Standards

by Art Smith

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I've just returned home from the September meeting of the MUMPS Development Committee (MDC), held in Chicago. As usual, it was both a lot of fun and a lot of work. It was fun to see all these friends who meet just two or three times a year and catch up with each other's lives. It was also fun to knuckle down to the business of crafting a standard.

Much of the work that goes into one of these meetings occurs well before the meeting itself. Not only must the hotel rooms, transportation, meeting facilities, etc., be arranged well in advance, but the proposals to be discussed must also be prepared. Documents to be discussed at the meeting must be in members' hands early enough to allow them a chance to read them carefully. The MDC Secretary gathers these documents and sends them out as a single mailing about one month before the meeting.

This time there were 386 pages in the "pre-meeting mailing." There is also a "post-meeting mailing." It is usually a good idea to have the previous "post" at any given meeting since it often has the minutes and handouts from the previous session. In this case it was 236 pages. There are also the handouts that appear on the back table during the meeting, an additional 47 pages this time. All told, over 650 pages of material.

A bit over half of these pages are "technical proposals." These contain suggested changes or additions to the MUMPS standards maintained by the MDC. These documents move through the MDC in a series of votes. A document can only move up (or down) one notch at any meeting. This process helps to ensure due process and lessen the likelihood of mistakes arising from hasty decisions.

The first vote for many documents is a vote by one of the four subcommittees of the MDC to establish whether or not they think the proposal is worthy of consideration at all. If a simple majority of the subcommittee votes to discuss a proposal, it becomes a "Subcommittee Type C" document. If the proposal was requested by a subcommittee or task group, or if a task group accepts it directly and discusses it, it may gain an "automatic" Type C status.

Once at a Type C status, a document becomes eligible for consideration as a "Subcommittee Type B" proposal. This indicates that the majority of the subcommittee endorses the *idea* of the proposal, though may not agree with all of its details. Many proposals remain at a Type B status through several iterations as the details are adjusted to the subcommittee's satisfaction. Smaller groups, called Task

Groups and Working Groups, typically work on these documents. These smaller bodies have a narrower focus of attention and (presumably) higher concentration of expertise.

Eventually, the subcommittee may endorse a proposal, as correctly representing the desired change or addition. This requires as least two thirds of the subcommittee to vote in favor of the proposal. Such a proposal is at a "Subcommittee Type A" status and is eligible to come before the full MDC at the next meeting.

Proposals that have made it through a subcommittee consideration and are approved by a two thirds majority vote of the full MDC become "MDC Type A" proposals and are therefore included in the next MDC/ANSI standard.

At any given moment, there are a number of proposals at each status. At the beginning of this meeting, for instance, there were at least 17 documents at a Subcommittee "C" status, 29 documents at a Subcommittee "B" status, 11 documents at a Subcommittee "A" status and 65 documents at an MDC "A" status. How, then, is a final standard prepared?

At some point, the MDC decides

that it is time to establish a new standard. That standard is the previous standard as modified by all of the documents that are then at an MDC Type A status. The guidelines of the American National Standards Institute (ANSI), for which the MDC is an accredited standards development organization (SDO), state that SDOs should review their standards every five years. The canvass method, by which ANSI determines if the standard meets with consensus approval, generally takes at least two years. The last standard, approved by ANSI in late 1995, had its MDC cutoff date in mid 1993. If the next standard (nicknamed the "Millennium Standard") is to appear in 2000 or 2001, then it needs to be wrapped up in the not-too-distant-future.

At this meeting of the MDC, it was announced that the next standard's cutoff date will be the September 1998 meeting of the MDC. This doesn't leave very many chances for votes, so this announcement definitely got people scrambling. The next couple of meetings of the MDC should be very busy! They will doubtless include some heated hallway discussions and strategic applications of *Robert's Rules of Order* as proposal sponsors strive to get their "pet project" in under the wire.

So, the clock is ticking, and the pressure is on—the questing spirit has heated up once again! Look for more information about what will be in the next standard in future editions of this column, as well as information about how you can participate in the canvassing of the Millennium Standard. As always, if you have particular questions, you can drop me a line at: Emergent@sockets.net. Tally ho!

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MTA NOTEBOOK

Volunteers Needed for MTA Web Site

MTA needs web-savvy, imaginative but responsible and responsive volunteers to help with our growing web site. Can you lend a few or more hours—now and then, or on a regular basis? Send us an email and we'll talk!

Nominations Open for 1998 Board of Directors

The following two-year positions are open for the 1998 Board of Directors:

> Chair
> Executive Director
> Two At-Large Seats

MTA members may nominate any member in good standing, including themselves. The deadline is March 17, 1998. See page 27 for more details.