

The Almanac

Josh Becker, The Connector?

Menlo Park entrepreneur is in the race for the local Assembly seat

by [Sean Howell](#)
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Menlo Park venture capitalist and social entrepreneur Josh Becker is stressing his networking abilities in campaigning for the California Assembly's 21st district, saying that the district needs someone who can unite disparate groups of people to rally for change. In the months before the Democratic primary, his main challenge is likely to lie in convincing voters that those abilities would serve him well in public office.

The district encompasses The Almanac's entire circulation area, including Atherton, Menlo Park, Portola Valley and Woodside. Mr. Becker is one of three candidates running in the Democratic primary on June 8, competing to replace termed-out Assembly member Ira Ruskin.

In a recent interview, Mr. Becker spoke energetically and cogently of jumpstarting a state with constant budget troubles, and in need of new jobs. He expressed a desire to make California a leader in energy, and to "bring the spirit of Silicon Valley to Sacramento."

His private sector career has centered on bringing innovators together in various coalitions. He is the founder and chair of the Full Circle Fund, a San Francisco-based philanthropic organization that gives grants to nonprofits and boasts on its board of directors Congressman Mike Honda, Netflix founder Reed Hastings, and Brian David, director of the National Broadband Task Force.

Mr. Becker also founded New Cycle Capital, an "early stage" venture capital firm based in San Francisco. He also sits on the board of trustees for the University of California Merced.

He has delved into politics only recently: His involvement in the Silicon Valley for Obama campaign sparked his interest in running for the Assembly, he said. According to Mr. Becker, he helped launch "Cleantech and Green Business for Obama," which raised funds for the 2008 presidential campaign, as well as the Clean Economy Network.

The home page of his campaign's Web site features a photo of Mr. Becker standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Al Gore.

He would seem to fit the profile of a "Connector," a term popularized by Malcolm Gladwell in his 2000 book, "The Tipping Point." According to Mr. Gladwell, Connectors can spark a new trend by virtue of their wide networks: "One of the key things she does is to play an intermediary between different social worlds," he writes.

And that, essentially, is Mr. Becker's pitch.

"I think that what's needed right now is my kind of background," he said. "The other people who are running are good people, but what's really needed right now are innovative ideas, and people who can bring together different coalitions."

He stressed his connections to Silicon Valley innovators, saying he's working to get people with good ideas involved in his campaign, people who may have sat on the sidelines in past Assembly races. If his fundraising so far is any indication, he's succeeded, having leapfrogged the other candidates in money raised after just over three months of campaigning.

He may, however, face a challenge in convincing voters he is ready to confront the realities of serving in the California Legislature. Mr. Becker's two opponents, San Mateo County Supervisor Rich Gordon and former Palo Alto City Council member Yoriko Kishimoto, have a long history as elected representatives.

Asked whether he was prepared to deal with the slow pace and frustrations inherent in government bureaucracy, Mr. Becker said: "I'm not a big believer in people saying, 'we can't do things.'"

"This is a critical time," he said. "I just got off the phone with a friend of mine who asked, 'Can California really be saved? Why should we send you up there?' I said, 'Yes, it can be, but it's an all-hands-on-deck situation.'"

Mr. Becker, 40, has lived in Menlo Park for 15 years, with a brief hiatus in Palo Alto, he said.