Board Asks RIM Founder To Stay As CEO

Rob Gillies, Associated Press

TORONTO (AP) — Research In Motion Ltd. co-founder Mike Lazaridis said Thursday as he prepared to leave the company for good that the board had asked him to reconsider his decision to step down as co-CEO.

Lazaridis and Jim Balsillie stepped down in January 2012 after several quarters of disappointing results. Lazaridis said he stayed on as vice chairman and a board director to help new CEO Thorsten Heins and his team with the launch of the BlackBerry 10 smartphones, an update considered crucial to the company's future. With that underway, Lazaridis, 52, plans to leave the company on May 1.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Lazaridis said the board wanted both him and Balsillie to stay, but Lazaridis decided "it was the right time" to leave.

"I was asked to reconsider my decision to give up the CEO post, but I promised the board I would assist Thorsten and his team in the completion and development of BB10," he said. "Now with the launch of BB10, I believe I fulfilled my commitment to the board and told them it is now time to move on to my new adventure."

Lazaridis started a new venture capital fund last week and is also a major philanthropist.

Lazaridis said he has no plans to sell his significant interest in RIM. According to FactSet, Lazaridis is RIM's second biggest shareholder with a 5.7 percent stake.

Lazaridis helped turn the email smartphone into a ubiquitous device that many could not live without, but U.S. users moved on to flashier touch-screen phones such as Apple's iPhone and various competing models that run Google's Android software. RIM's modern operating system, BlackBerry 10, faced numerous delays before launching Jan. 31, starting in the U.K. A U.S. launch was further delayed until last week.

Heins, formerly RIM's chief operating officer, took over as CEO and has spent the past year cutting costs and steering RIM toward the launch of new BlackBerry 10 phones. The Waterloo, Ontario-based company said Thursday that it sold about 1 million phones running its new BlackBerry 10 system, more than analysts had expected. It also surprised Wall Street by returning to profitability in the most recent quarter.

Lazaridis said Heins has done an excellent job completing the BlackBerry 10 system and launching it around the world.

"I'm very proud of what we built at RIM together," he said. "I believe I'm leaving the company in good hands, and I remain one of its largest shareholders and I also

remain a huge fan of BlackBerry."

Heins paid tribute to Lazaridis at the start of a conference call on Thursday to discuss RIM's latest financial report. He said Lazaridis revolutionized the mobile communications industry when he invented the BlackBerry. Lazaridis dropped out of the electrical engineering school of the University of Waterloo to start RIM in 1984.

He is widely recognized as one of Canada's greatest innovators. He and Balsillie have long been celebrated as Canadian heroes, even appearing in the country's citizenship guide for new immigrants as models of success. Lazaridis, a Turkish-born Greek immigrant, moved to Canada as a kid in 1966.

"On a personal level I'm grateful to Mike for his help, guidance and advice during my first 15 months as CEO of BlackBerry, and I wish him all the best," Heins said.

Lazaridis and RIM co-founder Doug Fregin announced last week that they've started a $100 million venture capital fund called Quantum Valley Investments. It will be focused on the power of quantum computing. He has long been interested in physics and has donated more than $270 million to the Waterloo area, including $150 million to the Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics, which he founded in 2000 and which has attracted the involvement of such giants of physics as Stephen Hawking.

Lazaridis also donated money to the University of Waterloo's Institute for Quantum Computing and to the Mike and Ophelia Lazaridis Quantum-Nano Centre.

"There is a lot to do," he said. "We've had a lot of chapters in BlackBerry. This is my next book. It's very exciting."

Lazaridis' stake in RIM was worth more than $3 billion at its peak in 2008, according to Forbes magazine, but the value has fallen to about $440 million amid the company's declining stock price.

He is on the verge of completing a 26,000-square-foot mansion on the shores of Lake Huron. Construction began in 2006.

"It's going great," he said. "It is accepting furniture. We hope to move soon."

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