

How YIMBYism Paves the Way for Georgism

By: Jeff Fong / 25 October 2023

As this Substack [has previously explored](#), the [YIMBY](#) and Georgist movements are natural complements for each other. Most Yimbys love Georgism and most Georgists are on the train to Yimbytown¹. However, Yimbyism has gained political traction while Georgism is still relatively niche. Reappropriating land rents remains anathema to most home owning Americans. And even if there were more fertile grounds for Georgist reform, there are no dedicated activists doing the on-the-ground organizing needed to build political power. As a Georgist and Yimby activist myself, I'd like to make the case that Yimby reforms can fix these issues in two ways:

First, Yimbyism stands to re-configure the political economy of urban land use, removing a built-in bias against Georgist reforms. Second, Yimby political organizing will provide the playbook—and possibly the infrastructure itself—for Georgist activism to implement these reforms.

Why It's Hard To Do A Georgism

Oceans of ink have been spilled explaining why we don't already live in a Georgist utopia, so we'll keep it brief. The most basic explanation is as follows:

In the U.S., property taxes are unpopular. They're [highly salient](#), unlike the payroll and sales taxes that we've learned to ignore. For homeowners, they're also a tax on an illiquid asset. On top of that, U.S. government policy for the last seventy years has made homeownership the basis of middle class wealth. Hence, there are a lot of folks for whom higher property taxes -- and by extension, most versions of an LVT -- would be a problem. It's important to remember that resistance isn't just against a higher tax bill. There's also a fear of being taxed out of one's home. That's a traumatizing outcome and one that's enough to inspire organized political resistance. Exhibit A: [the California homeowner tax revolt of '78](#).

It's California in the mid-70s. Inflation (along with reforms to the office of the tax assessor) results in an effective increase in property taxes. An angry old guy named Howard Jarvis picks up a pitchfork and out of the ensuing chaos emerges Prop 13, arising like some Lovecraftian god of fiscal insanity. This amendment to the state constitution has hamstrung the state's ability to levy property tax in perpetuity and enshrined tax-protected property ownership as the basis for entrenching dynastic wealth in the state.

This is also why forcing through Georgist policy in the current status quo isn't actually a lever to accelerate Yimbyism. While it's true that increasing the carrying cost of land should drive landowners to develop it more intensely, existing land use regimes make that mostly illegal. Instead of a market response increasing density, we're more likely to see a political response to rewrite the tax code. As it stands, implementing an LVT is a political non-starter. Even if something could be forced through a legislature or council, the likely outcome would be a tax revolt.

What changes this is the implementation of Yimby reforms.

The Road To Georgistan

Yimbyism will deliver more housing by enabling greater density and denser development means more multi-family structures. This, in turn, likely means more renters -- renters who have no downside from increasing taxation on land rents². Even if we see more condo owners, we still come out ahead on the political calculus. A condo owner consumes far less land than a single-family homeowner sitting on a quarter acre lot. Their tax burden is far less likely to hit that critical level of forcing someone out of their home.

To the extent that certain areas still have lots of owner occupied single-family homes, Yimby reforms rewire incentives even for them. Recent reforms have legalized ADUs in places like California and they now make up a large proportion of housing starts. Homeowners who were previously anti-development are now pro-construction because the change has direct, tangible benefits for them. In a world where homeowners want –

and are allowed – to densify their properties, shifting taxes from improvements to land imparts immediate, tangible benefits as well.

The YIMBY Playbook

Up to this point we've been discussing how Yimbyism will change the political economy of land use in ways that unblock Georgist reform. However, this doesn't automatically result in change. In entrepreneurial terms, what Yimby reforms will do is create the "market opportunity" for Georgist policy. Practical political work will still be required to realize that opportunity. Fortunately, I believe the Yimby movement can provide a model for Georgist activism.

Yimbyism didn't *just happen*. Faced with the contradictions of breakneck economic growth and a draconian land use regime, a group of patient zero activists in San Francisco self-radicalized. They started by going to city hearings to yell in support of housing, but quickly started building the political infrastructure needed to foster a mass movement. In the example of Yimby Action, that infrastructure is a federated network of local chapters. Volunteer leads run each chapter and chapters engage in project level advocacy, campaigning for pro-housing candidates, directly petitioning elected officials, and other various forms of local politics. Building this organizing infrastructure has been necessary to move policy, but it's also somewhat separate from the policy work itself. If policy is about coming up with solutions, organizing is about building the political power necessary to implement those solutions.

We could spend hours talking about political organizing and lessons learned by Yimbys over the last half decade, but I'll make two points here:

First, scaling political power means activating less engaged voters. That includes folks who'll never read a whitepaper, but who can be counted on to vote your voter guide at election time. In the Yimby movement, that includes folks who buy the basic thesis and trust Yimby Action to vet the pro-housing position on candidates and issues. Georgist policy will need a similar TLDR articulation and messengers that ordinary voters will trust.

Second, deploying that power still only gets you incremental, directionally correct progress. For American Yimbys, copy-pasting Tokyo's excellent and comprehensive land use regime has never been on the table. Our wins to date have been an incremental hacking away of laws, regulations, and processes that impede housing production – no silver bullets. Similarly, Georgist reforms will be necessarily piecemeal. They might look like state level legislation allowing cities to opt into a split-rate system (that activists will then have to fight to implement at the local level). It could also mean allowing special districts to implement LVT for things like school funding. Whatever the specifics, practical reforms will require ongoing political activism. They'll also require looking for creative ways to present Georgist policy as a solution in fights about funding public services.

YIMBY Infrastructure

Once Yimby reforms have created an opening for Georgist policy, Georgism will still need activists to do the actual politics. These activists will need the kind of organizing infrastructure Yimbys have been building for years. In my view, the path of least resistance for Georgists is to channel their activism through existing Yimby institutions. Currently, Georgism as a movement is poor in resources like people, money, experience, and connections. These are all things that Yimby institutions have *already* managed to build up through years of hard work. Instead of struggling to build and maintain “pure” Georgist institutions as maybe the only Georgist in a city or state, it is much easier to join and work through existing Yimby networks.

Yimbys come in many different flavors that Georgism can appeal to. Some of us are concerned with unblocking economic growth. Others are interested in reducing inequality and addressing historical injustices. And still others base their housing advocacy in environmentalism. Georgist policy can be sold across all these same groups (groups which Yimby orgs have already brought together and politically activated). By joining and contributing to the Yimby movement, Georgists can pave the way for policies like LVT while building up credibility with people who are highly receptive to the Georgist program. Genuine relationships built

through helping Yimbys achieve their goals are a very strong way to increase receptiveness to Georgism as a comprehensive philosophy. In turn, Georgists can learn and benefit from Yimbys until such a time that explicit Georgist activism becomes more viable.

Conclusion

While it's true that Yimbyism and Georgism should go hand in hand at the policy level, the success of the former will be necessary to clear the way for the latter. The Yimby project will change the underlying political economy of land use. In turn, those changes will erode the structural impediments to Georgist reform over time. As increased housing production – and especially densification – alters the electorate's relationship to land ownership, Yimby activists will have the tools, infrastructure, and the political know-how to help turn Georgist ideas into implementable policy. Fortunately for Georgists, Yimbyism isn't slowing down. For anyone interested in learning more about Yimby organizing or getting involved in their own neck of the woods, there are over 50 different Yimby Action chapters across the U.S. with more on the way. Joining up with one (or another YIMBY organization) is an obvious path for an American Georgist who is eager to help advance the cause but is unsure how to start³.

1

Fun fact: we literally saw “An LVT would fix that” written on a whiteboard at last year's actual Yimbytown.

2

Because landlords can't pass on the tax burden of an LVT onto renters.

3

And if you're inspired to get involved in Yimby organizing, let us know in the comments – happy to chat with you directly!