The Bitcoin Foundation Wants A Comeback, But Can it Be Saved?

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Once one of the most well-known public advocates for bitcoin, the Bitcoin Foundation has faced a long series of obstacles in its bid to remain relevant to the technology's community.

Thus far this year, the industry's oldest trade organization has moved to strike a conciliatory tone with bitcoin's volunteer development team, capitalize on a potentially life-saving infusion of cash and move forward on a plan of action with new board members.

But, that doesn't mean every member of the bitcoin community is on board.

An email sent from the Bitcoin Foundation executive director Bruce Fenton that pitched a group of Bitcoin Core members to take a seat on the board of directors and subsequently leaked on social media has been met with skepticism bordering on derision.

The Bitcoin Foundation has long attracted criticism from bitcoin community members over everything from issues with the handling of donations to law enforcement issues with those who once formerly represented it, two of which are now incarcerated.

Late last year, it was finally revealed that the group was running low on funds after maintaining a high burn rate.

In interview, Core contributor Peter Todd offered his take on why the reaction to the email has been so negative from some members of the bitcoin community.

Todd told CoinDesk:

> *"I think they wanted to state what they're aims were. Unfortunately, I don't think they can represent Bitcoin Core anymore. It hasn't been an organization that people have wanted to be associated with and I personally would like to distance myself from it."*

No stranger to controversy, Todd played an active role in jumpstarting the conversation by tweeting a link to the email (now since deleted), followed by another message advocating for the Bitcoin Foundation to start "fresh under a different name".

The email in question was addressed to members of the Bitcoin Core development team, its largely volunteer development organization, and included a proposal that a "qualified member" of the development community serve as a board member. Further, the email proposed that a committee chair or chief of development be appointed by Fenton.

Fenton wrote:

> *"We hope for Core Devs to consider the foundation an asset that belongs to you just as much as us or anyone else. We've fixed much of what needed fixing and would welcome your help to make this the most effective benefit to bitcoin it can be."*

Recent interviews suggest that this approach fits into the broader objectives the organization is seeking.

New directions

During an interview with CoinDesk last week, Fenton talked about his hopes for the Foundation's future direction following on recent funding successes.

Members of its board, including Fenton, BTCC CEO Bobby Lee, board chair and Blockchain Capital managing director Brock Pierce, each donated $10,000 to keep the foundation afloat this year. In addition, a surprise donation of bitcoin worth $65,000 was also made by a mysterious mining entity.

Fenton said that the collective funds will be used to fuel the organization's education and outreach efforts, as well as a renewed focus on developers by way of its DevCore event series.

Fenton said he'd like to help "bridge the gap" for companies facing talent shortages as it relates to bitcoin and blockchain-related skills. He said this process would begin with dialogue with corporations to see what specific skills are in demand, which would then shape a curriculum.

Yet, perhaps the single largest obstacle facing the Bitcoin Foundation has to do with how the board itself is formed, where each of its approximately 1,500 members get a vote.

Last year, former Bitcoin Foundation board members Jim Harper and Olivier Janssens resigned after they each cast a vote to disband the organization. The runners-up from the previous election were then appointed in their place.

Going forward, Fenton said he'd like to see the Foundation embrace a more "conventional structure".

Fenton said:

> *"If you look at organizations around the world, there isn't a correlation between detailed minutes and complicated election processes. In fact, it's probably quite the opposite."*

As to what that structure might look like in practical terms, Fenton acknowledged more work discussion was needed.

"We're not really sure what we're going to do with elections right now," he said.

From the outside looking in

At least one former stakeholder in the Foundation says the group would benefit from more active engagement.

After leaving the organization last year, former board member Jim Harper has returned full-time to his work at the Cato Institute. In conversation with CoinDesk, he said that the Foundation needs a stronger sense of direction, an actively engaged board and a stronger reputation.

But on whether the group could actually achieve this, Harper was less certain.

"The Foundation has enough baggage that I think it's time for something else," he said.

Fenton defended the group's recent actions, saying that the Foundation has moved to address the issues that led to problems in the past.

He concluded:

> *"If you step back and look at it fairly, this is a group of about a dozen people who put in their own money and do what they can."*