

A Smile For Georgists

SOUTHFIELD, Michigan became for a few years a proving ground for modified land value taxation procedures. Perhaps it should be left silently to its fate, now that things have changed. But somebody always keeps bringing it up.

Jack Woerpel is a real estate writer on The Sunday News (Detroit) who is very apt to harp on this until Detroit reluctantly learns a lesson from the precocious, fast-growing suburb.

Note how effectively his logic stirred the readers. On May 31st Mr. Woerpel advised Michigan homeowners to "Do this right now: look at your latest property tax bill or other records and check the equalized assessed value of your property. Now double that figure. Is that a fair market value for your property?"

He told them in a detailed article how to proceed, and then he told the story again about Southfield's assessing policy when the assessor (Ted Gwartney) put more emphasis on land values than on building values, and how this worked to the advantage of homeowners and building owners and to the disadvantage of vacant land owners (see p. 16).

Now that the county equalization board has increased all assessments 27 percent to make Southfield's share of the tax burden equal to that of other communities in the county, the taxpayers, he says "are hopping mad at the mayor, the assessor and the county board."

Finally in a mild pique he suggests having a panel of qualified real estate appraisers make a study and give an opinion, and "while we're on the subject, how about a law requiring all assessing officers in all Michigan cities and townships to be qualified for their jobs, not political hacks?"

Just one week later, on June 7th, a very surprised Jack Woerpel wrote in his Sunday section that according to a new law effective December 31, 1971 any assessor, even a township supervisor, would have to be certified as qualified, and that the governor had appointed a board for this purpose. A course for assessors is being introduced in two colleges.

Maybe you've heard all this before, but it was Robert Benton, then the HGN director in Detroit, who pulled James Clarkson into the HGS milieu, first as student, then teacher. Soon he became mayor of Southfield and now county judge. With such a background Benton, as an LVT enthusiast, is notorious. We use the word pridefully, for he was invited to sit with members of Detroit's Board of Assessors and discuss assessment practices and theory. Nothing like this ever happened before. Ten years ago it would have been so shocking as to cause Georgists real alarm.

LVT practices and advocates are no longer dismissed as readily as they once were. Clarkson was the first to defy warnings and include LVT principles in his campaign. He had a hard fight but he won. And in winning he started a train of events that will surely find friends who will keep troubling the waters.

It's true that other board members did not accept Bob Benton's LVT ideas, but they listened. It is also true that the state constitution would have to be changed before assessors could do so bold a thing as to assess land only and exempt buildings. But here's a line from Woerpel's copy that should make Georgists smile: "Many Detroiters have been wondering whether there might not be something to the LVT idea."

The man who works and is never bored is never old.—Pablo Casals