ICANN | Opportunities in the Next Evolution of the Domain Name System

April 9 2025 - Civic Hall NYC

Got it! Here's a **refined speaker-by-speaker summary** that's midway between the fully structured version and the more fluid conversational one. It retains clarity and flow while keeping the dialogue tone grounded and direct:

Speaker-by-Speaker Summary – ICANN: Opportunities in the Next Evolution of the Domain Name System

April 9, 2025 – Civic Hall, New York City

Joe Catapano – Director for Stakeholder Engagement, North America (ICANN)

Joe opened the event by welcoming the audience and explaining ICANN's role in managing the Domain Name System (DNS), which includes both domain names and IP addresses. His focus was on **top-level domain names (TLDs)**—the part of a domain that comes after the last dot (e.g., .com, .org, .nyc).

He traced the history of TLDs from the original "legacy" ones to the 2012 expansion that introduced over 1200 new generic top-level domains (gTLDs), including branded (.bmw, .apple), geographic (.nyc), and **internationalized domain names (IDNs)** in scripts like Arabic and Chinese.

Joe emphasized the upcoming **Next Round of the gTLD Program**, where new applicants will be able to apply for and operate their own TLDs. He described this as a major **branding and identity opportunity** for businesses, nonprofits, and communities. However, he also stressed the responsibilities involved: applicants must operate a registry, which involves managing the TLD's infrastructure, or outsourcing it to a **Registry Service Provider**.

He explained that applying is significantly more complex than simply registering a domain, and the **evaluation fee alone is expected to be $227,000**. To address cost barriers and encourage broader participation, Joe introduced the **Applicant Support Program (ASP)** and handed the floor to Ken Herman.

Ken Herman – ICANN Community Member, Non-Commercial Stakeholder Group

Ken outlined the purpose and structure of the **Applicant Support Program**, designed to make applying for a gTLD more accessible to:

- Nonprofits
- NGOs
- Indigenous and tribal communities
- Micro and small businesses (if aligned with social enterprise goals)

To qualify, applicants must demonstrate:

- Operational and financial capability
- Commitment to public responsibility
- Financial need
- Eligibility in at least one of the target categories

Successful applicants receive:

- A **substantial fee reduction** (down to $75K–$85K)
- **Bid credit** advantages if multiple applicants want the same TLD
- **Reduced registry provider costs**
- **Non-financial support**, including legal, technical, and application assistance

Ken emphasized that while the gTLD application process doesn't open until **April 2026**, the **support application window is open now until November 2025**, with a rolling admissions model (i.e., first come, first served until funds run out).

Audience Q&A

Participant 1 shared their experience running an eCommerce site on .nyc—a domain limited to NYC residents. Joe confirmed this kind of geographic restriction is allowed and cited .nyc as a strong use case.

Participant 3 asked whether projects under the umbrella of another nonprofit (i.e., fiscally sponsored) are eligible for ASP. Ken clarified that yes, they can apply—**as long as the parent entity is disclosed** and is not a large commercial organization.

When asked what **control a registry operator** has over their TLD, Joe explained that while operators can set some terms (e.g., eligibility for domain registration), they're **bound by contractual agreements with ICANN**. Ken added that registry operators can't act with complete autonomy—rules around fairness and non-discrimination still apply.

A question followed about whether operators can **auction valuable domain names** under their TLDs. Ken confirmed that's possible, within reason, but the initial application doesn't need to include a detailed business plan. There's flexibility after approval, as long as contractual compliance is maintained.

There was interest in the **sealed-bid auction process** for resolving cases where multiple applicants want the same TLD. Ken noted that ASP participants get a **discount or "bid credit"** to help level the playing field, especially against large competitors.

Joly MacFie asked whether backend operators still need to go through full due diligence for each applicant. Joe and Ken confirmed that in the current round, **a backend provider can be pre-approved once and serve multiple applications**, making the process more efficient.

Joly also pointed attendees to **CircleID's video series "Beyond WHOIS"** by Steve Crocker for historical insight into the 2012 round.

Regarding whether ASP covers the cost of becoming an accredited backend provider, Ken said he wasn't certain but believed **those costs are generally not covered**.

Participant 8 asked for nonprofit success stories from the first round. Ken cited examples like .kids, .giving, .ngo, and .ong, though he noted few nonprofits succeeded due to high cost—something the ASP now hopes to remedy.

There was a broader question about how **ICANN resolves open policy issues**. Joe and Ken pointed to the **Applicant Guidebook**, which is still under public comment and expected to be finalized in **December 2025**. Both emphasized that policy is decided through a **multistakeholder consensus process**, not by top-down directives.

Another question addressed concerns around **price gouging or exclusivity** for domains. Ken explained that ICANN's **Compliance Department** enforces the registry agreements, though the speed of enforcement varies.

On **lessons from the 2012 round**, Joe pointed to the creation of the ASP as a major improvement. Ken added that previous controversies—such as over **"closed generics"** (e.g., allowing a company to control all domains under .book)—have now been addressed, and **closed generics will not be allowed** in this round, except for verified brand TLDs.

Closing – Joe Catapano

Joe wrapped up by encouraging attendees to:

- Apply early for ASP if eligible
- Review the draft **Applicant Guidebook**
- Sign up for ICANN's **regional mailing list** for updates and events

He offered his support to help connect interested parties with the right ICANN teams or community members and provided the key contact: **globalsupport@icann.org**

He closed by thanking the audience and inviting further discussion over refreshments.