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UB supercomputer not getting enough power

Amount of electricity needed to run the machine was underestimated

By FRED O. WILLIAMS
News Business Reporter
8/23/2005



Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News file photo
Martins Innus, research assistant at UB's Center for Computational Research, checks the supercomputer network.

They name their supercomputers after rock stars at the University at Buffalo. But the newest machine, called U2, isn't playing at full volume.

A shortage of electricity at UB's Center for Computational Research has left the new machine, one of the world's most powerful computers, running at only 60 percent of its capacity, administrators confirmed Monday.

The \$2.3 million computer was delivered in April and announced by the university and by supplier Dell in July. The addition of the federally funded computer was said to nearly double UB's number-crunching power.

However, technicians haven't been able to fully start the machine without causing power outages at the computer center at UB's North

Campus in Amherst.

"We don't have enough power at the moment to run all of the machine," center director Russ Miller said.

U2 is a "cluster" computer, made up of hundreds of servers harnessed to work together. It ranks among the world's 40 fastest computers, Dell has said. The Dell machine has 1,668 processors, the mathematical workhorses of the computer, of which 1,008 are available for use.

Miller said that increasing electrical power to the center should be a relatively minor task compared to the cost of the machine and its ability to drive scientific projects. He said he didn't know the reason for the power shortage and referred questions to UB administrators.

The shortage is the result of an initial underestimation of the power needed to run the machine, a university spokeswoman said.

"I'm pushing to have this on line as soon as possible," said a statement from Bruce Holm, director of the state Center of Excellence in Bioinformatics and Life Sciences, which oversees the supercomputer center. His statement was relayed through a university spokeswoman.

The computational research center supports studies in earthquake safety, groundwater pollution and other projects that involve computation-intensive modeling, as well as bioinformatics.

The new cluster will enable scientists to take on larger projects and to obtain results faster, the university said in announcing the machine last month. The cluster includes over 800 Dell

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servers, each containing two Intel processors. The system also includes high-speed networks to connect the machines, plus data storage equipment.

Officials are considering moving part or all of the supercomputer center to the bioinformatics center's new building, which is under construction near downtown Buffalo. However, the possibility of a move isn't delaying an increase in power to the supercomputer center's location in Norton Hall, spokeswoman Ellen Goldbaum said.

Although lacking some punch, U2 has been able to handle projects, including the rendering of graphics for an animated series produced by a Buffalo company for MTV2. The scenes produced by IBC Digital feature animated characters from video games. The supercomputer center contracts with local companies for computer time as part of its mission to support the regional economy.

The UB center's older "Joplin" cluster is ranked at number 200 on the list of the world's fastest computers maintained by Top500.org. Installed in 2002, its 600 processors give it a calculating speed of 2 trillion operations per second, according to the listing.

The new machine at UB should be able to reach peak of 10 trillion operations per second, the university has said. It won't qualify for a place on the Top500 list, however, until it is fully running and tests have confirmed its speed, Miller said.

Dell referred questions about the installation of the new computer to UB. The Austin, Texas-based company has met recently with UB officials and is discussing expanding its role with the university, Holm said.

e-mail: fwilliams@buffnews.com

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