

# EMPIRE STATE

## CAPITAL PROFILE

### Bill Batt

#### Executive Director of the Central Research Group Inc.

**Personal:** Batt, 70, grew up in Springfield, Mass., where his parents were teachers. After graduating from the University of Massachusetts, he joined the Peace Corps and went to Thailand as a teacher and community development worker. He taught English to nurses in a local hospital and did "anything that we would think would be useful" — which included raising chickens, pulling stuck elephants out of the mud and even helping with a woman who was having a breech birth. At that time, he said, the Thai people thought of the U.S. as a combination of Hollywood and Disneyland, and that Americans could do anything. He still returns to Thailand — he was there for a month in the fall — and speaks the language.

After the Peace Corps, Batt attended graduate school, earning a masters degree at Northern Illinois University and a doctorate in political science at the University at Albany. "I expected to be a professor of political science, public administration and economic development somewhere," he said. In the meantime, he got married and lived in Ithaca while teaching at SUNY Binghamton.

Following a divorce, he came to Albany in 1982 and went to work for the Assembly Tax Study Commission. He spent 10 years there.

"By the time I left I had become pretty knowledgeable," Batt said, "and working with computers I realized it had become possible to apply some ideas that had been moribund for some time — and these were the ideas of Henry George."

**What he does:** Central Research Group Inc. is a not-for-profit organization that researches public financing as well as sustainable development. While the Group is currently inactive, Batt is a leading proponent of land value taxation, in which property taxes would be shifted mostly to the value of land rather than buildings. Proponents believe this would spur investment and new construction.

#### Who is Henry George?

When he died in 1897, along with Mark Twain and Thomas Edison, he was the most famous man in America. He wrote this book, which later sold more copies than any book ever published except the Bible. It was called "Progress and Poverty," it asked why in this world of so much wealth there was still poverty. He figured out a remedy: taxing natural resources, land being the primary one. He believed that all natural resources are a common birthright of all humanity and we own it in what is known as "leasehold."

#### What is the best way to describe Land Value Taxation?

We've proposed that you no longer tax buildings, that you only tax land



LORI VAN BUREN/TIMES UNION

**BILL BATT** stands between the many bookshelves in the office of his Albany home. Batt is a leading proponent of land value taxation.

values.

#### Why do you believe that would be advantageous?

You add a wing to your house, you add a second story and you get hit with a higher tax — isn't that dumb? Most taxes — income, or traditional property — discourage economic growth. This one helps economic growth.

#### Has it ever been tried?

Scranton and Pittsburgh did this beginning in 1914. It was very common in places like South Africa and Australia. Even in China and India. Some of it died out; land speculators didn't like it.

#### Is Land Value Taxation used anywhere else?

There are 20 cities in Pennsylvania that do this. It's being considered all over: One political party in South Korea, another party in Taiwan, in London.

#### How do you promote it in New York?

Nobody ever heard of it, so it's hard. As people understand how it works, they'll realize it can revitalize New York State's economy upstate. California is looking at it. Ireland will start phasing it in.

— Rick Karlin