## Incoming PVNET GIS specialist charts new course

By Amy Higgins, Special to the News
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Amid many recent changes to Palos Verdes on the Net, Sonali Tambe, manager of Geographic Information System services for the organization, recently accepted a job with the city of Hermosa Beach. That ended her tenure of four years at PVNET, but her service bears witness to the organization's apprenticeship opportunities.

"[Sonali] getting that job [with Hermosa] is a testament to our internship program," said PVNET Director Ted Vegvari. "People can stay or go, but they receive great training and real experience. Some [interns] come to us with a career path, but most don't. We all make life choices based on our opportunities. Being prepared to take advantage of good opportunities is paramount. For Sonali and many others, our 'technological-candy-store' methodology fit [her needs]."

Tambe originally came to PVNET while looking to return to the workforce after spending a few years caring for her two sons.

"I came to PVNET as an adult intern and worked there for almost a year trying out various career paths," she said. "Ted then offered to have me join the staff, and it worked out well for me at the time. He introduced me to the field of GIS and gave me the option of [working on] the GIS project. It sounded like an exciting field. I am thankful for the opportunity that was given to me."

Tambe also gained experience when she participated in setting up the new GIS system from scratch. "The city of Hermosa Beach has selected the right person for the job. Sonali has exactly what it takes to develop their GIS system from the ground up," Vegvari said.

Tambe's replacement, Blair Harkins, is a Peninsula native whose love of golf led to his interest in GIS. After graduating from Peninsula High, where he played sports, Harkins attended the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign on a partial golf scholarship. There, he received a degree in geography with an emphasis in GIS. "Playing Division I golf at a Big 10 school was a goal for me," he said. "We traveled all over the United States and abroad and played world-renowned courses. It was one of the best experiences of my life.

"GIS really interested me," Harkins continued. "I came back [to the Peninsula] and got in touch with Jean Etter, who pointed me to the [GIS job] opening with PVNET. Ted was really interested in getting the position filled by a Peninsula native, and the job and I seemed like a good match. Picking up where Sonali left off is very exciting. The amount of GIS data that's been developed at PVNET is tremendous, and we're in the process of adding much more to it. I'm very excited about the possibilities and looking forward to leading the GIS internship program."

Vegvari said Harkins has "the right personality for the [GIS] field and for mentoring interns, just like his passion for the Earth and golfing made him well-suited for the study of geography and GIS."

Tambe agreed, saying, "With his degree and GIS training, [Blair] is a great fit for taking on the position at PVNET."

"Blair has an intellectual calmness and confidence that would be an asset to any organization," Etter added.

A brief history

PVNET's GIS program was developed specifically to support the city of Rancho Palos Verdes. When RPV first considered deploying a GIS system, PVNET was selected to help design and implement it.

"PVNET struggles with the fact that the city, in order to enter into a contract with us for services, has to label us a 'vendor,' even though we are a nonprofit [organization] providing a vast array of services to the city and the community." Vegvari said. "In fact, we charge between one-quarter and one-half of the normal market rates, and provide educational opportunities to student interns who learn by being involved in these projects."

Although the city now has a robust GIS server, PVNET loaned the city a network server and the necessary related hardware required to establish the pilot GIS program, in which Tambe was an instrumental part.

"The GIS pilot program is very successful," Vegvari said. "Through our own effort and at our own expense, we have continued to develop the GIS system in advance of specific known needs, and with direction from the city, we develop specific programs that are available to every city staff member's computer on their GIS network via the city's intranet."

He added that PVNET's function is both philanthropic and service oriented. "Our goal is to improve the quality of life in the city by providing much-needed IT tools and technological services, and by improving operations and communication throughout our communities," Vegvari said. "By working together with interns, volunteers and professional staff, we enable the implementation of technology that the city and community could not otherwise afford.

"We provide people, and donate time and equipment. This has enabled the city to provide technological services [that are] on par with those of cities much larger than RPV. Few if any cities in the United States have a facility like PVNET on City Hall premises."

The organization provided an advantage to the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy as well.

According to Tambe, the Land Conservancy, as the open space manager for the city, has benefited from the PVNET GIS system for several projects. "PVNET also has given informal training to PVPLC staff," she said.

The GIS internship program played a major role in making it possible for RPV to convert many original documents — paper-based maps of all kinds — into digital formats and to create new GIS layers, which the city now depends on for its operations. Additionally, the Palos Verdes Peninsula Horsemen's Association has presented PVNET with a project that involves replacing PVPHA's existing 15-year-old, paper-based horse trails guide — which contains 30 maps — with updated trails enhanced with aerial photos.

PVNET's GIS training efforts also caught the eye of the Environmental Systems Research Institute, the world leader in GIS modeling and mapping software and technology. As a result, ESRI offered to PVNET a software grant worth $1.4 million (including 3-D modeling), making the facility one of the most well-equipped GIS training and internship centers in Southern California. This provides an opportunity for learning GIS at no cost through the internship program.

"Having on-the-job experience is so vital," said Etter, who helps students obtain internships at PVNET and other local organizations. "The updated, cutting-edge software and equipment available in the field spreads to so many other areas. Ted has the only facility I've seen in Southern California that allows students to explore technology to this extent."

To learn more about the GIS internship program, visit PVNET's Web site at www.palosverdes.com/annex.