

# O'Brien: Local tech candidates focus friends on state, local issues

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I didn't know much about Josh Becker when an acquaintance called a few weeks ago and invited me to a fundraiser for the man who bills himself as the "innovation Democrat." I couldn't go, but I was surprised and impressed by the list of people scheduled to attend, which was hosted by Zynga CEO Mark Pincus and included such notables as LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman.

"This guy has really gotten this community involved," said Gary Kremen, founder of [Match.com](http://Match.com) and now chairman of Clean Power Finance, when he was telling me about the event. "He's amazing. You've really got to meet him."

In this case, "community" refers to Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and venture capitalists who have traditionally dismissed state and local politics. While I've found these folks to be passionate about political and social issues, they're often big-picture causes like malaria prevention or famine relief in Africa.

While those are worthy, we've got plenty of trouble right here. California is currently falling into a financial sea thanks to a dysfunctional state Legislature. Local governments around the Bay Area are also facing budget crises.

So we could use a lot more of the innovative thinking that created the Valley — as well as its money — to help the Bay Area and California at a time of dire need. The good news is that Becker's campaign — along with that of former Facebook executive Chris Kelly, who is running in the Democratic primary for state attorney general — seems to have galvanized many of those in the innovation community to get involved with state and local politics, often for the first time.

That's no easy feat. Despite the relatively short distance, the gulf between Sacramento, with its often parochial and byzantine politics, and Silicon Valley, which sees itself as part of a global marketplace, is enormous. According to recent campaign finance records assembled by [MAPlight.org](http://MAPlight.org), a non-profit that tracks money and politics, people who work in computer-related industries donated about \$1.06 million to state legislative races over the last two years, not quite enough to crack the top 10 interest groups. That's astonishing for one of the state's most important industries.

When I met Becker for coffee recently, he said his campaign is about trying to bridge the divide between the valley and the state capital.

A big theme of Becker's work over the years has been to encourage local involvement, especially among techies who flock to Silicon Valley from around the world but remain disconnected from the issues that surround them.

By the looks of things, both Becker and Kelly are making some big inroads here. Thanks to a flood of donations from local entrepreneurs and venture capitalists, Becker raised \$110,211 between Jan. 1 and March 17, according to state campaign finance records. That's a big lead over his two rivals in the Democratic primary, Yoriko Kishimoto, who raised \$32,897, and Rich Gordon, who raised \$28,629, both over the same period. Gordon's big contributors have been traditional Democratic interest groups such as unions while Kishimoto has put \$85,000 of her own money into the race.

By comparison, Becker has drawn from a larger base of contributors, including venture capitalists such as Dixon Doll, and entrepreneurs and tech execs such as Spikesource CEO Kim Polese and Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg.

Kelly's contributors include Marc Andreessen and a bunch of Facebook executives including Sandberg.

Becker has been using the social media strategies he learned while volunteering for Barack Obama's campaign, including fundraising through Facebook and Twitter. Whether this will translate into more votes against his two opponents on election day remains to be seen.

But win or lose, Becker's commitment to local involvement is genuine, and began long before this election. During the dot-com boom, when many CEOs were busy counting IPO riches, Becker and some friends started the Full Circle Fund, a philanthropic organization that raises money and finds volunteers for Bay Area groups working on issues like education and the environment. And before that, as a Stanford law student, he started an organization to train students to work on the boards of local non-profits. Currently, he's a partner at New Cycle Ventures, which invests in companies taking innovative approaches to social problems.

We desperately need that kind of involvement from the valley's best and brightest, at a moment when it feels like the social foundations of this region and state are crumbling. Entrepreneurs succeed when they are able to take a problem, approach it from a different angle, and invent a solution. "I want to take what people do every day in Silicon Valley and bring that up to Sacramento," Becker said. Becker and Kelly have taken a big first step by getting the innovation crowd to donate money to their campaign. But that's just a start.

If they build on that momentum and get the innovation crowd more involved in solving the social and policy issues plaguing our state and local governments, they will leave a worthy legacy no matter what the outcome on election day.