

Council of Georgist Organizations

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The Elephant in the Room

The 2018 Baltimore conference was outstanding,
but is that the real issue?

Annual Report from Dan Sullivan, CGO President

Dear friends and colleagues;

This letter is coming to you late because I agonized over how to best write it for a very long time.

Our main role has been hosting conferences, but this role does not exist in a vacuum. Some who are dissatisfied with our conferences blame them for the failings of the movement. The Baltimore conference is a great example of that connection, because the enthusiastic response to that conference was due more to what Georgists had already accomplished in Baltimore than how our planners put together the conference.

Joshua Vincent, Lindy Davies and Alanna Hartzok had put together great programs, giving the conference a great deal more variety than we had in previous conferences. Thanks to yeoman efforts after the conference by Paul Justus, almost every session, even the “open mike” sessions, are online. Paul and Scott Walton also did all the camera work. Never before have we put so much of the conference online, so you can get much of the experience whether you could attend or not. Even the “open mike” sessions are online. You can also share your favorite videos with others to inspire and help educate them.

Links to the videos are at <http://cgocouncil.org/videos/>. You can also see them all by searching YouTube for Council of Georgist Organizations and clicking “videos.” I will tell you more about the Baltimore conference and the upcoming Pittsburgh conference later in the letter. For now, I will just note that the four highest-rated presentations were all about activism: Two by Maryland state delegate Clarence “Tiger” Davis, who spoke on the first day and again at the banquet, one by Charles Avila, who came all the way from the Philippines to talk about the ethics and morality behind his LVT work there, and my closing session, “The Politics of Reason.”

I believe our presentations were the highest rated, not because we were outstanding speakers, but because Georgists long to see action, results, and a way forward. I think most of us are tired of dwelling on theory and want to see something actually happen. That brings us to...

The Elephant In The Room:

Mahomet cald the Hill to come to him. And when the Hill stood still, he was neuer a whit abashed, but said; If the Hill will not come to Mahomet, Mahomet wil go to the hil.

- Sir Francis Bacon, Essays, 1625

If we are to succeed, we must get over the notion of the conference as a vehicle getting the mountain to come to Mohammad. Rather, each of us, like Mohammad, must go to the mountain and do our own outreach. Effective outreach is personal and individual. The conference can give us the inspiration, the training and the tools to go out and do that outreach, but it cannot do that job for us.

Some of us keep looking for our conferences to do in three days what it is up to all of us to do all year long. Conferences are not where we recruit people to become Georgists or even land value tax supporters. It is where we help *existing* Georgists go back home to recruit people to become supporters, and were we celebrate who have *already* advanced the cause and recruited others to help them.

We have succeeded when we focused on in inspiring new people whom you and other Georgists had already reached out to and won over. We have failed when we tried to attract outsiders and win them over at the conference.

The purpose of any well designed conference is not to attract new supporters, but to strengthen the bonds between already committed supporters and to help them attract additional support during the rest of the year. Conferences are places where members of a community confer. This is true whether they are lavish liberal or conservative conferences funded by billionaires like George Soros or the Koch Brothers, or small conferences like ours that are primarily self-funded by the attendees with help from small grants from a few of our foundations (most notably the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation) and donations from people like you. Although well-done conferences can inspire and motivate us, great conferences do not make great movements. Rather, great movements lead to great conferences.

Yet one Georgist after another has insisted that we bend the conference to the purpose of outreach, each saying that they will succeed where others have failed, and each failing. These failures were not due to particular strategies, but to the fact that conferences are not, by their nature, outreach vehicles.

I believe that we need to use the conference to nurture our supporters and educate them so they can be more effective. That is why my own study has focused on where we have been successful and where we went wrong, and why my last two presentations have been on effectiveness. I have studied the history of the Georgist movement with that in mind, and I found that the approach that has been effective for us has differed from “us vs. them” approaches.

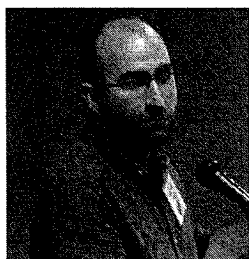
The 2019 Pittsburgh conference will include, on the last full day, a training session on how to build positive relationships with politicians and other leaders. It will be conducted by the Pennsylvania co-coordinator of Citizen’s Climate Lobby, the only

major environmental group that is not corporate-funded, and the only group that proposes a carbon tax coupled with a citizens' dividend. Their approach of building relationships with elected officials is tailored to work well for groups like ours that do not have power, but have reason on our side.

The Baltimore Conference:

The Pre-Conference Charrette:

We started off with some excellent presentations at a pre-conference charrette on Monday, August 27, organized by Joshua Vincent and Lindy Davies with the goal of attracting local public officials who should have a professional interest in tax policies. Although very few public officials showed up (The mountain did not come to Mohammed), Georgists got to see how our competent advocates talk to public officials, and the officials who did show up were given priority at question time.



The presentation by Victor Rameriz was a particularly good example of how to talk to political leaders. It was visual, data-driven, non-ideological, and focused on the concerns of Puerto Rican leaders rather than on our concerns. It showed, among other things, how land values follow transit lines.



Our two most exciting presentations:

The regular conference began on Tuesday, and the hit of the conference was Delegate Davis. He had fought to get a land value tax option for Baltimore through the state legislature and vowed at the conference to organize for that purpose again. He even brought a young activist to the conference to work on the issue with him. He spoke from an interesting, non-stereotypical black perspective with candor, humor, passion and commitment, and helped us understand what our reforms would mean to Baltimore's predominantly black population.



I want to emphasize that follow-up in Baltimore is crucial. When we get serious commitments like this from important community leaders, we must respond with our own commitments to back them up. Prominent Georgists once had a meeting with Ralph Nader in which Nader was very excited about what they had to say, but nobody followed up to nurture him along and give him what he needed to confidently endorse our proposals. Also, our outreach efforts at the Michigan conference were wasted after we got serious leaders interested in our issue and then had nobody followed up in that state, either. Our point-person for Baltimore is Joshua Vincent, director of the Center for the Study of Economics, and he deserves your support. You can donate to him at 1501 Cherry St, Philadelphia, PA 19102 or email him at: joshua@urbantools.org. Be sure to tell him it's for Baltimore.

We had some disappointments that first day. Technical failures on our part prevented Fred Foldvary from speaking to us from California, and we had a last-minute cancellation. Josh hustled to find a substitute, a free-market urbanist named Scott Beyer. Scott was touring 30 cities promoting his web magazine, *The Market Urbanism Report*, which serves as a libertarian-leaning resource for city planners and officials. Attendees were disappointed that Scott didn't understand or like land value tax, but I am pleased to tell you that I have been participating on his Facebook page, and he has warmed to the idea. He seems to grow more positive about it the more he learns.

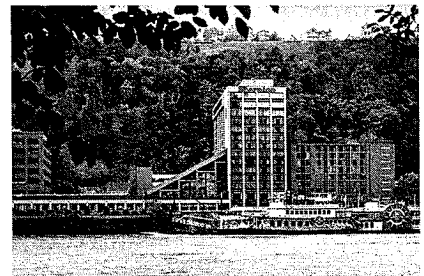
The rest of the day went well. It focused on practical advantages of land value tax, with the launching of the new Schalkenbach book, *Rent as Public Revenue*, Maryland's historic LVT advocate Jackson Ralston, and a talk by Tom Daniels, a Georgist planning professor at the University of Pennsylvania, on value capture as a tool for city planners.

Wednesday was also focused on items new to many Georgists – Elinor Ostrom's ideas of the commons, the Georgist spirit of early Cuban revolutionary hero José Martí, financing bonds with land value tax, a new land value tax in Thailand and support for such a tax by the dominant political party of Korea.

Alanna Hartzok organized the Thursday sessions, which focused on the moral and ethical foundations of land value tax. The ethical focus was a perfect setup for Clarence Davis's banquet speech, and the transition from the pragmatic to the historic to the ethical gave the conference a great deal of variety without losing cohesion. Having several people involved in programming also increased the variety.

The main downside to the conference was that there was not enough time for social interaction. First of all, we accidentally scheduled sessions without leaving breaks in between them. We have learned over the years that 20-minute breaks are ideal, and we are returning to that policy for future conferences. We also failed to have a hospitality suite this year, due to the hotel's unwillingness to give us one. Next year we have an exceptionally large hospitality suite where Georgists can socialize all evening long.

When we took over responsibility for putting together conferences, we were given grants from the original conference hosts that, in today's money, would be worth \$42,000 per year. Even that was less than it had been costing the original foundation hosts, because they did everything with paid staff and we do much of our work with volunteers. (I am one of several unpaid volunteers.) Today we get \$10,000 per year from these same hosts, and we are expected to do far more for it than was done with four times as much originally. (It had gone down to \$6,000 until your personal donations demonstrated how much you valued the conferences.)



We have also been told to make the conferences better, which we have done, to make the sessions available on YouTube, which we have also done, to prepare special edited versions of the sessions that we have also done, even though I have not seen

these edited sessions put to use, and to make the conference more affordable to young Georgists, which we had been struggling to do all along, only to see our efforts eroded by funding cuts. It reminds me of a sign I once saw over an employee's cubicle that said, "We have been doing more and more with less and less for so long that we will soon be qualified to do everything with nothing."

Recently, our largest sponsor has spent far more money to subsidize one-day conferences designed to attract young people than they spend on the three-day conferences that hold our core supporters together. It reminds me of a man who is tired of his wife and has decided to court new girlfriends. It makes far more sense to focus on committed supporters who need help and guidance to become more effective than to throw money at new people and hope they become interested.

After we learned to function with our funding gradually reduced by 75%, a member of that sponsoring organization even asked me if our "business plan" for the conference was to lose money! I was so flabbergasted I couldn't even answer. As I see it, the purpose of these conferences is to nurture supporters and help them become effective advocates for our cause, much as parents nurture children and help them become effective adults. Yes, we profit as a movement from that, but we don't profit directly off the conference any more than good parents profit directly off their children.

The 2019 Pittsburgh Conference

The theme of the 2019 conference is reaching out to the American labor movement, and we will have labor leaders giving us feedback on what they think of our proposals and on how to best win labor's support. Pittsburgh is a big labor city and home of the nation's biggest Labor Day Parade. After all, the Georgist movement and the American labor movement were born together and are now declining together. Both the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor originally campaigned for taxes on land values. How we lost our partnership with labor and how we can regain it will be the theme of the conference.

Land value tax is the ultimate pro-labor reform, and maybe we can work together to win over the labor movement once again, not at the conference per se, but as a result of the conference none the less. We are going to make this conference as good as we can possibly can in hopes that support for the conference will turn around. If you have any connections with the American labor movement, please call or text me at (412) OUR-LAND, (412) 687-5263. We are holding our 2019 conference from the evening of July 23 through the morning of July 27 at the Sheraton Station Square, a union hotel directly across the river from Pittsburgh's Golden Triangle.

There are good places to eat right in Station Square, ranging from inexpensive to upscale, and also at the top of the two incline planes by the hotel. The hotel shuttle will also pick people up from the downtown stops of the Airport bus and take people anywhere in a three mile radius, which covers the most interesting places in the city.

To that end, I have prepared brochures designed to showcase George as a champion of labor, and have been in touch with union leaders who are very interested in our conference. We will be printing those brochures at a reasonably priced union print

shop, and will be using them to reach out to labor. Copies of the brochures are online at <http://cgocouncil.org/labor>.

The Common Ground USA Sponsorship Fund

Common Ground has pledged \$3,000 to help get its members to the conference. Preference is given to established members over new members, but anyone who has been doing volunteer work for the Georgist movement can join Common Ground and apply. We are grateful to organizations that do this, as it helps bolster our attendance by bringing dedicated supporters to the conference.

Your Support is Crucial!

We are still struggling, but without your donations over the past two years, we would have had to make 2020 our last conference. Even with your support, our balance gets smaller each year. It is now about \$24,000, which is about \$30,000 less than it had been a decade ago and only about enough for half a year's operating budget. Our labor materials will be an extra expense, but we believe the expense will be worthwhile if you will use them to reach out to labor.

On the fundraising drives of the past two years, we had been given matching grants of \$1,000 each, first from Mason Gaffney and then from Polly Cleveland. This year Nicholas Rosen, our biggest donor during the previous years, pledged to match the first \$2,000 in donations. He chose to set no limit on the size of the donation he will match, but only on the \$2,000 total. Nic is one of those unassuming people who has quietly supported the conference and the movement without recognition. We hope you will be inspired by his commitment and donate what you can.

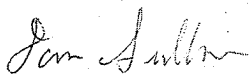
If you represent a member organization, we ask first that you renew your organization's \$50 dues. This gives your delegate a right to both speak and vote at the annual business meetings. As an individual, you may serve as an affiliate member for \$25 per year. Affiliate members may speak at meetings but do not vote. Donations above and beyond dues are subject to matching by Nic.

I hope you value the conference as the lynch-pin of the Georgist community, and that those of you who can afford to do so contribute generously so we can work to turn the movement around.

Recognizing Outstanding Georgist Efforts

If you know of a Georgist who has done outstanding work that deserves recognition at the banquet, either as one who has accomplished a great deal or who has quietly worked behind the scenes to make other people successful, let us know on the enclosed form.

Sincerely,



Dan Sullivan, CGO president