun also granted the Open Source community access to over 1,600 patents associated with the Solaris OS.

While generally applauded, some in the community expressed concern that the proliferation of incompatible Open Source licenses are defeating the purpose – many licenses prohibit integration of code covered by licenses with different terms and conditions.

Press Release: Skype for Mac OS X and Linux

Cross-platform Compatibility and Extensive Features With Skype for Mac OS X V 1.0 and Skype for Linux V 1.0

Luxembourg 1 February 2005 - Skype, the Global Internet Telephony Company, today announced the availability of its feature-rich Skype for Mac OS X Version 1.0 and Skype for Linux Version 1.0 software applications, enabling high-quality voice calling via the Internet for multiple computer platforms. Skype is the leading VOIP-category product worldwide, with more than 23 million registered users, and more than 130,000 new users per day. Skype products for Linux, Mac OS X, Windows and Pocket PC platforms are free and available for download at www.skype.com.

Previously available in beta versions, Skype for Mac OS X and Skype for Linux software includes free Skype to Skype calling and conference calling for up to 5 participants, cross-platform communications, rich presence and personalization features, and the pre-pay SkypeOut service, allowing users to call any landline or mobile worldwide for the price of a local call.

"We encourage all Mac OS X and Linux users to experience the cost and quality gains with version 1.0 Skype software," said Niklas Zennström, Skype CEO and co-founder. "We thank all those who downloaded the beta products as we were developing; your support has been fantastic. We will remain committed to innovation and will continue to expand platform choice."

Skype for Mac OS X V 1.0 and Skype for Linux V 1.0 features include:

- Skype's Global Directory - the user-built global Skype contacts directory with numerous search options and an easy add-a-contact tool
- Instant messaging - cross platform messaging ability
- Conference calling - instantly create a free 5-party conference call
- Logs - reference or discard call and message history
- Presence - easily manage availability and view status of contacts
- Customization - MyPicture image display, ring tones, call alert options
- File transfer - send and receive files via Skype
- Mobility - sign in to a Skype account anywhere in the world
- SkypeOut - pre-pay to call traditional phones around the world, at local rates
- Multiple Skype accounts on one computer
- End-to-end encryption for superior privacy

Skype for Mac OS X System Requirements

Skype for Mac OS X 1.0 requires a

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Macintosh computer with Mac OS X v10.3 or newer, a G3, G4, or G5 processor, a minimum 400 MHz processor, 128 MB RAM, 20 MB free hard drive disk space, sound card, speakers, microphone and an Internet connection.

Skype for Linux System Requirements

Skype for Linux 1.0 requires a computer running at least a 400 MHz processor, 128 MB RAM,10 MB free hard drive disk space, sound card, speakers, microphone and an Internet connection. Skype for Linux 1.0 has been successfully been tested on many recent distributions, including, but not limited to: SuSE 9, Gentoo 1.4, Debian "unstable", Fedora Core 2, Sun Java Desktop System Release 2 and Xandros. It should run on all distributions that have the required versions of glibc and Qt libraries available. Skype for Linux 1.0 supports both KDE and Gnome desktop managers.

Upcoming Events

The first Security Enhanced Linux Symposium will be held in Silver Spring, Maryland on March 2-4, 2005. Security-Enhanced Linux (SELinux) was originally developed as an Open Source project by the U.S. Government's National Security Agency (NSA), and is currently supported by several major Linux distributions including Fedora Core 3. To find out more, visit http://www.selinux-symposium.org/.

Feel like taking a cruise in the Caribbean? Want to learn about Linux, computer security or Perl programming from the experts? You can do both on the Linux Lunacy V cruise! This cruise will visit ports of call in the Southwestern Caribbean, October 2-9, 2005 while hosting an onboard computer conference. To find out more and make reservations, visit http://www.geekcruises.com/top/ll05_top.htm.

Linux CD of the Month

In addition to the CD-R discs described below, I can provide any downloadable GNU/Linux operating system distribution (e.g. Fedora Core, Mandrake, Debian, Knoppix) on CD-R. Note: download versions of commercial distributions do not include official technical support or printed documentation.

Discs are available only to WAC members by pre-order. Contact me by phone (703-370-7649) or e-mail (*ggoodrum@bigfoot.com*) at least 48 hours before meeting day to order or for more information. Single discs cost $4 each; GNU/Linux distributions on two or three discs cost $6 per set. All executable programs are for Intel x86 compatible Linux distributions unless stated otherwise. Your requests and suggestions are always welcome!

Active Calendar – v1.0.1. Free GNU Lesser General Public License source code by Giorgos. Active Calendar is a PHP (Personal Home Pages) Class that generates calendars (month or year view) as HTML tables (XHTML-Valid). It can produce static calendars without any links or calendars with navigation controls, a date picker control, event days and content with event URLs, and linkable days (optionally URL or Javascript). The layout can be configured using CSS, and JavaScript is not required. The supported dates (on systems using a 32-bit signed integer Unix time_t) are: 1902-2037 (Unix) and 1971-2037 (Windows), when using the default PHP native date functions, and 100-3000 and later, when using the ADOdb Date Library. The class can now accept different URLs for the day and navigation links. A new example script has been added to demonstrate how to set events using an XML file.

OpenTTD – v0.3.6. Free GNU General Public License source code and executable packages for Linux Mandrake and Debian Linux by Ludvig Strigeus et al. OpenTTD is modeled after Microprose's original Transport Tycoon game by Chris Sawyer and enhances the game experience dramatically with additional features. Data files from the original game (DOS or Microsoft Windows version) are required.

Desktop Themes – various. An assortment of freely distributable desktop themes (background graphics, icons, window decorations) for KDE3, GTK and Metacity window managers.

GNU/Linux Distribution Updates - Security and bug fix monthly updates for Fedora Core 3.

Kernel Source - The latest versions of 2.4 and 2.6 kernel source code for all platforms.

Search the Windows WUGNET Shareware Hall of Fame

By Bettie Cummings Cook
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The web site of WUGNET is http://windowsxp/downloads/wugnet.mspx. On this site are the Microsoft picks that demonstrate the highest standards available today in shareware for Windows XP. Just for the record, freeware is free and shareware is generally free to try but you are on your honor to send the compiler a fee or a contribution. Yes, you can use them as long as you please without sending a nickel for them but I encourage you to support the persons who unselfishly provide good shareware programs. A number of the programs will develop into large, well-known products or become incorporated into new system programs. To cite a few old examples that did so: PKZip, Brother's Keeper, Checkit, XTree, and TweakUI. I purchased these as shareware programs a number of years ago for five dollar each. To the credit of the shareware compilers, their programs have continued to operate from Windows 3.1 thru Windows XP. So, for the most part, they are good investments.

Twenty-five of the best picks for Win XP are featured with links to downloadable sites. Everything from utilities to games. I was intrigued by one called Ink-Saver. It adjusts the amount of ink flow from cartridge to printer and causes those expensive ink cartridges to last a little longer. Check it out for dependable sources that have MS approval.

Bettie Cummings Cook is Newsletter Editor of the SW Indiana PC Users Group, Inc. (SWIPCUG). The above article appeared in the January 2005 issue of the P-See Urgent, SWIPCUG newsletter. Permission is granted to other non-profit computer user groups to use this article in their publications with credit to the author and the SW Indiana PC Users Group.

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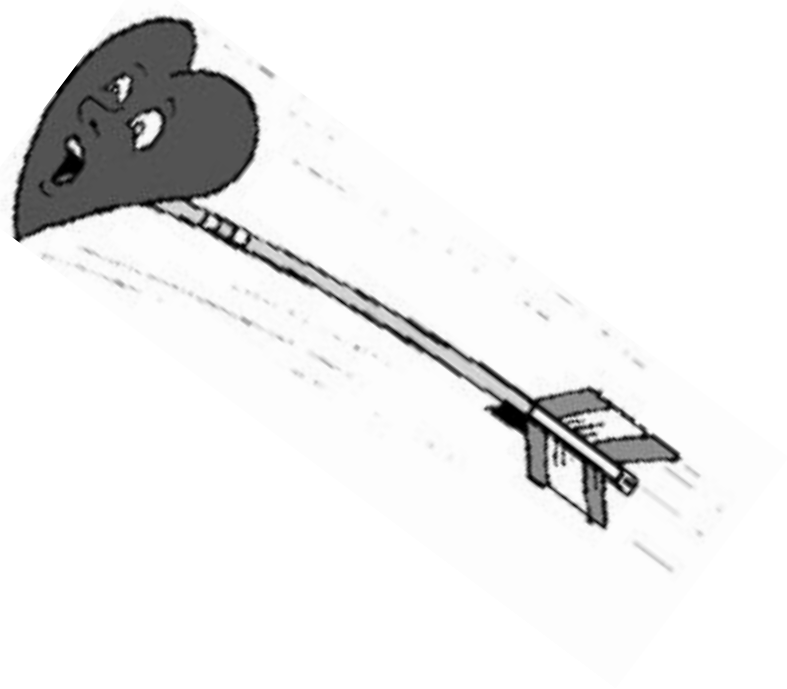

The Wonder of the Current Computer Hardware Transitions

By Timothy Everingham, TUGNET,
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teveringham@acm.org

When we have been changing computer hardware standards frequently, it has been one thing at a time. At other times those in authority say that if we are going to change one thing lets get some other changes done too. We are going through much more of the latter right now.

The thing that is more in the forefront of change currently is the move from PCI and AGP motherboard card slots to PCI Express (PCIe). PCI Express also changes the way data is transferred (serial rather than parallel) and has more intelligent data traffic management. This puts you in the position of having to decide whether to migrate to the AGP and PCI cards when upgrading to a new processor and motherboard or buying a new computer, something that is more of a problem if you recently paid a lot of money for a high end AGP graphics card or have a specialized PCI card where there is no equivalent PCIe card available. However, there are motherboards currently available that have both old and new type slots.

On the other hand you could go to the other extreme by buying a computer with the new NVIDIA SLI system. That is a motherboard with two PCIe graphics slots where you can run two NVIDIA graphics cards in parallel to get a 3D graphics performance boost similar to what was done to the old 3dfx Voodoo 2. We also started a shift last spring from Sockets 940 and 754 to Socket 939 for AMD 64 bit processors (Socket A remains for 32 Bit AMD processors) and from Socket 478 to 775 for Intel Pentium 4 processors, which also limits your upgrade options. Dual core processors, which have two CPUs on one chip, will be coming out for workstations, servers, and desktops in the second half of this year. Support for dual core processors will come from more of a BIOS change than socket change; however, some motherboards will be able to support dual core processors by upgrading your flash BIOS, but others will not. We also are making the transition from DDR to DDR2 system RAM, and some motherboards only support DDR2.

Now you think you have had enough. I am nowhere near finished. We now have a new power supply standard too. ATX Power Supply 2.01 is in process of replacing ATX Power Supply 1.3. Newer motherboards have different power connectors now. The new connector has 24 pins rather than the old one with 20. There have been adapters for the 1.3 power connectors to fit 2.01 compliant motherboards, but now we are going to move to adapters for 2.01 power supplies to fit into 1.3 compliant motherboards. Some motherboards and power supplies had AUX connectors, but the new standard does away with that. One thing that is nice with the new standard is that having SATA drive power connectors is now mandatory rather than optional. Also power supplies under the new standard are supposed to be more efficient. Nevertheless be aware that some power supply manufacturers have been exaggerating the capacity of their power supplies.

However, this new power supply standard is just a step in another transition, the move from the ATX motherboard and case design standards to BTX design standards. I say standards because there are three different BTX motherboard design formats: BTX, MicroBTX, and Pico BTX. BTX replaces the standard ATX motherboards, with MicroBTX going against the Mini-ATX motherboards and PicoBTX goes against the ITX motherboards. Part of the reasons for the change is to redesign the airflows in the case to get rid of all heat generated by the latest processors.

The airflow of BTX designs is from the front of the computer straight through to the back of the computer rather than typical lower front intake with exhaust in the upper back. The CPU has been repositioned towards the front of the computer so it gets the cool air first. That means a redesign of the power supply to a new BTX standard. Also a thermal module has replaced the standard CPU heat sink and fan. It takes a more global approach in covering the highest heat producing components sitting on the motherboard, including the CPU. Intel is the one who is pushing this because their Pentium 4s have higher clock speeds than an equivalent AMD Athlon 64 chip, which means they produce higher heat. There is so much heat that Intel had to abandon their goal of producing a 4 GHz Pentium 4 chip. As such AMD is not in such pressure to move to BTX, so BTX motherboards supporting AMD processors will be a few months behind those supporting Intel processors. The first BTX motherboards just recently came out, and should become dominate in 2006.

What does all this mean? By the second half of 2005 if you have a computer that is more than one year old it will probably be better to get an entire new computer rather

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than upgrade. This puts into motion another round of the old computer becoming the backup computer and the old backup computer becoming a boat anchor, flowerpot, or for the more adventurous: Christmas or Chanukah display control system for the whole house and yard. However, because there are so many changes with these transitions that many people will get a new computer sooner than normal, resulting in some of the retiring old backup computers being new enough to where nonprofit organizations and schools may want them. As such the probability is that not just those selling computers and computer components benefit from the chaos caused by this round of the wonder of computer hardware transitions.

Timothy Everingham is CEO of Timothy Everingham Consulting in Azusa, California. He is also part-time press in the areas of high technology, computers, video, audio, and entertainment/media and has had articles published throughout the United States and Canada plus Australia, England, & Japan. He is a member of TUGNET. Further information can be found at http://home.earthlink.net/~teveringham

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The Editorial Committee of the Association of Personal Computer User Groups (APCUG), an international organization of which this group is a member, brings this article to you.

IRS and "Free File Alliance" Again Offer FREE Online Tax Preparation and Filing

By Ira Wilsker, APCUG Board of Directors

It's that time of year again. Our mailboxes are brimming with W-2's, 1099's, and other ubiquitous indications of our daily financial lives. Preparing our forms 1040, 1040A, and 1040EZ are typically not our favorite annual right of spring. This year, the fine folks at the IRS and their partners, the "Free File Alliance" are again offering their free online federal income tax preparation and electronic filing services. Unlike past years, where only selected groups of people, such as students or military, could utilize the free services, this year there are free services available for almost all federal tax filers.

The main IRS website at www.irs.gov has at the top: "Free File -

Ever missed a good thing and regretted it? Don't miss Free File. Millions of eligible taxpayers can use Free File — a free online service that let's you prepare and file your tax return electronically. It's smart, free and fast. Don't miss it!" According to the IRS, about 6.5 million people took advantage of the opportunity last year.

The process is relatively easy. The first step is to enter the IRS Free File website at "www.irs.gov/app/freeFile/jsp/index.jsp?" where the various filing services offered by the Alliance can be viewed, and eligibility for each can be determined. Eligibility determination for each service is the second step listed. Some of the 15 resources listed have a maximum "AGI" (adjusted gross income) ceiling. Others will only prepare forms 1040A or 1040EZ online, while some others will prepare taxes for residents of specific states. Other members of the Alliance will prepare and e-file taxes for free based on age, often under 25 or over 60, while others (such as H&R Block, TaxAct.com, and TurboTax for the Web) have no restrictions on who can use the free services, and are available to all. After the free preparer is selected, the user will be directed to a non-IRS website to complete the online preparation. The taxes are calculated, and proper forms are electronically filed with the IRS using a secured link. An acknowledgement is automatically generated via email notifying the filer that the return has been accepted or rejected.

The IRS notes that several of these companies also offer a fee-based online preparation service, and the only way to be assured to get these services for free is to link to them directly from the IRS Free File website, and not directly to the company websites. It should also be noted that these companies do not generally prepare state income taxes for free, and that there may be a charge for preparing state income taxes, but users referred from the IRS site are under no obligation to incur any tax preparation expenses for the preparation and filing of federal income taxes, provided they were originally eligible for the services.

Electronic filing by these free resources, or other similar commercial resources, has several advantages, according to the IRS. Some

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of these benefits are that it takes less time to prepare online than on paper, refunds can be processed much faster, returns are more accurate (provided accurate information is entered), and acknowledgement of receipt is generated so you know the return has been filed, and other tangible and intangible benefits. The IRS also has a statement that the software used by the providers for the free service is "comparable" to the software used by these preparers for their commercial (paid) clients.

The IRS is well aware that not all taxpayers have internet access, so it is arranging for such groups as churches and community associations to provide the internet access so as to promote the widest possible use of the free service. The IRS is also supporting such volunteer groups as Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) and Tax Counseling for the Elderly (TCE).

Some individuals will justifiably question their personal privacy when entering this data onto a private company's website. The IRS has approved the security and privacy policies of the participating companies, and all of the providers must also have a recognized third-party privacy and security certification. Information provided to these companies can only be used for the preparation of income tax forms, and no other purposes not explicitly authorized by the user. The IRS will monitor all of the providers for compliance, and the companies are required to promptly alert the IRS if any privacy or security problems are encountered. The IRS has set up an email address with the Free File Alliance at helpdesk@speedymail.com, where anyone can get technical assistance about the Free File website, or resolve issues with any of the listed providers. Any user who is not satisfied with the selected free provider is free to try another provider that he may qualify for.

The Free File Alliance is a result of the IRS' Restructuring and Reform Act of 1998, which in part has a goal that 80% of all returns are to be filed electronically (e-filed) by 2007, and requires the IRS to make available to taxpayers free online filing options.

Last year (2004) saw 6.5 million e-filed returns, and the IRS hopes to triple the number this year. That still leaves many millions more that will have to e-file in order to reach the 2007 goal. The 15 companies listed that are providing free filing services are a good step on the path of meeting the IRS' goals.

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Important Reminder!

WACUG

Nominations and the election of four WAC members to the board of directors will take place at our meeting February 26, 2005. Members in good standing with paid dues are able to participate in the nomination and election process.

Your participation and support is appreciated.

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Through Front Entrance to the Left Hallway, Past the Elevators to: Conference Room 2-3

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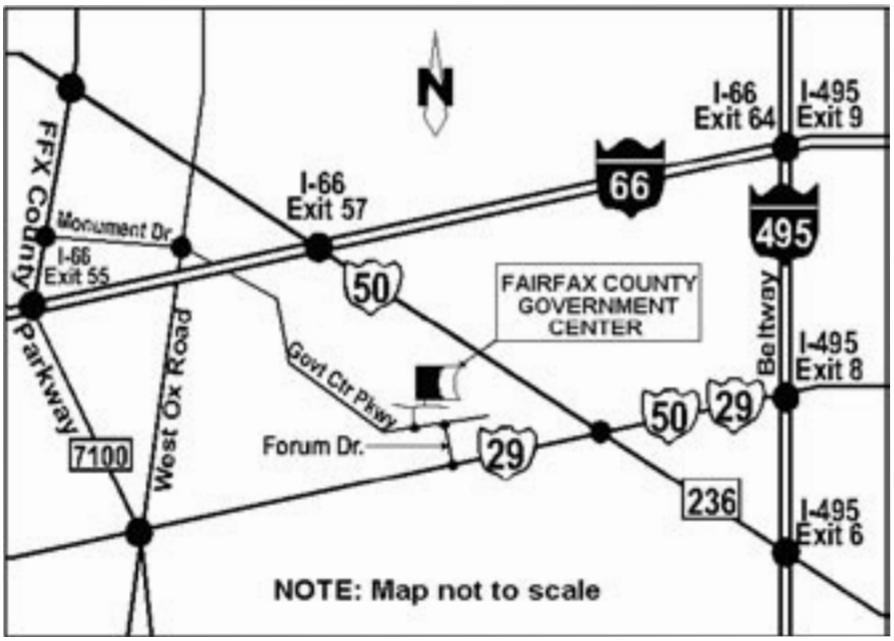

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