

Portland '98: Why It Worked

by Jeff Smith

Editor's Note: The 1998 CGO Conference in Portland, Oregon was well-attended and well-received. It is usually the Georgist Journal's policy to present extensive coverage of Georgist Conferences. However, the long delay in this issue has meant that Groundswell and other publications have already covered what went on there. Rather than re-do that work, we thought it might be useful to present a post-mortem on how that conference managed to succeed so well. — L. D.

Compliments. You gotta love 'em. But, come on. "Was the best conference I ever attended!" Really? And that voice was not alone. After the 1998 CGO Conference, in Portland, Oregon, so many accolades came across my screen that I had to both blush and wonder what other conferences they had been attending. The annual gathering of retired bean counters?

OK, it was a good conference. Speakers included a current State Senator who gave an excellent talk at the banquet. Panels included a former State Senator and current County Commissioner, legislative tax specialists, etc. The media blessed the event, noting it in several calendars, publishing an op-ed in the main daily, and even putting it on the evening TV news. We didn't please everyone, of course; our leading libertarian debater, Dan Sullivan, obliterated the local representative (who since has not returned phone calls). But that was excellent theatre. Our public reception actually attracted young people, energetic twenty-somethings. And, the acid test: it planted seeds that now are sprouting — most notably in the form of a study bill.

Perhaps it was a case of "you get what you pay for". The Schalkenbach Foundation and Common Ground-USA kicked in a few grand. To a poor activist charged with the organizing, it was a life-saver. It allowed me to avoid seeking grunt work and to defend such actions to spouse and infant daughter! Ideally, there would've been more funding and more time spent organizing, more time on the phone. To do activism, just glue a telephone to the side of your head.

I would say that the biggest difference in how this conference was organized was who I targeted and what I told them. For decades I've claimed environmentalists to be the segment of American society most ready to hear George's message. I wanted to prove it. First I repackaged the event as the "Geonomics Conference", dealing with "environmental economics" or "Earth-focused economics", exemplified by the green tax shift. The green movement, in growing numbers over the past decade, has been discovering the property tax shift. The WorldWatch Institute, Friends of the Earth, Redefining Progress, and

others promote it.

Having lived in Oregon the past year and given many a talk, I could count on a few key recognizable players to participate. Using them as sort of "anchor tenants", I could entice others to sign on.

I did blunder, though. Given the universality of my message, I wanted to get everybody into the pool: urban advocates, tax reformers, business groups, you name it. But in branching out, I diluted my efforts. Maybe others could reach those constituencies, but in Oregon, at least, they're not yet ready to hear the message. Had I concentrated on drawing in more environmentalists, the hotel would have been packed.

Besides being a green in a green state, another factor in my favor was the Internet. Everybody you'd want to invite is now wired in. Now you can communicate with more people, more quickly, and have those messages be bounced all around cyberspace in every direction imaginable (some doctors from Nebraska attended the conference!). It's a networker's dream come true.

Were I to offer advice to future CGO organizers, it'd be this: (1) Start very, very early. (2) Every step of the way, invite volunteers to come on board, to attend your work meetings, to take on tasks. Working with others is much more fun than being a one man band, and the final product is much better (here gratitude is owed to Kris Nelson). (3) Turn over every stone. You never know who the "little guy" or "little group" is connected with. (4) Concentrate on environmentalists of every stripe and strand — academics, activists, elected officials, businesspeople, students. (5) Update, often, everyone who might be even peripherally involved. (6) Send calendar items to every newsletter, large and small. (7) Send op-eds to every paper, tailored for every audience. (8) Do interviews on public access radio and TV. (9) Figure out a twist and have a name speaker for a press conference to kick off the event. (10) Simulate a party. Have lots of short presentations, with long Q&A and long breaks. Have a public reception with a surprise guest celebrity (we had a former Soviet ambassador) where you force Georgists to circulate, rub shoulders and hobnob. And finally, (11) resign yourself to wondering what sleep used to be like. Do these; I guarantee yours will be the next "best conference ever".

"To put the bounty and the health of our land, our only commonwealth, into the hands of people who do not live on it and share its fate will always be an error. For whatever determines the fortune of the land determines also the fortune of the people. If history teaches anything, it teaches that."

— Wendell Berry, "Local People, Who Are We?"