

# the Henry George News

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## *Kentucky's 100% Assessment*

by ROBERT TIDEMAN

AT MEETINGS throughout the State, California assessors are viewing an official Kentucky film which explains the mechanics of Kentucky's shift to 100 percent assessment last year. Evidently the assessors think our courts may rule for the practice of Sacramento County Assessor, Dr. Irene Hickman, who says she will obey Article II, Section 12 and assess at "full cash value". Realizing that they may have to obey the Constitution after all, California assessors want to know how Kentucky assessors met the same challenge last year.

Kentucky's Constitution, like California's, requires assessors to list all property at its cash value. Just as in California, Kentucky assessors had defied their Constitution and, over the years, had valued property at ever lower levels. As the official property tax base reflected an ever smaller proportion of Kentucky's rising property values, local governments and school districts became less able to support themselves. Lulled by low assessment levels into the mistaken belief that they were getting off easy, taxpayers failed to complain of inequalities, and assessment rolls became more and more unequal.

Then on June 8, Kentucky's highest court, presented for the first time with

**This article is abridged from one of the columns by Robert Tideman which appear regularly in the Pacific Sun, San Rafael, California. He is the Executive Secretary of the Northern California Extension of the Henry George School, with headquarters in San Francisco.**

a clear-cut case, ruled that the Constitution still lived, that all property must be assessed at its "fair cash value."

Faced with the Court's mandate, the Kentucky Department of Revenue asked for at least two years in which to comply with the law. The Court ruled, however, that the switch to 100 percent valuations would have to be made on January 1, 1966, less than seven months away!

"The first reaction," said Commissioner Lockett, "was shock. This turned to anxiety, to fear, to near panic . . ."

"The Court order was so direct, so sweeping, so unequivocal that the first thing the administrator under the gun did was to take a deep breath. There was soul searching by assessing officialdom, in fact by all officialdom, and by property owners as well . . ."

"Due to the short time available, June to January, and lack of local manpower, obviously a precise and thorough reevaluation of each property was impossible. Nevertheless, in most coun-

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ties, a respectable job was done. The county tax commissioners responded to the challenge and with few exceptions made a sincere effort to reach full value. The statistical results are solid testimony of how well they performed. And it wasn't easy. Many property owners who had gotten by with ridiculously low assessments heaped loud abuse on officials only trying to do their job.

In one year statewide real estate valuations were raised by 371 per cent. In some counties the increase was as much as 1000 percent. Tax rates were slashed drastically.

According to Commissioner Lockett, only 15,078 assessments—less than two percent—were appealed. In two counties not a single assessment was appealed. Only 21 of Kentucky's 120 counties missed full value by a margin wide enough to warrant corrective action by the State Department of Rev-

enue.

Is the full value program generally acceptable?

Said Lockett, "The people are now coming to realize that it is fundamentally right. It is tax justice . . . Now the property owner can make an intelligent comparison of his assessment with that of his neighbors . . .

"Kentuckians," said the commissioner, "have had a rewarding experience, a revolutionary experience seldom realized in such a short span of time. It is not easy to uproot tradition from one end of a state to the other; not easy for all taxing jurisdictions to reorganize their budget and financial machinery . . ." If our [California] court does rule that assessors must obey the Constitution and assess property at full cash value, it will be good to remember—in the moment of shock—that Kentuckians not only survived the enforcement of their Constitution but see it now as "tax justice".

Deeply felt by all who knew him will be news of the passing of Sidney G. Evans of San Diego on February 25th. Where there is so much to be said, words had best be few — until next month.

Leo Cohen's death, also on February 25th, is a sad loss to Georgist friends. He taught classes in Oakland, New Jersey and campaigned locally in an effort to arouse interest in a graded tax plan.

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