LINCOLN INSTITUTE OF LAND POLICY

President's Message: Defining Moments in Land Policy

By: George W. McCarthy / 18 October 2023

We can trace the **origins of the Lincoln Institute** to a chance encounter between a Cleveland inventor and industrialist and a barnstorming political economist in the 1890s. John C. Lincoln, an engineer who invented arc welders, high-torque electric motors, braking systems for streetcars, and even an electric car, was deeply moved by Henry George's impassioned account of the stubbornness of urban poverty in the face of the unprecedented wealth generated by the Industrial Revolution. Lincoln subsequently devoted years of his life—and a big chunk of his fortune—to advancing George's ideas for social improvement.

George showed in a powerful and persuasive way that poverty was the result of distributive injustice. The wrong people were benefiting from economic growth. Idle landowners could sit and watch land values increase exponentially, while the productive classes, labor and capital, were taxed to support the government. George proposed replacing corporate and income taxes with a new tax that expropriated the unearned value of land from its owners. He estimated that land tax revenue would be sufficient both to eliminate poverty and to fund the government.

Given his own disposition toward social justice, ethics, efficiency, and basic fairness, this proposition resonated with John Lincoln. But the failure of George's policy prescriptions to gain any political traction mystified him. One reason he could see was the lack of general academic embrace of George's analytics and his conclusions. Quite frankly, except for a handful of universities like Columbia, UC–Berkeley, or the University of Chicago, George's work was marginalized if it was taught at all.

It was never considered a mainstream component of the training of economists or political scientists. Lincoln decided to remedy this by creating the Lincoln Foundation and partnering with universities to establish programs in land economics and taxation. And that's what the Lincoln Foundation did from 1946 until 1974. In 1974, John's son, David C. Lincoln, took a hard look at the impact of the foundation's efforts to mainstream land economics

and taxation in the fields of economics and political science. He was underwhelmed. The programs supported with the foundation's resources were evanescent and land economics remained specialized in a few universities. He decided to try a new approach and established the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy to bring research and training under our own roof. And David was clear about one thing that he often repeated: "Henry George's work was not about promoting the land tax—it was about eliminating poverty." Thus, the Lincoln Institute was founded on the notion that land policy was not an end, but a means to solve bigger economic, social, and environmental challenges.

With that clarity, measurable impact quickly followed. In the 1980s, the arrival of Boston lawyer and conservationist **Kingsbury Browne** as a Lincoln Institute fellow led to the scaling up and national networking of private land conservation in the United States. Today, members of the **Land Trust Alliance**, an organization that evolved from Browne's work, have protected more than 57 million acres of private land in perpetuity in the United States. In the 1990s, the Lincoln Institute **invented computer-assisted mass appraisal**. Systems built on that legacy are now used by local governments everywhere. In the 2000s, new international programs in Latin America supported, tested, and documented modern **land value capture** tools and techniques. Dozens of countries and thousands of jurisdictions are now studying ways to use these tools to mobilize their own public revenue. In the 2010s, the Lincoln Institute went global, establishing the **International Land Conservation Network** to promote private land conservation and sharing our work on the global stage at venues like **Habitat III**.

There is an important point here (and I know I buried the lede): we accomplished decades of significant work even though we could not easily define the discipline in which we operated. Over the last few years, we've been trying to rectify that. This spring, the board and management of the Lincoln Institute tried to effectively define land policy. By effectively, I mean clearly, accessibly, and efficiently. We found the task so daunting that we even consulted artificial intelligence. In my **spring column**, I shared our challenges and asked for your help. I asked you to submit your best definitions of land policy and offered a prize.

I'm delighted to report that we got **many submissions**. They ranged from the artistic to the theological. They arrived from four continents, with the furthest submission coming from New Zealand. They came mainly from individuals, but included a group

effort from a network of 40 practitioners in Latin America. They ranged in length from 12 to 548 words. I even submitted my own definition.

While the judges were duly impressed with the scope and creativity of the submissions, I'm afraid I have unsettling news for the Luddites among us: they did not think we outperformed the AI bot. To remind you, here is the 85-word definition offered by ChatGPT:

> *Land policy refers to the rules and regulations that govern the use, ownership, and management of land. It involves making decisions about how land should be used, who should have access to it, and what activities are permitted on it. Land policy can affect a wide range of issues, from urban development and environmental conservation to property rights and social equity. Its goal is to balance the interests of different stakeholders and ensure that land is used in ways that benefit society as a whole.*

That doesn't mean, however, that accolades aren't due. In the view of the judges, the best submission was from Harvey Jacobs:

> *Land policy is about the rules, the culture that underlies those rules, and the social expectations for the use of land. It draws together government, the market, and private actors. It has formal and informal outputs. Formal outputs are often plans, regulations, and programs. Informal outputs are often socially accepted patterns for how land is to be used and our behavior upon land.*

The most economical submission was a haiku written by PD Blumenthal—

> *Use, control, share land*
> *Protect earth, water, and air*
> *To benefit all*

—and the most creative submission was a poem entitled "A More Stealthy Georgist Cat," by David Harold Chester. It is too long to reprint here, but you can read it in its entirety **elsewhere on our site**.

The pithiest submission was from Ben Brown:

> *Land policy is the bundle of rules through which governments formalize wishful thinking for responding to*

competing demands for land use in a future that is both inevitable and uncertain.

Even though we haven't yet outperformed artificial intelligence, I am very happy with the outcome of this exercise. It affirms a couple of important things. First, land policy has a vast scope, and it touches many aspects of life. As such, maybe it is okay that it eludes easy definition. Second, it is possible to spend years doing something that you cannot easily explain. I'm guessing land policy experts aren't the only people who cannot explain at get-togethers with their extended families what exactly they do.

It occurs to me that the problem might be taxonomical. In taxonomy, it might be harder to define a classification than it is to give an example of something in that classification. For the life of me, I can never remember the differences between class, order, family, genus, or species, but if pressed I can give an example of something in each.

In the end, I'm going to give everyone who submitted an entry in the contest a book of their choice from our impressive and ever-expanding library of land policy **publications**. In addition, I will give the authors of each of the four distinguished submissions above their choice of five books each.

It was a great exercise, and we appreciate the thought and effort put into all the submissions. We appreciate even more your collegiality, and we're honored to share this hard-to-define endeavor with all of you. What started with a chance encounter between a barnstorming reformer and an inventor more than a century ago is even more relevant today: finding answers in land to improve the quality of life.