

March 6, 2011

Dear National Secretaries,

Servas is an important and beloved international network, and gives joy and enriches life meaning to thousands who advance friendships and peace. The General Assembly of September 2009 decided on several ways of advancing Servas, in particular Servas Online.

This update covers the Servas Online project since last reported to you in June, 2010. We need your help, support and continued participation in the project. Please consider joining a Steering Committee as outlined below, and let us know. We hope you will say “yes!”

We have been delayed and forced to adjust, to in the absence of support, particularly volunteer work, and without enough resources to pay for contractors. Advice on the project has been helpful. But advice is divergent and requires involvement of experienced and qualified Servas people to make the direction whole and workable.

Lack of both technical volunteers and money has stopped the Servas Online plan developed in May/June, 2010. The project cannot continue in this form.

Thanks to several national secretaries who tried to find expert volunteers. Many who have had to decline help, because of lack of time in their personal lives, continue to send their encouragement.

A hearty thanks to many who came forward or offered to serve later stages of the project, including evaluation when needed (Claudio, John, Jonny, Jean-Yves, Nate, Jen, Penny, Uwe, Leonardo, Michael, Terry, Jerome and Jerome, Jessica, Lindsay, Matteo, Marco, Mario, Arne, Thomas and Thomas, Rodolfo, Harley, Diana, Anna Cristina, and the Dolphin Team again, Mario and Marco, Rita, Uwe and Omer **and others**). All of exco has been attentive and helpful: Penny, Pramod, Mirek, Pablo, Luisa. Some getting this message twice are on several help-lists.

The background below further outlines some practical steps needing support and funding.

#### ServasOnline Steering Committee

- a) At least some national secretaries are needed, or their well-informed and authorized designates for a project Steering Committee. The Steering Committee would decide on the direction for the project, and on related Servas operating procedures and practices; this group would commit to the project, directing and advising on it through the next GA.
- b) We are suggesting that the Steering Committee be formed and choose its Chair by June.
- c) The Committee’s direction on procedures and practices would be forwarded to the next GA as proposed regulations.
- d) If Servas accepts a commercial proposal to replace the unavailable volunteers -- a Servas resource group will also likely be needed, to help translate and coordinate the Steering Committee’s work into action by the contractor.
- e) Below you will see an outline of some Practical and Simple steps which Servas may take in the face of these realities. Even so, some will require more funding and either a volunteer or commercially-hired project manager to act on the advice of a Steering Committee and others.

Gary Sealey  
SI President

## Servas Background

New technical commercial programmes are replacing the expensive software available at the outset of the project. Technical obstacles have thus been reduced. But support and funds to buy the new programmes and services are required. The main challenges now are direction and support.

To ensure success a Servas Steering Committee would help Servas with two other issues.

1) **Reduce complexity:** Existing Online open doors hospitality programmes belong to single, integrated groups like Couchsurfing and Hospitality Club. These are single entities, not dozens or hundreds of groups many with different policies, like Servas which is so complex as to make ServasOnline very difficult, expensive, and unreliable.

Servas International should:

- harmonize policies and procedures
- reduce procedural differences among Servas Groups

2) **Coordinate and support ServasOnline in a reliable way.** For instance: for the past two years an online “application” has been quietly tested by Servas. Hundreds of applicants have used it to apply as hosts or travelers. For some countries such as US Servas stamps sales have increased (the online application is only in English), the application has benefitted, despite some difficulties in the flow of the applications... However we are told elsewhere, many applications are not being reliably processed. Servas still does not have the capacity or central coordination to serve applicants. National Secretaries can arrange for this essential coordination and reliable response either individually or through a Steering Committee. Exco does not have the capacity nor the mandate to promote and process online applications.

### ***Request to national secretaries:***

This background is to help you understand what is needed: can you or a designated delegate, agree to join a project Steering Committee to

- a) review Servas organization procedures and practices
- b) Help prepare procedures and practices to be passed as regulations at the next GA.
- c) Suggest others who can help, as resource persons, perhaps as Servas Germany has done, by carefully reviewing the skills of all hosts?

Below you will see an outline of some Practical and Simple steps which with your help and active leadership could likely go ahead.

## ServasOnline Background

Following the GA decision on Servas Online the choices were to:

1. Create our own ServasOnline software by a Servas technical task group to
2. Adapt Software already developed by some other group like BeWelcome

Another option, of buying software or a license to deliver Servas Online was too costly: at the time, inexpensive software was not available.

The first choice was considered too costly or would take too much volunteer time. Therefore, in May, 2010 we met with BeWelcome volunteer technicians in Italy, offering help to implement ServasOnline. We were glad to get that offer from BeWelcome to adapt BeWelcome.com software created in “Open Source”. Many BeWelcome volunteers had helped Couchsurfing and Hospitality Club become successful.

That crucial SI development-meeting kindly hosted by Mario and Rosetta Burlando cost less than 5000 Euros for the 9 Europeans and 3 North American attendees. It set out technical design directions for adapting the BeWelcome software to be used for Servas Online and it examined linking that software to the existing Dolphin system.

The meeting also committed to maintain and use the Dolphin project (over the past year, Servas use of the Dolphin has tripled, i.e. now, three times the number of Servas groups are using Dolphin). Servas would also maintain the traditional Servas paper-based system as long as it is needed. The proceedings of that meeting and other documents are at:

[http://www.servas.org/siexco/index.php/SI\\_Committees#ServasOnLine](http://www.servas.org/siexco/index.php/SI_Committees#ServasOnLine)

Penny and Uwe also mocked-up of ServasOnline based on the BeWelcome system which you can see at <http://sol.servas.org/> We left the meeting expecting that the project could be completed quickly by volunteers, with the SI Levy supporting essential expenses.

What we found, however, was that the ServasOnline project would take many volunteers many months or, even, years of dedicated effort. Despite a search for volunteers, not enough came forward to implement ServasOnline. BeWelcome and Servas do have many hosts and travelers who are qualified technicians. However most tell us they are simply too busy to give their technical work to Servas.

The Levy funds to support Servas Online arrived slowly. As you know, SI Treasurer reported this week that less than half of the Levy money agreed by the General Assembly actually came forward when promised. After paying for the low-cost meeting reported in May/June we expected more funds, but almost no more arrived to pay for more work.

Without the Levy, Servas does not have enough money in the ServasOnline budget line to hire contractors to substitute for volunteers.

### ***Considering options:***

- Adapting the BeWelcome software, without the volunteer workers, is too costly for us at this time.
- Finishing Dolphin and updating the user interface is being further investigated, but will also cost more than the SI budget includes
- New commercial software has been recently developed or improved (e.g. NING, DNN, which could serve Servas all together (with a common secure data base) or specifically each group according to locally decided ways of securely presenting national host lists online. Getting and using this new commercial service will require funding and coordination and strong direction and support of a Servas Steering Committee.

We cannot afford the concept of ServasOnline agreed at the GA and designed in concept and presented in detail to national secretaries in May/June, 2010.

During the global recession Servas International deficit discussed at the GA continues, even with careful Exco control of expenditures. Informal information suggests that Stamps sales appear to have declined (we will not know the true picture until after this year's Audit). Some may disagree, but we do not want to risk a big debt in these times.

For these reasons, we must reduce the project to something more achievable with diminished resources, such as these following steps.

## **Practical and Simple Interim Steps to ServasOnline**

Please note, with support several of these steps may proceed at the same time, according to priorities and available resources. A Steering Committee plus resource persons would be needed. See variations on these summary steps in the chart of consultation below.

### **1) a) Make Dolphin accessible to Travelers**

- Make Dolphin lists accessible after payment of fee
- passwords assigned individually by national interviewers and fee collected locally
- Interviewed hosts and travelers see all national lists of groups who agree
- host lists sent securely to all travelers (member groups decide to provide secure access)
- requires improved website and simplified presentation
- Steering Committee needed to sort out and harmonize approaches

### **b) Complete the suite of Dolphin programs:**

- Develop Servas Dolphin and Money Dolphin (some benefits available in likely months)
- limited Online presence;
- increase required in SI Budget

### **2) Feature individual Servas groups on Tripping.com (free, improved online presentation, but little or no savings to Servas)**

- member groups continue to set and collect own fee locally, as now
- passwords assigned individually, by national interviewers
- interviewed hosts and travelers see all national list
- new hosts and travelers enter own data
- Tripping is welcoming and helpful to Servas and already serves to present International Hostels, etc.
- Some coordination is needed to take this step, so that the presentation of Servas is not just a jumble.

***3) ServasOnline delivered on commercial software by small commercial developers reporting to a Steering Committee (\$\$\$ -- to be negotiated –use of licensed, low-cost software)***

- Servas to consider charging travelers (and Hosts) pay a standard fee – i.e.: to make rapid progress, i.e. harmonize the dozens of different fees among member groups into one -- or at most, a range of only a few
- password protected, with the password made available on payment of a fee
- subscription fee by PayPal, replacing Stamp Fee (receipt can be used as proof of payment)
- all hosts and travelers in all participating countries are visible to each other
- fully automated (except for traditional Servas qualifying interview); new hosts and travelers enter own data, interviewer has password access to authorize data, issue stamp
- Servas News and events schedules can be carried online
- some commercial costs for maintenance, updates, service
- Steering Committee and project management resource-persons advisory panels essential

***For lack of funds and volunteers we must abandon the option of adapting or developing a unique Servas Online system (takes too much time, requires on-going support and update; not recommended, for these reasons)***

- too expensive; requires more funding than available now
- lengthy time delay and ongoing costs
- difficulty in harmonizing and explaining the wide range of different member group policies and procedures and fees

***Related items***

Website improvements; and a new e-newsletter (with Ally and Terry and six national editors offering to assist).

**Although this comes at the end – it's important -- Servas must either hire or find technical expert volunteers to strengthen the ICT technical support group** served by Uwe working almost alone.

(The servas.org website helped by Renee must be redesigned; hundreds of thousands of "hits" result in many applications of hopeful Servas travelers.)

**February 2011 input on ServasOnline from some Servas national secretaries and key development volunteers**

<b>What</b>	<b>How</b>	<b>Why</b>	<b>Feasible</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Scope</b>	<b>Cost</b>	<b>Who suggested</b>
<b>Direction</b>							
Give Travelers and eventually hosts access to Dolphin or some parts of it	give password protection and let travelers see hosts	benefit travelers		Soon	Member groups on Dolphin who agree		John Gunther
Allow all authorised travellers online access to host lists of all willing countries in a secured manner	Through some third party server like <a href="http://www.watchdog.com">http://www.watchdog.com</a>	Inexpensive, secure		Soon	All groups which agree		Pramod Kumar
Travelers and eventually hosts to access Dolphin or some parts of it	encrypt host lists	benefit travelers		soon	Member groups on Dolphin who agree		Michael Silbert
Travelers and hosts all in Dolphin	put travelers into host Dolphin	possibly help retain travellers improve admin., and help retain travelers		now			Pablo Colangelo, Harley
Give Travelers and eventually hosts access to Dolphin or some parts of it	small group complete dolphin traveler and money dolphin			November?		?	Dolphin team
Platform	Convert Dolphin to a Microsoft Active Platform	Seamless integration with a new Servas Online front page		soon			

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Platform	Convert Dolphin to a Drupal Platform	Many technicians know it as a reliable and quick platform		soon			John Gunter, other programmers in BeWelcome
Front End	Use Tripping as Servas Online front end	Affordable, practical		yes, demo			Tripping, some favourable comments from others
Project Management	RFP -- a manager	reduce uncertainty, risk, get timely and affordable results		ongoing	see draft		No funds for staff contractors to support the Manager.
Steering Committee	Direction and support	policy, consensus		ongoing			France may host meeting; this could prepare Steering Committee