

Launching the national information infrastructure

By Patricia A. Wand

Government task force studies information superhighway

During the past year or so, the term "Internet" seems to have replaced, in the media, the National Research and Education Network or NREN. The latest name the federal government is giving the entity we all envision as the information superhighway is National Information Infrastructure or NII. Keep your eyes peeled for future references everywhere to NII.

The executive summary of "The National Information Infrastructure: Agenda for Action" opens with this forceful, visionary statement:

"All Americans have a stake in the construction of an advanced National Information Infrastructure (NII), a seamless web of communications networks, computers, databases, and consumer electronics that will put vast amounts of information at users' fingertips. Development of the NII can help unleash an information revolution that will change forever the way people live, work, and interact with each other. . . ."

The agenda was issued September 15, 1993, by Ronald H. Brown, Secretary of Commerce and chair of the Information Infrastructure Task Force (IITF), serving on behalf of the Clinton administration. It sets forth the categories of concerns that must be addressed by policy in order for the NII to become an effective information tool.

At the same time that the IITF is addressing policy issues, Secretary Brown will be appointing 25 members of the U.S. Advisory Council on the NII whose charge is to advise the secretary on matters related to the development of NII. NII is defined as "the integration of hardware, software, and skills that will make it easy and affordable to connect people with each other, with computers, and with a vast array of

services and information resources." (President William Clinton, Executive Order: U.S. Advisory Council on the National Information Infrastructure, September 15, 1993.)

The IITF is wasting no time. On September 24, 1993, it held a meeting at the Department of Commerce Auditorium where the private sector was invited to voice concerns and issues to IITF members. As chair of the ACRL Government Relations Committee and on behalf of the ACRL, I attended the meeting, along with over 200 representatives from other library and education associations, educational institutions, software companies, telecommunications companies, information providers, and government agencies.

The goal of the meeting was to bring together all the stakeholders: business, labor, education, libraries, general public, and federal government. Attendees highlighted to the panel the broad range of issues that, not surprisingly, also concern libraries: universal access, information rich/information poor populations, training users, protection of privacy, assuring copyright protection, adequate regulation and enforcement of policies, development of appropriate standards, pricing structures, special needs of the nonprofits, and adequate funding for schools and libraries.

The role of the federal government is that of leader, regulator, and customer. Its role as leader was apparent when Secretary Brown so correctly observed: "Information is the currency of the 21st century." How well we librarians know the truth of that statement!

To submit comments on "The National Information Infrastructure: Agenda for Action," or to request additional copies of this package write: NTIA NII Office, 15th St. and Constitution Ave., Washington, DC 20230; phone: (202) 482-1840; fax: (202) 482-1635; Internet: nii@ntia.doc.gov ■

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