

President's Report for 2016-17

Annual General Meeting

6 March 2017

The Project

The firebird project is going well. After years of hard work, Firebird version 3 was finally released last April. With its new, multi-processor optimized architecture, it promises significantly better performance. With that huge pile of work finally behind them, the team has been able to focus on new features in Firebird 4 and beyond.

Other noteworthy events this year included:

-) Firebird Developers' day in Brazil (July)
-) Release of Firebird 2.5.6 (July)
-) Release of Firebird 3.0.1 (September)
-) Firebird Conference in Prague (October)
-) Release of Firebird 2.5.7 (Feb)
-) Several ADO.Net provider releases (version 5.0 in May, now up to 5.8)
-) New Python Drivers (version 1.7 released in February)
-) New Jaybird (JDBC driver) v3.0 (in beta as of now)

In addition, the team has been working to upgrade their JIRA installation to the latest version, to enable improvements in team communication and progress tracking.

Overall, I'm very pleased with the progress of the firebird project, and the state of Firebird 3 and its tools and documentation.

The Foundation

Unfortunately, the Firebird Foundation isn't faring as well. In a way, we're a victim of Firebird's success. Its stability, and its excellent balance of power and simplicity, make it really easy to just "install it and forget it". For the majority of users, for the great majority of the time, Firebird just works. Most have no idea that they're using Firebird, let alone the value they're getting from it.

In addition, we have the problem of Firebird (and all locally deployed relational database systems) slowly becoming obsolete. Most new software development is being done on the web, creating systems that only need one database engine installed (or none when a cloud database is used). So the number of new systems being deployed with local servers and on-site databases (Firebird's "Niche"), is gradually diminishing.

The effects of these two factors are felt in our funding. In the last year, we lost a long-time Platinum sponsor (who has migrated to a NoSQL database), and one of our Silver sponsors, and we have a large number of members with delinquent dues.

As funding gradually diminishes, so will progress. While I can't foresee a time when Firebird is no longer usable because nobody is left to maintain it, I can foresee a time when feature enhancements stop because the foundation can no longer afford to pay for anything but maintenance.

That might not be a bad thing. Our user base might actually be pretty happy with the current feature set, and its relative simplicity compared to its more feature-ridden competitors. But if there are enough users that really want the additional features being planned for Firebird 4 and beyond, maybe they will come forward with the additional funding needed to get that done.

Final Thoughts

I believe the next big challenge for the Foundation is to determine if enough of our users do want new features and capabilities enough to be willing to pay for their development, and if so, to find a way to reach out to them to raise the necessary funding.

This doesn't have to be determined immediately. With the change we had to make this year to our grant system (switching from U.S. to Australian dollars), our financial situation is stable for now. But to keep our talented (and equally importantly, experienced) developers involved for the long term, we do need to increase grant funding, which means we need to increase fund raising, if we're going to avoid going into "maintenance mode".

On a personal note, I have chosen not to run again for president this year, to leave the office open for a much more worthy candidate: Pavel Cisar. Pavel is an active member of the development team. As the Quality Assurance Coordinator (and the developer of the Firebird Python driver), he has far greater understanding of the project and its needs than I do.

I'm happy to resume my position as Vice President (a.k.a., the guy who postpones meetings if the president isn't available), but I believe the foundation will be better served if it is directed by someone directly involved in the project.

Steven E. Summers, President
5 March 2017