

The CGO's Pittsburgh Conference

report by Damon Gross

The theme of this year's conference was "Labor and Land: America's Lost Legacy." This is as fine a catch-phrase as can be crafted. But for this attendee the conference was all about some important events that have occurred since our conference last year in Des Moines. The most important of these events is that Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, in which Pittsburgh is situated, did a complete and disastrously erratic re-appraisal of all the real estate in the county. So chaotic were the new appraisals that Pittsburgh regressed from the split-rate legacy that has benefited its citizens since 1914 to a uniform tax rate on all types of real estate. Among other prominent recent events, Alanna Hartzok ran for Congress. The Henry George Foundation of America moved its offices from Maryland to Philadelphia. New leadership was installed at the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation. Mike Curtis was named Director of Education of the Henry George School in New York and Ken Ford Director in Philadelphia. And at least two new books of interest to Georgists were published.



Pittsburgh's Assessment Debacle

It is hard to appreciate just how bad the new appraisals in Pittsburgh are without the copious details that were presented at the conference. Just one example: on one block in a commercial district the land assessments alone vary from parcel to parcel from \$14.71 per square foot to \$327.75 per square foot, and there seems to be no rhyme or reason to the variations. Comparable lots right next door to each other differ in land assessments by a factor of 2 or 3 times. Sabre Systems, the consulting firm that Allegheny County hired to do its first comprehensive reappraisal in more than twenty years, could not have done more to sabotage land value taxation even if it knew what it was doing.

Dan Sullivan, Joshua Vincent, and Bruno Moser made fine presentations on various aspects of the Pittsburgh situation, and there was much more to be learned about it in private conversations at breaks and after hours.

There was also good news. On the very day before the conference started, as the directors of Common Ground-USA were gathering to conduct our annual board meeting, Bill Batt drowsily picked up the local morning newspaper. His eyes immediately grew to the size of frizbees. He stuffed the paper in my face and said, "Look at this! LOOK AT THIS!" The headline was right there on the front page of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*:

"Sabre's systems ditched." Allegheny county had fired Sabre Systems and Service and had hired a different appraisal consulting firm which is, coincidentally, one Ted Gwartney recommends, Cole Layer Trumble, to come in and fix the problems. This news cast an optimistic glow over the entire conference.

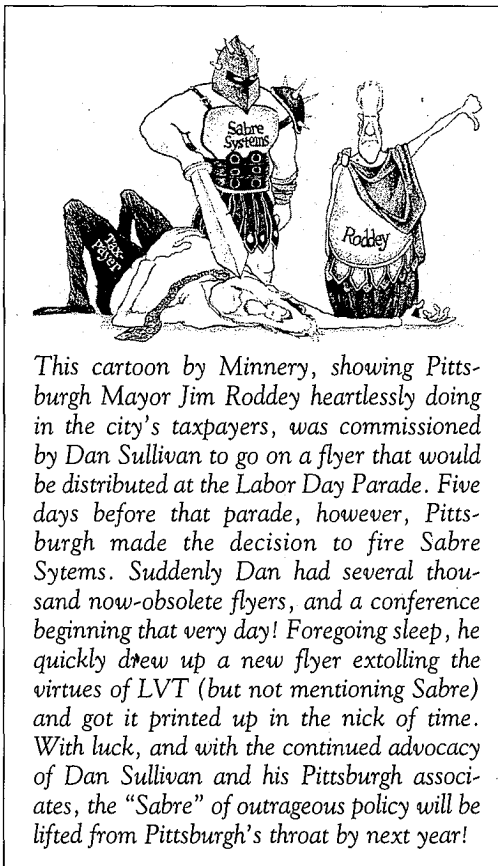
Hartzok's bid for Congress

After long-time Pennsylvania ninth district Congressman Bud Schuster resigned his seat under an ethics cloud, the Green Party of Pennsylvania nominated Alanna Hartzok to vie for the open seat. After a three-month campaign, Bud's son Bill Schuster won the special election. Hartzok garnered more than six thousand votes despite the fact that only one

hundred people in her district were registered with the Green Party. But the real story is the publicity Hartzok generated for our cause during the course of the campaign. She held rallies, interviewed with the print, radio and television media, and participated with the major party candidates in televised debates. She clipped the newspaper stories for a scrapbook that she circulated at the conference, and I must say that the coverage she got from the press was overwhelmingly positive. It even bordered on "thorough," close to "comprehensive." If you didn't see her scrapbook, you missed something. The clippings clearly showed that even the press could see that she was the one candidate with real, positive proposals, ideas that could solve real problems. No wonder 44 times as many people voted for her as there were people who identified with her party affiliation! And all this was done on the tiniest imaginable budget. Next time let's get Alanna elected.

The HGFA move

I think I recall overhearing Josh Vincent tell someone that the Henry George Foundation moved to Philadelphia because that is where the action



This cartoon by Minnery, showing Pittsburgh Mayor Jim Roddey heartlessly doing in the city's taxpayers, was commissioned by Dan Sullivan to go on a flyer that would be distributed at the Labor Day Parade. Five days before that parade, however, Pittsburgh made the decision to fire Sabre Systems. Suddenly Dan had several thousand now-obsolete flyers, and a conference beginning that very day! Foregoing sleep, he quickly drew up a new flyer extolling the virtues of LVT (but not mentioning Sabre) and got it printed up in the nick of time. With luck, and with the continued advocacy of Dan Sullivan and his Pittsburgh associates, the "Sabre" of outrageous policy will be lifted from Pittsburgh's throat by next year!

is. I agree. Several prominent Georgists live in Philadelphia or within shouting distance, we have already made progress elsewhere in Pennsylvania, and, from what I have heard, Philadelphia is ripe for our reform. Of course the fact that Philadelphia is the birthplace of Henry George adds a nice touch. Vincent spoke at the conference. So did Steven Cord. And two of the new office staff of HGFA were present. Among Josh, Steve and their new associates, HGFA was prominent at the conference both from the podium and in informal groups.

The Henry George Schools of New York and Philadelphia

Mike Curtis spoke at the conference with his usual flair and analytic accuracy. Ken Ford also spoke with energy and determination. I predict that both of these Henry George Schools will flourish under their new leadership.

The Schalkenbach Foundation

Nicolas Tideman is now Vice-President, Frank Peddle is the new President, and, after an eight month long search process, Christopher Williams has been selected as the new Executive Director, succeeding Ted Gwartney who resigned to become city assessor of Bridgeport, Connecticut. Tideman and Peddle of course are long-time mainstays on the Schalkenbach board and as far as I know the Executive Committee of the board remains the same, so we can expect a good deal of continuity. But all of us wanted the opportunity to get acquainted with the newcomer, Christopher Williams, and we were not disappointed. Tideman, Peddle, and Williams all spoke at some length at the banquet Saturday night. From the gist of their speeches I would expect Schalkenbach to expand beyond its traditional roles of publisher and grant maker and be more proactive in the future. Williams mentioned some conferences on specific Georgist issues that he is working to put together. I look forward to seeing where some new tactics will take the Foundation.



Pia DeSilva, Alanna Hartzok and Jeff Smith

A Brilliant Book and a Disappointing Book

Libertarian Party at Sea on Land is a well documented, clearly written, incisive critique of the views of past and present libertarians on land. It is must reading for libertarians, Libertarians, and the rest of us. At the conference we were treated to a fine talk by its author, Harold Kyriazi.

Kenneth C. Wenzer and Thomas R. West have written several essays that they have published as a book called *The Forgotten Legacy of Henry George*. Despite the intriguing title and the excellent reputation Wenzer

has earned for his work on previous volumes on Henry George, I could not find much merit in this new book. Bob Andelson deftly sorted out some of the most important confusions in the book in a delightful review entitled "Seeing Which Cat?".

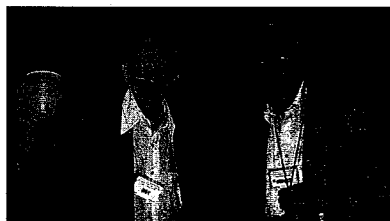
Miscellaneous Things that I liked

The main body of the conference was three days instead of just two days. Two days is too short. There was lots of open mike time. There were talks by real live local office holders like former Mayor Spozzi and former Councilman and current Representative Robinson. And lots of Pittsburgh people were there, a real tribute to the impact Dan Sullivan has had.

Miscellaneous Things that I did not like

Not all conferees were able to be at the conference from its beginning or stay till its end. I was one of many who left mid-day Sunday before the leafleting of the Labor Day parade.

Concurrent sessions. Because I was co-host of the conference last year in Des Moines I can appreciate the temptation to have concurrent sessions. There is too much to cover and too little time. Also, a sort of misguided modesty tends to creep into the planning process. The planners



Roy Corr and Ernest Kahn

think that not everyone might be interested in each and every one of the sessions they think should be included in the conference. Solution: concurrent sessions. Wrong solution to a non-problem! At the end of the Des Moines conference I felt that having concurrent sessions was the one real mistake

that we made in planning the conference. There were fewer concurrent sessions this year at Pittsburgh, but any is too many.

Microphones. Almost every speaker started his talk accompanied by a disconcerting chorus of "We can't hear you" shouted from the audience. A better sound system would be a huge boon.

The expression "21st Annual" in bold face on the front page of the Program Schedule. A first time attendee button-holed me and pointed to that, commenting, "I thought Henry George lived in the 19th century. If you have only been organized for twenty years or so, no wonder you are behind the eight-ball." I explained at length that a number of our organizations have indeed existed for many decades, and they have held various kinds of annual conferences in North America for 60 or 70 years. So, it is more accurate to say that this conference was our "21st annual" *since the CGO was formed to organize our annual conferences*. My explanation mystified the new attendee. I suggest that we determine, as *(continued on page 15)*

We don't get to hear most of the speakers because we're busy administering the conference, but we did get to hear State Senator Bill Robinson at lunch on Friday talk about tourism and the single tax. We plan meetings for a living, so we found that very interesting.

The hotel staff was very helpful and nice. They even gave our hard-working leafleteers a lounge to rest in on Monday after the parade.

Saturday night's banquet was great fun. Every year your Daddy makes up award certificates for our volunteer workers. This year he came up with the "Rooster Little" awards "for pluck and perseverance amidst a plethora of problems". The look on hard-working conference host Dan Sullivan and his wife Amby Duncan-Catt was one of "well it's almost over - thank heavens".

Next year we'll be in London, Ontario, Canada, August 20-25, 2002. John Fisher will be host - he has promised us lots of blueberries and good Canadian donuts. Not only will our hotel have an indoor pool with water slide and children's playroom, but it will also be downtown - not way out by the airport! There'll be plenty of restaurants and stores, and even an indoor farmers' market, three blocks away. The hotel is just four blocks north of the Amtrak Station for those who prefer not to fly.

Looking forward to seeing you next year!

*Sincerely,
Sue & Scott Walton*

The Pittsburgh Conference

(continued from page 13)

nearly as we can, how many years Georgists have held an annual North American conference. Suppose it is 72 years. Then we could bill next year's conference as "The 73rd annual Georgist Conference in North America, 22nd under the auspices of the CGO." That would more clearly reflect our heritage.

In the Final Analysis

This was a great conference. It takes a lot more work to put on a conference like this than you would know unless you had been involved in planning one yourself. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to the CGO, the local host Dan Sullivan, conference facilitators Sue and Scott Walton, the Schalkenbach Foundation, all the speakers, and everyone else involved. And, yes, let's give a hand to all the attendees.

One Final Point

As I revise these comments, I am struck that something is missing that is more important than the mention of some session that I have omitted or better balance in my treatment of some topic. What I cannot capture on paper is the sense of exhilaration and humility that one cannot help but feel in attending a Georgist conference. For that, you must attend the conference yourself. **Ⓞ**