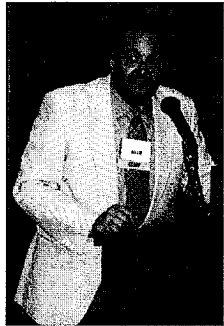


Gaithersburg: Geo Solutions Gain Momentum

by Ed Dodson

Changing the course of history a few people at a time is hard work. So, each year some of us who feel compelled to devote ourselves to this mission get together, under the auspices of the Council of Georgist Organizations, to share experiences, console one another and recharge our batteries for the year to come. This



Josh Vincent

year, the gathering took place in Gaithersburg, Maryland (at the outer edge of the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area). Its organizers were two of our movement's brightest lights: Josh Vincent, Director of the Henry George Foundation of America, and Hanno Beck, President of the Banneker Center for Economic Justice.

People came to be participants in panel discussions, deliver presentations, hear speakers from other groups with

similar concerns, conduct business meetings of activist and educational organizations and to see old friends and colleagues. My primary contribution to this year's conference was as part of the entertainment — holding a "jeopardy" competition with categories relating to Henry George, his life, his writings, and the movement his writings inspired. Even this version of Jeopardy is competitive — but, the biggest laugh came at my expense. One of my answers: "Jimmy Stewart starred in the film adaptation of this John Steinbeck novel."

Well, even the handful of people there who were under age 30 knew that I meant to say Henry Fonda, not Jimmy Stewart! I'll keep my day job.

For most of this century, Henry George's sweeping proposals have been narrowed by practical politics. Georgist activists (working alongside others who never heard of Henry George but found his proposals sound) have kept working in cities and state capitals to introduce legislation that would gradually reduce the taxation of improvements people make to property, so that government would increasingly rely on taxation of land values



Giddy with success: conference hosts Jeff Smith ('98) and Hanno Beck

(actually, to be more precise, a tax on the rental value of parcels of land) as the primary source of revenue. It's not easy to convince elected officials and their advisers that long-standing tax policy is destructive. However, in the face of crumbling cities and deteriorating infrastructure, many conventional wisdoms are beginning to be successfully challenged.

This work has been undertaken by many volunteers, local activist groups, and often some technical and financial support from the Henry George Foundation of America. Few Pennsylvanians are aware that an amendment to the Pennsylvania constitution adopted back in the 1920s grants communities the option to tax peoples' houses, apartment buildings, office towers and other types of structures at a lower rate than land parcels — or not at all. This amendment came as a result of efforts by members of the Henry George Foundation.

Josh Vincent's work, along with that of other activists across the Commonwealth, has resulted in fifteen cities (not including Philadelphia, I am sad to say) adopting the shift in tax base. Recent legislation — whose passage owes much to the tireless advocacy of Alanna Hartzok — now permits all Pennsylvania boroughs to do likewise, if they so choose. Josh Vincent reported that the Foundation is currently receiving more invitations to borough council meetings than it can respond to.

At the conference, we heard reports from all around the country about interest in how this change stimulates new construction and economic activity, generally. There is even some interest on the part of Washington, DC. The City of Baltimore may be the next major city to make the move.

Georgists will not be satisfied even should every community in the United States — and elsewhere — shift their property taxation from improvements to land. Why not? Well, the short answer is that we oppose having government confiscate earned income from whatever the source. We think that what we produce with our physical and mental labor ought to be our property to dispose of



Steve Cord was presented with a lifetime achievement award, by Dan Sullivan. Long known for his tireless practicality in promoting local tax reform, Dr. Cord spoke of the need for a "schizophrenic" vision: focusing on achievable steps, while keeping the ultimate goal in sight.

pretty much as we see fit so long as we do no harm to others, or to the environment. On principle, we also see most impediments to commerce — even international commerce — as interfering with our liberty. Do all of these things and, down the road, we would not be worrying about foreign competition destroying employment.

A utopian vision? Perhaps. So that this full employment scenario can be experienced without overly disrupting things, we tend to support gradual change — so long as that change is in the right direction.



Walt Rybeck was also honored with an award. Walt, who is not generally given to boasting, was flattered by the attention Alanna Hartzok paid him in asking him to tell her about all his achievements. He never suspected that she was doing research to present him an award!

After he read about this back in 1880, Karl Marx denounced Henry George as an apologist for capitalism. Meanwhile, the laissez-faire “capitalists” of his day denounced him as a socialist because he proposed to end land monopoly. Confused? In our own time, environmental groups have warmed to Henry George’s taxation proposals as a “tax shift”

that rewards behavior we want to encourage (e.g., using land and natural resources wisely and not as a commodity that is exploited then discarded), while penalizing behavior we do not want (e.g., pollution, destruction of ecosystems, etc.). People concerned about sprawl and quality of life issues are championing Henry George’s taxation proposals as a way to stimulate private investment in our crumbling cities, to rebuild them as places where people can live, work and play — safely and without dependence on the automobile as a primary means of transport. To explore these issues, the conference featured David Roodman (a senior researcher at the World Watch Institute) and Courtney Cuff (the legislative director of Friends of the Earth). Each brought their own perspective and emphasis but left attendees with the sense we are on the same page.

The next day, we all boarded a bus headed for the Sam Rayburn Building in D.C., where Rep. Ron Paul (a Libertarian)

had arranged the use of a meeting room to hold a Tax Reform Summit. One of the presenters for this event was N.J. Assemblyman Michael Arnone, a very pro-business and conservative Republican who is working to have the New Jersey Constitution amended to permit New Jersey communities to do what Pennsylvania's communities are able to do. Other panelists who spoke in support of this policy shift included economics professor Nic Tideman (from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and a leading adviser to the Russians on land privatization), Rick Rybeck (the deputy administrator in the office of intermodal planning for the District of Columbia) and Deborah Katz (of the Washington Regional Network for Livable Communities).

Not every presentation or discussion at this conference conveyed a story of advances or successes. Two reports from outside the United States — one on South Africa, the other on Australia — remind us just how much of a slippery slope exists in the struggle for change. Despite its disturbing racial and ethnic policy history, White South Africa had incorporated a dose of Henry George's ideas in how its government raised revenue. We heard from Robert Andelson (a professor emeritus from Auburn University and the president of the International Union for Land Value Taxation and Free Trade) that the new central government in South Africa is moving to impose a uniform property tax system on all cities that effectively moves them back toward heavy taxes on buildings. William Pitt, of the Henry George Foundation of Australia, reported that huge land owners and some union leaders have embarked on a campaign to tax buildings in Australian cities that have for decades been collecting revenue from land values alone. In Melbourne, one finds no slums — no areas decimated by the flight of people and jobs to the suburbs. The fact that Melbourne has not burdened development with taxes is an important reason. I cannot help but hope the citizens of Australia will not sit by and allow land speculators and misguided union leaders destroy the very policies that have made their cities the envy of much of the rest of the world. The message for activists is clear: constant vigilance is necessary to prevent loss of not merely our political liberties but equality of opportunity in the economic arena as well.



Toni & Ted Gwartney, Erika Rybeck

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