

*In a democracy, citizens have the right to pry out the measure of their own.*

## CHAPTER 36

### PEOPLE POWER TO DE-CLASSIFY DEEP DATA?

*Ask officials for a stat for Earth's worth. If that's too hard, ask the universe.*

**N**ot just gadflies are stonewalled when trying to squeeze a response from government; even presidents get stymied. John F. Kennedy expressed amazement upon discovering how little power the President of the United States actually had, how unresponsive bureaucracies were to his executive orders. Perhaps since then, the “highest” office in the land has accrued more power.

#### RULERS BOSS BUREAUCRATS

**O**f course, bureaucrats did not stonewall every command issued by their commander-in-chief. Most often, they obeyed in one fashion or another, even to an order pertinent to our request. Throughout history, bureaucracies have complied with their ruler's mandate to calculate the worth of Earth in their jurisdiction: in ancient Sumer and Egypt (Foreword) and medieval England (Ch 3).

How hard can it be? In Denmark, they used to include the value of the location with each number and address in the phone book. Denmark had a history of assessing and taxing land dating back to the Age of Enlightenment (late 1700s). Then, a nephew overthrew his uncle, the king, just so *he* could sit on the throne and tax land for the betterment of the whole kingdom (the idealism of youth). No vestiges remain.

The first US Government, in operation during the rebellion against Great Britain, operated according to the first attempt at a constitution, the Articles of Confederation. That document directed the federal government to fund itself with land value collected by a tax. To do so, of course, required government to know, and thus assess, the worth of locations.

The Founding Fathers junked their first constitution with its land tax, in favor of the current constitution with free trade between states and tariffs at national borders, plus land sales to fund the federal government. While no longer needing to know the value of locations, that document does nevertheless require Congress to conduct a census every ten years.

Today's census counts many things; not just the number of people but also their incomes and outgoes and possessions. The US Census Bureau even used to add up the value of land in America, but quit doing it. Yet, the US Congress could require that department to get back to tabulating the worth of Earth in America.

The Census Bureau is not the only federal agency that Congress could order to calculate the rental value of land and resources. In the past, many agencies have published a report on the total rental value of some, or all, of everything:

Bureau of Economic Analysis, Bureau of Land Management, Census Bureau, CIA (believe it), Congressional Budget Office, Congressional Research Service, Departments of Agriculture, of Commerce, Federal Communications Commission (for the value of the EM spectrum), Federal Housing Administration, Federal Housing Finance Agency, Freddie Mac, Fannie Mae, General Services Administration, Government Accountability Office, Housing and Urban Development, Labor (Bureau of Labor Statistics), Library of Congress, Office of Management and Budget, Treasury (Bureau of the Fiscal Service), and two quasi-governmental agencies, the Federal Reserve and the National Bureau of Economic Research.

That's a big bowl of alphabet soup. If asked to take a stab at it again, let's hope this time they standardize their goals, definitions, and methods, so that they arrive at a unanimous answer.

## **FOR US: FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT**

**I**n a democratic republic, people have a right to know how much their society spends on the nature they use. Under the Freedom of Information Act, any citizen could request the figure for the total of rents. But that assumes at least one official agency has tabulated it.

It also requires that the petitioner understands the obtuse text on the agency's websites on how to use the FOIA (they offer a second website to explain the first one). A citizen can only hope that their request is made according to the bureaucracy's rules. And that, if any mistake is made, it won't completely derail the request.

In total, 20+2 bureaucracies got our own FOIA request; I held my breath. Within days, the letters from the bureaucracies did begin to pour in. Many were form letters, yet many others were unique and original, in order to address my unheard-of request. I was grateful for the time that a busy bureaucrat took to reply.

The end results? I should be honored. I was treated like JFK. Not all even bothered to answer. If an agency did not have the answer, it'd be easy for them to say so. But if an agency did have the answer, it could be hard to say so. The powerful insiders who now capture most of the rental stream have subtly mandated government to overlook that fatness, the very existence of King Rent, in order to keep the public in the dark re this source of fortune. Would that explain why some agencies did not reply?

Those that did reply said they did not track “rents,” our society’s spending on land, resources, spectrum, etc. Those that did track real estate values said they did not keep separate the value of human-made buildings from the value of nature-made land. Nor did they offer to separate for me the two drastically different values, to make clear our two drastically different spendings – one that rewards human effort (production) and one that rewards social advantage (ownership).

### GO OVER THEIR HEADS

If our public bureaucracies don’t have the answer, elected officials can make them determine it. The infrastructure is in place. Members of the House, the Senate, and the Executive all have their own research service. And when it’s a member of Congress asking for an answer, that bureaucrat feels enough heat to generate some light, however dim.

Officeholders might issue such an order if they, in turn, were ordered. Upstream from politicians, a citizen could request their elected representative to require the relevant public agencies to either release a reliable figure for the worth of Earth in America or to get busy and calculate it. That is, if the chain of command in a democracy were to behave as advertised.

Of course, the elite could accomplish that; they can make the law and they can break it (which is the way all societies operate). For an ordinary citizen, it’s much harder to persuading elected officials or bureaucrats. Still, citizens asking their reps to ask their public servants is worth a shot.

In communication with an elected representative, various talking points can grab their attention. A letter could look like this:

re: Official Figure for Land & Resources

Hon. [congressperson];

Given your clout with federal bureaucracies, you could be of immense help to the electorate, ferreting out data. Our sought-after

figures tell us what phase the business cycle is in (decades ago Hoyt discovered the 18-year land-price cycle). Good to know if you want to keep your savings or investments safe. Those same statistics also tell us how much surplus our economy is generating.

The surplus is our spending for land and resources and other assets not created by anyone's labor or capital. During the Civil War, the US included land values in the tax base. If government could assess location value then, it could do so now, too.

When government does recover "rents" (technically), i.e., puts them in the tax base, landowners use land more efficiently, which generates jobs. Even if the federal government forgoes these rents, it could negotiate with states to levy a tax or charge a land-use fee or institute land dues to direct this common-wealth into the public treasury.

Many voters prefer a more equitable disbursement of our social surplus, rather than let just a tiny fraction of us hog the most. A fair share would finance free time for every citizen. Presently Singapore cuts taxes on efforts, taps into the socially generated value of locations, piles up a revenue surplus, and pays citizens a dividend.

At your beck-and-call you have the Congressional Research Service, the Congressional Budget Office, and the Library of Congress, among others. In the past, economists in such public agencies have taken a stab at coming up with the correct answer. They can do so again, hearing from you.

If no other agency wants to do it, the IRS could. Instead of always prying into one's private wealth, the agency could tabulate society's public values. Performing that service would make the IRS less repugnant to ordinary citizens.

How much we spend for nature can be derived from many sources, including mortgages, property taxes paid, certain insurances, assessments, appraisals, for all uses, not just residential, but also commercial, industrial, agricultural, sylvan, mineral, fossil fuels, the EM spectrum, and not just private land but also nonprofit and public land, including roadways and water. We're talking trillions here, so we really need to know this stat.

There is a precedent. In the past, President Thomas Jefferson (a physiocrat) ordered explorers to bring back from the Louisiana Purchase all sorts of knowledge. Your researchers could bring back a total for society's spending on nature.

Feel free to use any of the language in this letter. If you have any questions, please ask. If a researcher has any questions, I'm happy to answer them, too. If they find themselves unable, we can tabulate

the total, once supported by a fair contract.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Thanks sincerely, John Q. Public

Asking officer holders difficult questions runs into the same obstacles as asking bureaucrats. The politicians, or their staff person who handles incoming mail, may have a radically different worldview. They don't see what the big deal is about knowing the size of all rents. Plus, like almost everybody else, they're busy.

Even though elected public officials are often about as helpful as the unelected public officials, politicians are here to serve us. Sometimes they do. They are cautious, they are weathervanes. One thing all politicians do is count noses. They won't build a bandwagon; but will hop on one with enough voters in it. The greater number of people who want to know, the happier politicians are to help. They're human and humans like to be on the winning side. When an election is coming up, incumbent candidates are especially helpful.

Instead of sending a letter that might fetch a form reply, gadflies could make an outing of it. Assemble a crew and pay a visit to their Congressperson; even recruit an academic expert to join in petitioning Congress. In person, they could all insist that public agencies measure the socially generated value of locations and make that knowledge public. Present a sample letter the elected official could use.

### LEADING THE WAY

**R**ational officeholders [sic] should bite. Heck, location value could be a tax base, for gosh sakes. Whether to write a letter or set up an appointment, there's the link to find your federal reps.

Even then, after fielding a request from a Congressperson, bureaucrats might stall, as they did with JFK. Words-on-paper are one thing; adherence to those words is something else altogether. Whatever factors influence an agency's decision to comply, or not, are hidden from public view. Even if the venture is not immediately successful, at least it will plant seeds that will bear fruit in ways one cannot expect.

While waiting for the powers-that-be and specialists to perform, we gadflies can do our own digging and show the specialists the way. Show them all what an accurate answer would look like. And how to find it.

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.*

– Margaret Mead