Firebird Foundation Incorporated
President's Report
Annual General Meeting
12 October 2009

The year of my fifth and last term as President has been marked by continuous activity in the Firebird Project and by serious pressure on the Foundation's ability to sustain it. By the last quarter of 2008, the numbers had become alarming. We had four releases under support and/or development. Far from having enough funds in the bank or in sight to increase the pool of core developers and testers and spread the load, it looked likely that even the ones we have would be looking for other work by Easter 2009.

When the Treasurer and others of the committee raised the problems in FFMembers, several ideas were circulated. Nothing new happened, but some of our members took up the cause. Sponsorships were renewed and, in one case, increased. A few of our members actively went out and found some new sponsors or became sponsors themselves. A campaign by Carlos Cantu in Brazil brought in a significant number of new members in October and November; and it was a fruitful year for membership renewals.

Two grantees (Philippe Makowski and, more recently, Pavel Cisar) relinquished their grants to lighten the pressure.

So here we are, approaching the end of 2009, alive but diminished, with enough in the budget to see us through for perhaps most of the forthcoming year if current sponsorships continue. Thank you all for that. I'll talk more about the sponsorships later.

Donations and Fund-raising

The Mad Auction at the Firebird conference in Italy, in September 2008, brought in 1650 Euros and the participants at the 2009 Firebird Developer Day in Brazil passed the hat around to benefit our funds by $1250.

Other ad hoc donations have been coming in quite steadily through PayPal, constituting more than 11 per cent of all income for the year up to June.

Sponsorships

Tabulex and Great Lakes Data Systems have continued their Platinum sponsorships, with Tabulex augmenting its contribution handsomely with extra payments to help counter the funding crisis. A new Gold sponsor was Martens & Prahl, while Bas-X, Broadview, DRB Systems and UVData renewed their Gold sponsorships. Since our 2009 close, Communicare has also resumed its Gold sponsorship. IBPhoenix continues to contribute cash in the Gold Band, too, as well as a higher level in the form of core developer grant subsidies and person hours for builds, testing, documentation and releases.

We had a pleasing run of new Silver sponsorships: SMS-Timing, Microcom APS and Adept Software, and QuickEasy continuing theirs, and Bill Oliver bringing his regular stream of personal donations up to the Silver level. Maxys APS and Passfield Data Systems became Bronze sponsors.

Sponsorships accounted for about 65 per cent of income. You have done us proud.

Memberships

About 21 per cent of income came from membership subscriptions. Currently we have 207 members: 96 voting (16 overdue) and 111 associate (19 overdue or unpaid). We have 29 voting members who don't pay membership subscriptions, these are the honorary members and the Platinum and Gold sponsors. To the 16 voting members overdue with annual subscriptions or defaulting on monthly ones, the good news is: you still have time to renew and do some voting!

We can always do with more members, so I would like to remind you that we have Foundation member logos that paid-up members can display on their websites to encourage site visitors to think about becoming a member. You can pick these logos up from the menus on the Foundation's web-pages.

The Committee

There is an old saying that goes "If you want a job done, ask a busy person." Certainly, we have had a predominance of committee members who are also some of the busiest workers in the project team and the past year or so has been almost impossibly busy for some of us.

One of our number, Fabio Codebue, was the organiser of the conference in Italy last year. Although other committee members helped set up the speaker programme, the Foundation itself was not involved in the organisation.

Not surprisingly, the raising of cash has dominated discussions. We have also dealt with some tricky trademark usage issues. The need for the Foundation to get its act together to formulate and publish a policy for trademark usage has been on the Agenda for at least two years. I anticipate that the new committee will try to get some forward movement on that before long and will need to call on the other members to help.

Treasurership

We continue to benefit from the orderly and detailed manner in which Alan McDonald conducts his role as Treasurer. The Annual reports he will table today are very similar to the ones he presents at each committee meeting, budgets and all. It means that, under Alan's tenure, we have a much better view of our finances than we have had in the past.

On behalf of the committee and the Foundation, I want to thank Alan for his great work. I am pleased to note that Alan has agreed to run for another term in the role of Treasurer.

Codeworker Grants

No new allocations were made in the year, and, as I noted earlier, two grant recipients voluntarily vacated their QA allocations to help keep the Foundation afloat. They haven't stopped being the QA Department of the project, though. On behalf of us all, I express appreciation to Philippe and Pavel for their actions. It is a sad irony to look back at my 2008 report where I noted that we had made an extra funding allocation for QA and that we were looking to assign to more regular QA testers if they could be found.

The event that made the reassignment of funds to two of our core developers was a direct effect of the global financial crisis on my own company, IBPhoenix. The Foundation had weathered a previous crisis at the beginning of 2008, when hostile offers were made to our core developers to leave the project and work instead for a commercial company in Russia. The Foundation had short notice to find funds to match the offers. Absent to any other proposal to rescue the project at the time, IBPhoenix stepped up to fill the gap that would enable the three core developers to turn down the hostile offer and stay with the project. So from February 2008, IBPhoenix was heavily subsidising the grants to achieve a level that would keep Alex Peshkov and Vlad Khorsun in their essential roles, with the Foundation funding Dmitry Yemanov's grant entirely.

The continuity of the arrangement depended on the expectation that Firebird-related support and consultancy contracts that provide the basis of IBPhoenix's revenue would continue to grow as they had been doing. As the realities of the credit crunch began to develop and companies began to cut back on costs, so IBPhoenix's revenue was reduced. By the middle of this year it was clear that we could not sustain the subsidy at the level of the previous 18 months and stay in business.

When the bad news was broken to the committee, they decided that the Foundation's only option was to use its own reserves to try to make up the gap in the short term, thus reducing the "time to live" of the project as we know it to a few months at best. It wasn't a solution to anything but the immediate crisis and the members were asked to come up with some alternative ways to improve the medium-term prospects and to work on how to ensure survival and growth in the future.

I have already commented on the various measures that the members have taken to address the short term crisis: reaffirming sponsorship commitments, recruiting new sponsors and members, pumping extra cash into the coffers in the case of one already big sponsor (Tabulex).

Following up on one idea that was surfaced in the members' discussions, Martijn Tonies set out to produce a web-based bulletin intended for distribution to Firebird users on a subscription basis. The idea there was (is) to draw in more financial contributors and make the Foundation more evident to the wider public. Stefan Heymann, who developed the web interface, tells us that the project is ready to roll out but lacks the crucial element - content.

Sixth Firebird International Conference

In September last year, Fabio Codebue and his colleagues staged the sixth International Firebird Conference in Bergamo, Italy. The Foundation was not involved in the organisation but assisted with the selection of papers and the organisation and publication of the programme. I couldn't attend the conference myself but all the feedback was that everyone had a great time. Our Vice-president, Philippe Makowski, gave a comprehensive presentation on behalf of the Foundation and the project, which was well received.

Embarcadero

Embarcadero, the company that bought the Codegear division from Borland, continues to market InterBase as a commercial product. However since that purchase, we have seen signs in blogs and even in a couple of press releases that Embarcadero is already incorporating Firebird support into its tools.

Some of the anti-Firebird flavour of the old Borland era is now being replaced with some level of desire on the part of Embarcadero to embrace Firebird in a more positive light. It makes sense, considering that users of Delphi and other ex-Borland tools still figure in Firebird's developer community. It seems clear, from comments posted in our forums at least, that such a shift would be welcomed by many in our community.

In stepping down from the presidency, I want to thank the committee and the members for their support over the five or so years I have been in office.

Paul Beach, President
10th October 2009