

The Battle of Philadelphia

by Josh Vincent

For four years, the Henry George Foundation of America has worked to make citizens, decision-makers and policy wonks aware of the gift of land value taxation. To a large degree, we've succeeded. In these past four years, the City Controller's office has taken up the cause, along with the Philadelphia Tax Reform Commission. The Philadelphia Association of Realtors, the Mid-Atlantic Small Business Alliance and dozens of small civic and neighborhood groups have taken a stand for taxing land values in this once-great and powerful city.

The Tax Reform Commission recommended land taxation as one of the major reforms to be adopted to fix Philadelphia's hopelessly skewed and unfair tax structure. The Commission arrived at that conclusion because HGFA, and our sister organization, the Center for the Study of Economics, brought experts from other Pennsylvania cities where we've worked, citizens from neighborhoods rich and poor, and ourselves: HGFA and CSE were represented in person day in and day out.

Finally this year, on May 10th, the Philadelphia City Council heard about the tax reform program, including land value taxation. The Henry George Foundation, believing that powerful and moneyed interests were arrayed against the land tax, alerted 150,000 ordinary Philadelphians — by means of a letter that showed how a shift to LVT would affect *their own tax bills*. It took a lot of money and time, we managed it.

Thanks to our efforts, every seat in council was filled, and literally thousands were turned away. Retired people, working people, young people, black, white, Asian and Latino were represented. The lucky few hundred admitted sat with their "Land Tax Now" signs and American flags and waited for their chance to be seen and heard as citizens. And waited. And waited. In the end, not one of those citizens was heard on May 10th! I waited until 8:45 that night to be heard. The disheartened and disenchanted homeowners of Philadelphia dejectedly left, in what was likely their first experience with participatory democracy in Philadelphia.

The next day, the hearings were resumed. Excitement was replaced by dull lethargy, except when the boss of Philadelphia parking lots, Bob Zuritsky, turned up — and was treated like a prince as he inaccurately railed about "radical" land value taxation. As the fifth hour rolled around, one lone homeowner from East Oak Lane remained. The last man standing.

For this year, land value tax was stymied. The interests we feared, the parking lot owners of downtown, hit us with everything they had. Sunoco, for example, grouched that their profits for their refinery tanks would be cut (by .02%, by our calculations).

(continued on page 34)


Becoming a Pundit...

(continued from page 17)

interest. Do not push too hard to persuade that your views are correct. Let the writer see that you could be a useful source of information. Cut it off by saying you have another engagement but would be glad to meet again.

☞ Phone, email and regular mail are good once you have established contact. Short responses to future editorials, sharing your take on the problems and solutions discussed, can be frequent, say every month or so, but not so often as to be seen as a pest.

☞ Aim to become a friend and unofficial consultant to the editorial writer — to influence what he or she writes. So put “Not for Publication” at the bottom of your written comments. If the editorial writer wants to publish your thoughts under your name, of course, happily go along with that.

☞ Let the editorial writer’s responses guide whether this is a friendship to nourish and continue. If, after a reasonable effort, you conclude the case is hopeless, start over with another local editor, reporter or talk show host on your local radio and TV stations. 

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(continued from page 18)

Since political contributions are not monitored or limited in Philadelphia, the parking lot barons are particularly generous to those running for office (with little overhead, parking lots enjoy profit margins that rival those of prostitution and drug dealing). Our principal opponent — the Zuritsky family — is the third largest landowner in Philadelphia. The councilpeople who supported us initially collapsed like the burning Hindenburg.

The Tax Reform plan calls for a 2006 implementation of land value tax — so we are alive and kicking. We have a plan that calls for public exposure of the corporate welfare community in Philadelphia, further exposure of LVT’s benefits to hard-pressed homeowners, and more pressure on politicians. We can be very thankful that City Controller Jonathan Saidel, a loyal and committed LVT supporter, will run for mayor in the next election cycle.

Land value tax has slowly built small victory upon small victory. Without the experience of Allentown, Altoona and Harrisburg, Philadelphia would never have taken land value taxation as a serious and sober alternative. The years of hard work have borne results in our land tax cities and have directly led to LVT being in the maelstrom of big-city politics.

At the '05 CGO conference next August, Georgists will be able to see just what is being done in Philadelphia, how we are making alliances — and how we are considered a true threat to “business as usual.” What you hear will be at turns inspiring and horrifying, but never dull. See you there! — J. V.