Russell Hancock on what this election means to Silicon Valley

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What does this election mean for Silicon Valley?

Not much.

The fact is, Silicon Valley’s issues have mostly been ignored by the two presidential candidates, which is a travesty because I would argue that Silicon Valley’s issues are really the nation’s issues.

There used to be a saying emanating out of Detroit that “what’s good for General Motors is good for America.” Today, I wish people across the nation would understand that what’s good for Silicon Valley is what’s good for America.

But for some reason, Silicon Valley and Washington always seem to be on different pages, singing from a different songbook.

Take Asia, for example. The Washington establishment—and by extension, the candidates—always seems to treat China and the other burgeoning economies of the region as a problem, or a threat. Here in Silicon Valley we don’t see it that way. We see Asia as an opportunity.

Yes, these are our competitors, but competition makes us stronger. But the Asian companies and the governments that support them are more than merely competitors—it’s more complicated
than that. They are also our collaborators, our partners on a growing number of patents, our trade partners, our colleagues.

To folks here in Silicon Valley the entire Pacific Rim is one large macroeconomy, and the ties among us are complex and multi-faceted, better characterized by words like “co-opetition.” It would be nice to have a stance on these issues from the federal government that recognized their complexity and their strategic importance, but this is never the talk out on the campaign trail.

A closely related issue is immigration, since two-thirds of Silicon Valley’s scientists, engineers and entrepreneurs are Indian or Chinese. The honest truth is that Silicon Valley wasn’t built so much by Americans as it was by immigrants—the best and the brightest coming here from elsewhere. Our competitive future clearly depends on this trend continuing.

Sadly, the candidates have little to say about legal immigration, our absurdly low quotas, and Silicon Valley’s strong preference for “stapling a green card to every diploma.”

Yet another issue entirely missing from the campaign is the emergence of the cleantech sector, and the crucial role Silicon Valley can play in leading America to a new energy future. The whole issue has been reduced to demonizing Solyndra, both candidates doing everything in their power to distance themselves from the issue.

To me this makes no sense, whatsoever. Could there be a more important issue facing the nation and the planet? And shouldn’t we be talking about how the federal government can play a strongly instrumental role? Shouldn’t a future fueled by renewables be the “moon shot” equivalent of our generation, with each candidate racing to position himself as the visionary leader?

Hurricane Sandy has brought climate issues to the fore in this final week of the campaign, but the candidates are mostly talking about FEMA and whether states should play a larger role. What’s missing is a long-term discussion about climate change and how we position our nation as a world leader in carbon reduction, and a world leader in the provision of new infrastructure.

The infrastructure issue is of huge importance to Silicon Valley, though many don’t realize it. So many Silicon Valley companies are fronting the San Francisco Bay, which, because of sea level rise, is now prone to flooding. Silicon Valley is actually below sea level, which means a major storm will put hundreds of thousands of people at risk and do billions of dollars in damage to our public assets.

We don’t have hurricanes here, but tropical storms (like the “Pineapple Express”) will make their appearance, as will our inevitable seismic events, and all of it will overwhelm the dikes and levees. Wouldn’t it be nice if the candidates were talking about how our nation needs to build world-class infrastructure in order to cope with the inevitable damage that is coming our way?

And wouldn’t it be great if they understood that technology is the path forward? And that Silicon Valley’s great technology companies will be the solution providers?
Wouldn’t it be great if the candidates were trying to outdo each other as Silicon Valley champion?

Unfortunately, California isn’t up for grabs, so the candidates spend their time elsewhere, talking to the reactionary, populist issues. It’s a pity for our nation, because Silicon Valley’s issues really are the nation’s issues.