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EXCLUSIVE REPORTS

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Ga. patents decline again during 2005

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Staff Writer

Georgia-based inventors in 2005 received fewer patents than in 2004 -- continuing a three-year slide -- but some of the state's intellectual property elite registered impressive gains.

Inventors living in the state received 1,686 patents, down 9.7 percent from 1,867 in 2004, according to the U.S. Patent & Trademark Office. Meanwhile, 722 patents were assigned to Georgia companies in 2005, down from 794 in 2004 and 819 in 2003.

The decline was expected, said Bryan Bockhop, a patent attorney with [Arnall Golden Gregory LLP](#) and [Bockhop & Associates LLC](#). Patents usually take about three years to be awarded, so 2005 would be an indicator of the dreadful 2002 economy, he said.

A better indicator of 2005's economy -- patent applications published during the year -- showed improvement. The Patent Office published 3,175 applications for Georgia-based inventors, up 6.3 percent from 2,986 the previous year.

Among Georgia companies that won patents in 2005, [BellSouth Corp.](#) (NYSE: BLS) led the pack for the second year in a row. The company's intellectual property division in Wilmington, N.C., was awarded 194 patents, including 128 from the company's Georgia-based inventors. In 2004, BellSouth inventors across the Southeast received 188 patents.

Scott Frank, president of BellSouth Intellectual Property, boasts that the company's patent portfolio exceeds [Verizon Communications Inc.](#)'s and the former SBC's -- combined. He predicts BellSouth soon will have a bigger portfolio than [AT&T Inc.](#) (NYSE: T).

"We're more innovative," Frank said. "We also think we're much better at protecting our innovations. It's really become a corporate focus. It will differentiate us from the industry."

In a Dec. 26 article, BusinessWeek ranked BellSouth as the 12th most undervalued stock in the country because of patent portfolios. BellSouth stock has been relatively stagnant for the past two years, at about \$25 to \$30 a share.

Frank said inventions in broadband and wireless were especially hot in 2005. But the company also ventured into some cutting-edge technologies. On Dec. 29, three Georgia inventors were awarded a patent that dealt with "gesture-activated" home appliances. Applications could include making computers operate with hand gestures, according to the patent filing.

"We are coming up with some of the best ideas in the industry," Frank said. "But we're not the kind of company to push them out until they're fully baked."

Another big winner of patents in Georgia in 2005 was [Kimberly-Clark Corp.](#) (NYSE: KMB), whose health-care division is in Roswell. Georgia inventors working for the company won 89 patents in 2005.

Inventors working for Georgia Tech, meanwhile, won 42, up from 36 the previous year. George Harken, director of Georgia Tech's office of technology licensing, said increased funding led to more invention disclosures in 2005. He said university inventors filed 324 such disclosures, the precursor to patent applications, up from 277 the previous year. In fiscal 2005, Georgia Tech received \$357 million in grants, up from \$341 million in fiscal 2004, he said.

One of the hottest areas for Georgia Tech, Harken said, was nanotechnology. In March, physics professor and nano expert Z.L. Wang received his second nano patent, a potential precursor to an early cancer detection system or even to "nanobots," theoretical subatomic-sized particles that could travel the bloodstream repairing damaged body parts.

On Jan. 11, Gov. Sonny Perdue proposed a state budget that includes \$38 million to complete construction of a cutting-edge nanotechnology research center at Tech.

A significant number of patents also were won in 2005 by inventors working in Georgia for [GE Energy](#), [NCR Corp.](#), [Motorola](#), Emory University and The University of Georgia.

Statewide, the technology that received the most patent awards was "stock material," chemicals and other substances, according to Barry Brager, managing partner of intellectual property consultant [Perception Partners Inc.](#)

Other hot technologies dealt with telecom and other communications inventions, he said. Pharmaceuticals also were hot.

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