

NAHMA Analysis

News and Analysis of Breaking Issues in Affordable Housing



National Affordable Housing Management Association
526 King Street, Suite 511- Alexandria, Virginia 22314 - 703-683-8630 - FAX 703-683-8634 -
www.NAHMA.org - E-Mail George.Caruso@NAHMA.org or Chris.Lord@NAHMA.org - all rights reserved

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TRACS - Sprint Mail Replacement April 20, 2001

HUD issued the following notice on Sprint Mail Friday afternoon. Because of its impact on everyone's operations we have reproduced it in full below, our analysis and spin follows the announcement.

HUD' s Approach to SprintMail Replacement

As most members of the Multifamily Housing Industry know by now, Sprint is discontinuing their SprintMail product offering effective January 1, 2002. This decision was announced to HUD after the FY 2001 budgets were set, and none of the departments affected by this news had funds budgeted to replace SprintMail this fiscal year. The move to migrate TRACS to the Internet was planned, but unfunded for FY 2001.

After a series of meetings among Housing, the TRACS Team, other Departmental representatives, and Sprint, the following course was decided to assure continuity of the data communications critical to the TRACS operation. HUD will concurrently follow both a short-range and a long-range strategy. The short-range strategy effectively removes the 12/31/2001 drop dead date. The long-range strategy pursues the Internet solution with a target implementation in 2002 - totally contingent upon funding.

An Industry meeting is scheduled for May 3 and May 4, 2001 to discuss requirements and planning for the SprintMail replacement. The session on May 3rd is a general session in which the Industry will participate in defining performance and interface requirements. May 4th is a technical session for TRACS, the HUD Internet infrastructure management, and the Industry software developers to collaborate on establishing the data communications standards for the short-range and long-range solutions.

The Short-Range Solution:

HUD will contract with Sprint to provide a replacement E-mail service that will be as transparent as possible for the users, but there will, inevitably, be some changes required, and some that the Industry may want to embrace. 56KB modems will be supported, Internet email characteristics will be embedded in the new system, and some current SprintMail users may need to upgrade their systems to accommodate the software required by the new environment. Sprint will provide, through HUD, a toll-free dial up number. This will essentially

be the access mechanism for a private network supported by HUD. Owner/agents, service bureaus, and contract administrators may use this network to exchange data with each other as well as TRACS. There will be a new TRACS Id assigned, but it will follow the same convention as the current TRACS Id; however, it will be modified slightly to identify the transmission as a Sprint Email transmission and not a SprintMail transmission. Existing ids will be scrubbed to eliminate duplicate assignments and inactive users.

TRACS will support Sprint Email with Release 201B. The objective is to have the Industry deploy one software release during the remainder of calendar 2001. SprintMail will not be supported by Release 201B. Release 201B now looks like a July or August rollout.

The Long-Range Solution:

The long range Internet solution is consistent with the approach that TRACS and the Industry have been collaborating on for some time now, with an additional element. TRACS is moving toward a March/April Internet only implementation using XML. The current intention is to change no business rules in either Tenant or Voucher, but reengineer the MAT around the capabilities of XML. The architecture of the Internet solution will be, as discussed before, a solution whereby all users transmit to HUD and HUD will distribute the data to the designated addressee.

George's Spin - This gets us started down the road of getting a replacement in place for Sprint Mail. As soon as we have details on the location of the Industry Meeting we will share those with you. NAHMA will be there, as will most if not all of the major software vendors.

The announcement does raise questions which we will work on getting clarified before the meeting. Going at this problem on a two track basis where both dial in and direct high speed internet access are available is the right approach, particularly since some owners and CA's have already spent a lot of money upgrading their systems with just that approach in mind. It appears that the dial up FTP submission method will only last through next spring with fully internet based submissions after that.

The initial speculation on the new system is that it will require at the minimum a Windows 95/98 platform with v90 compatible modems and a current version of Internet Explorer or Netscape Navigator. We understand that they are trying to have broadband internet access available early on. We will confirm the platform details in the coming week.

The early indications from the software suppliers we spoke with yesterday are that the XML platform is the way to go and will address a lot of issues that give us problems. Several suppliers have new and upgraded products either in the pipeline or in beta testing that already support XML. As this moves forward we will keep you posted.