OPEN FORUM: Why Silicon Valley needs a patent office

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Silicon Valley will host the director of the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office on April 14 to discuss the value of opening a regional office in the area.

To us, it's a no-brainer.

About 25 percent of all patents granted to American inventors originate in California; 12 percent come from Silicon Valley. This has been the case for more than 30 years.

In business, smart organizations get ahead by being close to their customers. This makes sense in government, too, and that's why we were so encouraged when Commerce Secretary Gary Locke set out to make the Patent Office more geographically diverse. When he announced it would open the first-ever satellite office this year, we had high hopes.

Well, that first office is going to be in Detroit.

Huh?

Of course, we're happy for Detroit, and there is a lot of good science coming out of the Motor City, no question. But Silicon Valley patent volume dwarfs anything happening in Michigan.

Fortunately, there is legislation making its way through Congress establishing three more satellite offices. One of those simply must come to Silicon Valley.

For the federal government, it's a win because it enables the office to draw on Silicon Valley's unmatched talent pool, made up of savvy scientists, engineers and attorneys. This means the new patent officials will more readily understand the technical material they are reviewing, and that should increase processing significantly.
The government also wins because a base here puts it in proximity to Asia. Most applications are filed by two or more inventors, and many Asian colleagues co-apply with California inventors, accounting for nearly half of all U.S. patents being issued today.

Locating here means the office will easily tap into our region's cultural assets and language skills, and that, too, will boost productivity.

For valley innovators, it's a win because the proximity and easy interaction will chip away at the office's backlog, which today stands at 700,000 applications. With a logjam of that size, it is taking as long as three years to receive a decision.

Three years! Three years in Silicon Valley time is three or four product life cycles. The slow pace impedes access to fast-moving markets, stunts job growth and creates a real barrier to innovation and economic growth.

To their great credit, Secretary Locke and U.S. Patent chief David Kappos are working to get the review period down to 18 months. We applaud their effort. We're also convinced we can do even better once the office taps into Silicon Valley's unparalleled expertise in information processing, electronic records and other productivity tools.

But if this isn't persuasive enough, then perhaps we should reflect on the climate implications. Consider: If California's 7,081 patent attorneys make only one round-trip visit to Washington annually, then they will generate more than 7,130 metric tons of greenhouse gases.

All those trips will be spared if there's a patent office here, making this a win-win-win situation.

In Silicon Valley at least, when we see a deal that good, we take it.

**The reasons**

California deserves a patent office because it is:

**Where the action is:** More than 10,000 patent registrations were filed by Silicon Valley inventors in 2009, the last year for which figures are available.

**Where the talent is:** Patent officials can draw on Silicon Valley expertise in new technologies.

**Gateway to Asia:** Forty percent of 2009 U.S. patents were awarded to Asian and American co-applicants.

**Multilingual, multicultural and technologically productive:** Strengths that will help shorten the average three-year wait for a decision.

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