

Community Gone Viral: a Georgist Un-conference

by Edward Miller

In July, we held a special conference in the heart of San Francisco, at the Impact Hub, a trendy space for people to collaborate. We marketed it to young people looking to form voluntary communities and co-living arrangements. It was a big success.

The idea for the conference was sparked by conversations between us young georgists, noting that we needed events that appealed more to our demographic. Some were especially interested in the idea of forming voluntary georgist communities, since our generation is more cynical about politics.

The man most responsible for everything was Jacob Shwartz-Lucas, who is a force of nature. I like to think, though, that I had some positive role to play. I'd had an idea for a long time that if we can harness the best models for these kinds of communities, and learn from past attempts, we can avoid some of their mistakes. I was inspired by the work on this subject of people like Dan Sullivan, Mike Curtis, and Fred Foldvary. The key will be to create a model that can grow and replicate, and that is how we went about planning the theme.

Unlike typical georgist conferences, ours was an “un-conference” — a participatory and ad hoc format where for much of the day people can form breakout sessions to talk about anything they like, and report back a summary to everyone else.

However, we also had designated speakers. Our event offered a far greater variety of viewpoints than traditional georgist conferences. More than half of the speakers were not georgists at all. We had Chelsea Rustrum who is an author and consultant promoting the Sharing Economy. We had Sarah Kaplan of the Sustainable Economies Law Center explaining the legal side of things. Rick Lewis from the Bay Area Community Land Trust. Carla Mays from the California Technology Investment Fund. The list goes on.

There were talks, however, by a number of prominent georgists including Mike Curtis, Fred Foldvary, Dave Giesen, Rana Lehmer-Chang and Andrew Perry.

In the breakout sessions we had all sorts of speakers, discussing everything from “sociocracy” to logistical details of forming communities. We also had a session where people brought in clips of documentaries about cooperative living. Mike Curtis showed the intro to a documentary on the history of Arden, and it absolutely blew me away. How can we get that onto the internet for young people to see?!

It was no accident that the conference was a success. We worked so hard on it, Jake especially. Many discussions for months. Jake and I flew out to San Francisco back in April, months in advance, to get everything set up. Additionally, Jake went to SF for an extra week in advance to ensure things went smoothly. We met with just about every co-living advocate in the city, including the people from Freespace, the Embassy Network, the Noisebridge hackerspace, East Bay Cohousing, and the organizers of a previous conference called Community Squared.

We ended up with 104 registered attendees, and we have much of it on video, which we hope will be available shortly.

We couldn't have done it without the efforts of the dynamic duo, Betsy Morris and Raines Cohen, at East Bay Cohousing. They knew so many of the local people, and were fantastic at planning, facilitating, and co-organizing everything.

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