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PRESERVATION

For Zoë Baird, a New Opportunity for Public Service

By AMY HARMON

The invitation was "the kind of thing that makes your eyes glaze over," as one attendee put it — a meeting to discuss the dispensation of Internet addresses.

But perhaps because they scented resources or perhaps because the summons came from Zoë Baird, representatives of several nonprofit groups gathered in Washington on Thursday to hear why they should care that the Internet's first governing body was being formed without their input.

The gathering marked the beginning of a new crusade for Ms. Baird, President Clinton's onetime nominee for Attorney General, who has served as the president of the Markle Foundation the last year and a half. Though she has long advocated public representation in decisions about technology, Ms. Baird is now starting to act — and to spend a lot of money in the process.

Today, the New York-based Markle Foundation will announce plans to give away \$100 million — more than half of its \$187 million endowment — over the next three to five years to carve out a place for the public good amid the frenzied commercialization of the Internet. The idea is to make a difference in areas from governmental policy to health care to children's media before it is too late.

"We've concluded that this is a critical time to build things that benefit the public into the development of communications media," Ms. Baird said. "The forces that are driving the growth of all this won't do that. We have to consciously attend to making it happen."

The move is significant both because of the scope of the spending and the singularity of the goal. Markle plans to give away

its assets at least twice as fast as the 5 percent required by law. The average for the nation's foundations is only slightly more than the minimum.

"They're eroding their assets, and they're doing it on purpose," said Sara Engelhardt, president of the Foundation Center, a New York-based group that tracks foundation giving. "Their interest in technology has obviously led them to believe that this is a pivotal moment and spending now is as important as investing and having more money in the future."

Heading a foundation that strives for a public role in the Internet.

In another departure from conventional grant-giving, the donations will not be limited to nonprofit groups. Markle's first major commitment is to a joint venture with Oxygen Media, an Internet start-up working to develop women's programming across different media platforms. Markle and Oxygen will spend a combined \$8.5 million the next three years to conduct research on the information needs of women. Markle has pledged an additional \$1 million to finance programming based on the study's findings.

Markle's new mission also reflects a turning point for Ms. Baird, who has kept a relatively low profile since 1993, when the Clinton Administration withdrew her nomination to serve as the nation's first

female Attorney General. Ms. Baird faced a storm of criticism over having hired illegal immigrants to take care of her children and her failure to make Social Security payments for them.

But she has not been resting. After returning to her job as corporate counsel for Aetna Inc., Ms. Baird spent a year at Yale Law School as a visiting scholar before joining Markle in January 1998. She has served for six years on the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, and sits on the boards of several nonprofit organizations.

Despite all this involvement by Ms. Baird, some associates say they sensed that she was casting about for a more meaningful challenge. Jimmy Carter, who brought Ms. Baird into the White House as his associate counsel and whose Carter Center is now receiving a Markle grant, says he remembers seeing Ms. Baird at the Clinton inaugural gala shortly after her nomination was withdrawn.

"She was sober and very disappointed but was determined to find another place to utilize her talents," Mr. Carter said. "I don't think she was ever quite satisfied with being a lawyer that would research land titles and things like that. I think she saw herself doing great things."

Perhaps still bearing the scars of that intense public scrutiny, Ms. Baird, 47, was guarded and careful to be accompanied by Markle's public relations specialist in several interviews last week. On a hot afternoon, she wore a black suit and stockings, softened by a pink scarf loosely tied around her neck. She declined to say where she lives in Connecticut or much about her personal life.

But once she started to speak about the urgency of the task at hand, it was hard to mistake the light in Ms. Baird's eyes for anything but passion for her cause.



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

As president of the Markle Foundation, Zoë Baird has shifted its focus.

The foundation, which was established in 1927 by John Markle and Mary R. Markle, whose families made their fortunes in coal mining and finance, has a broad goal of promoting "the advancement and diffusion of knowledge" and the "general good of mankind." Over the years, its focus has ranged from medical research to the role of mass communications in a democratic society.

The decision to dedicate Markle's resources to information technology — the foundation is perhaps best known for seeding "Sesame Street" in its early days, and has tended to focus on more traditional media grants — emerged from many months of consultation and research.

At a time the Internet industry is almost entirely preoccupied with its own growth and the Clinton Administration has for the most part seen fit to leave well enough alone, "I was really struck by how little public discussion there is in the field," Ms. Baird said. "I think people need to see a way for themselves to be influential and to speak for the public interest, and I hope we can help them find paths to do that."

To Stephen M. Case, chief executive of America Online, which is working with Markle for a second year on an effort to provide in-depth election information over the Internet, Ms. Baird's willingness to work with the for-profit sector will be key to determining Markle's effectiveness.

"The notion of a private-public partnership is very critical," said Mr. Case, who invited Ms. Baird to speak at his home recently on the subject. "It's clear that Markle got it; they've recognized that the Internet is a social force, and they're figuring out where nonprofits, governments and companies can work together in new ways."

Although Ms. Baird's business experience is rooted in bigger, more traditional companies, staff members say she is already beginning to run Markle more like an Internet company, distributing authority in a decentralized fashion among the 20-person staff.

Still, it seems some of the attributes that qualified her to be nominated for Attorney General apply to her role as foundation president, too.

"Being with her is part cross-examination, part enthusiasm and willingness to think outside the box," said Kim Spencer, executive director of Internews, a Markle grantee. He credits Ms. Baird with pushing his organization to come up with new ways of generating revenue. "But you can always see the lawyer in her."