

League plans tax probe in Washington

housing supply generally, and hold rents and sales of dwellings to more reasonable levels."

The League wants to finance a city-wide analysis of the impact of land value taxation on the U.S. capital, to inform homeowners and businessmen of the effect on their incomes.

In addition, the League intends to sponsor an ambitious project to study the medium term effect of a switch to land value taxation. Previous studies have concentrated on the immediate impact.

The "dynamic" study, designed by Mr. M. B. Hodges, a leading Washington economist-appraiser, will take into account trends in land sales, new construction, etc. These responses would be fed into a computer to calculate revised taxes. A panel of experts will advise on the way people will respond to the change in the tax structure.

"The land use and economic growth patterns projected for the decade are likely to be more realistic than previous forecasts of how a large city will respond to the untaxing of buildings," says the League.

"It is recognised, of course, that no panel can predict the future with precision because many factors other than the tax climate will be changing. But identification of the general directions of change should be significant to urban policy makers and useful to planners in the private sector as well."

The urgency for change in the property tax structure is well-illustrated by the misuse of land and buildings in Washington itself.

The city is seeking developers to build new homes, such as the projected development on 11 acres in the 14th Street area. At the same time, however, the capital has a large number of unoccupied houses. Last year, there were 2,800 privately-owned vacant housing units and 1,300 city-owned vacant housing units. Many have been vacant for years. A suitably adapted property tax which penalised the underuse of valuable land would rapidly compel owners to modernise the housing stock and take some of the heat off the need to invest scarce capital in new constructions.

P. E. POOLE

LAND SURVEY "UNLIKELY"

THE VEIL of secrecy over who owns Britain's land is now not likely to be lifted.

There was a promise in the last Queen's Speech of a new land register for Scotland, which was a concession to the Nationalists.

But a pilot survey of land ownership in 13 parishes in Hereford and Worcester has revealed how complex would be the task of getting a register—a new Domesday Book—compiled.

The Ministry of Agriculture concludes that the survey indicates "the complexities of agricultural land occupation and ownership and the consequent difficulties associated with collecting and analysing information on these subjects."

Yet the 13 parishes were chosen precisely because of their agricultural "complexity."

Richard Norton-Taylor, reporting in *The Times* (11.12.78) suggests why Whitehall is sensitive about digging into land ownership:

"The Ministry of Agriculture relies on the cooperation of the Country Landowners' Association and estate agents to compile its official statistics, and gets it only so long as it promises to keep the information confidential."

A nationwide survey would remove this dependence on land owners, and thereby negate their powerful control over vital information.

●FEWER houses will be built this year than in 1978, says Mr. Donald Moody, president of the House-builders' Federation. But the lower level of anticipated housing starts could be improved, he said, if more land were released.

Government Ministers, however, are likely to evade the issue by claiming that an investigation into land ownership would be too costly.

The last complete survey of land ownership in Britain was published in 1873.

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Scots fear land tax

A SCOTTISH Assembly might have raised revenue by taxing farmland. That was the fear of the Scottish Landowners' Federation, which wants to preserve their privileged status. Farmers do not pay rates on their land, so they enjoy subsidised public services paid for by other property owners. The Federation declared: "It will be natural for the urban majority to look with longing eyes at the largest and most efficient industries in the country—agriculture and forestry. They will wish to devise ways and means of raising money, possibly by rating agricultural land and thus putting our farmers at a disadvantage."