

Gofast.net lines up Internet incubator

By Drew DeSilver

Staff reporter

Like a lot of Internet-oriented businesses, Berkana Productions exists more in cyberspace than in physical space.

The three co-owners of the 16-month-old company, which designs World Wide Web pages and does Web training and consulting, work out of their individual homes and swap data over the Net; when clients want to visit the company, they use Kate Wolfe-Jenson's apartment in downtown St. Paul.

But often, Wolfe-Jenson said, her apartment just isn't appropriate or convenient for business meetings. "I do a lot of saying 'Oh, that's OK, I'll meet you at your place,' " she said. "It would be nice to have access to a conference room."

Soon, she may get her wish. Gofast.net Inc., a St. Paul-based provider of high-speed Internet connections, is trying to put together the Twin Cities' first small-business incubator aimed specifically at Internet-related companies. And

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Berkana is interested in being one of the first tenants.

The Internet incubator would be housed in downtown St. Paul's Lowertown district, which includes Galtier Plaza, Mears Park and a number of old warehouses. The incubator could be up and running within a few months, said gofast.net partner and co-founder Mike O'Connor.

Gofast.net is looking for about 1,100 square feet for itself, O'Connor said, as well as options to lease another 7,500 square feet for incubator tenants.

Gofast.net is looking to move because its operations have just about burst their current quarters — the basement of O'Connor's St. Anthony Park home.

"We are going to outgrow very soon the capability of US West to pull wire out to my house," said O'Connor, a frequent critic of the local Bell company.

In Lowertown, however, gofast.net will be able to hook into US West's high-capacity fiber-optic line that loops through downtown St. Paul up to the Capitol complex. "It's sort of like there's an underground river, and we're drilling a well to bring some of the water up to the surface," O'Connor said.

Lack of bandwidth often is the single biggest factor inhibiting the growth of small

Internet-based companies, said Dennis Fazio, president of MRNet Internet Services.

The planned incubator would house Internet-related companies that are too big for their founders' garages or basements, but not yet big enough to lease their own offices.

In the incubator's first development phase, estimated to cost \$50,000 to \$100,000, O'Connor said gofast.net and two to four small firms will move into the site. Gofast.net plans to lease about twice as much space as the handful of firms will need.

Then — "after we have something to show people" — the incubator will recruit more tenants, leasing additional space as needed, O'Connor said. He estimated the second, expansion phase will cost about \$250,000. ■