

Homeowners for Lower Taxes

IF YOU speak to people about under-assessments, maybe they will agree and do something, maybe not. But if you point out that an injustice is making their tax bills higher they may become interested. After more than a year spent in preliminary work, Dr. Samuel Scheck and Gerald Schleicher, two instructors in the Henry George courses, now have very workmanlike tax maps of portions of Nassau County, Long Island, complete with pertinent data. These were demonstrated and explained in a conference address by both members of the "team."

Using these maps they can show first that it is not quite true that "there is no more room" or that their county is overbuilt. Several large parcels have gone unnoticed—these tend to be very lightly assessed while the bulk of the population is grievously taxed at an unusually high rate. People in Nassau County are ready for tax reform.

Mr. Schleicher tells interestingly and well the step by step process which has brought them through to positions of leadership. Their main purpose is simple, they want to show how to raise more money so the taxes can be lower, not only for owners of homes but of businesses.

This activity, which the men call their hobby, got its impetus when Eugene H. Nickerson succeeded in having all the vacant land in the county reassessed. With these figures readily available the two Henry George enthusiasts took it from there. They are fortunate that this county can furnish small tax maps—half the areas in New York, including the adjoining Suffolk County, does not have them. By use of these maps, greatly enlarged, they can demonstrate to an audience how a tax rate now set at 15 percent could go down to 7.9 percent with a con-

structive tax reform based on proper reassessment of vacant land.

This ground work started when the two men selected a test area of approximately one square mile with well diversified land use and proceeded to make up a tax map with assessment figures which can be viewed for comparisons. Assessment employees were cooperative, and real estate companies in the area, who list each plot accurately, were also willing to share their figures. They have now formed HALT, the Homeowners Association for Lower Taxes, and are trying to incorporate it. Under this banner they hold public meetings to show neighborhood groups and others, how much money is involved, and how much is paid in tax bills because of under-assessed vacant land that is lightly taxed. It gives audiences something a little more practical to think about, and people at all levels come to see the inequities growing out of land speculation.

The New York state constitution provides for assessment of land at the same proportion of full value as buildings. The proportion of full value, it was stated, does not matter as long as it is the same for land and buildings. In Nassau County this proportion is one-third of full value. While it is true that old buildings are worth much more today than when they were built, it is primarily the land that has zoomed in value. One two-acre plot was listed in April 1966 by real estate agents at \$18,000 and in February 1967 it was \$10,000 higher. Land can be estimated at 130 times as much as it sold for in 1945 (Levittown) whereas the cost of producing a house is only about 30 percent higher. So the difference in the selling price of the house is generally the difference in the cost of the land, not the building.

HALT wants to see assessors in the

county reassess all the land at one-third of market value as the constitution demands. Equalization and value are key words. The same proportion should be maintained for land and buildings, and fortunately in this county they are listed separately. Value is more important than use in approaching land assessment. If a man chooses to plant cabbages on his land or even keep it idle, he may do so, but if the land is zoned for industrial use he should pay taxes accordingly. There is no reason for his paying lower taxes for growing cabbages, since he could at any time sell his land or use it himself at the utility for which it is zoned. The homeowner's land assessment is not reduced if his house burns down.

If the work of teaching at the Henry George extension in this county seems to have been slighted, think not so. Interested persons who show some comprehension of the subject are invited to come to the Fundamental Economics classes taught by Sam Rubenstein, the new director. Sometimes he appeals to new students by exposing the paths their tax dollars are taking.

Dr. Samuel Scheck, whose name is well known to Georgists around New York headquarters for his patient pioneering efforts, regards this idea as a Henry George gem with many facets. If George's principles are true, he says, they should work right here and now. In Nassau County, when students ask what they can do, the answer is "come and help us." They may distribute information to neighbors or call them together for an evening's perusal of a tax map—and the first thing you know they're learning a little about Henry George's theories and the law of rent without knowing it.

There is evidence now in several parts of the country to show that taxation is not as formidable a topic as people used to think. The excitement in California proves that people can

get aroused and informed about an unglamorous subject that is no longer dismissed as being too technical. Formerly economics in general was a study avoided by women and regarded as dull, but by curious coincidence it was primarily the support of women that gave Dr. Irene Hickman her startling victory in Sacramento.

How can all this affect you who are reading this message?

Dr. Scheck reiterates what others have said—make inquiries at your assessing agencies. Inquire as to whether land value maps or assessment figures are available for public use. If not, find out why not. See if improvements are listed separately from the land. This was a basic step inaugurated by a few of the stalwarts during Henry George's lifetime. Where this separation exists it can often be traced to such a source. Once its importance is understood it helps vastly to clarify one main issue—the fact that negligence in assessing unused land results in a gift from all homeowners to non-productive holders who will be enriched by the presence and efforts of the growing population.

Dr. Scheck, like Mr. Schleicher, says their aim is solely to teach the people that land is routinely under-assessed in relation to improvements. These men, now that they are able to see the early fruits of their efforts, rather enjoy being the proving ground for this cause. Other workers can use their tax maps, they say, but it would be better to make your own if they're not available in your assessor's office.

Their field work has revealed that most assessors are not professionals but laymen doing part-time work, hence a good student of Henry George could know more about this subject than those holding office.

Death and taxes are inevitable. The founders of HALT say just as doctors are working to increase longevity, *they* are working to reduce taxes.