

Sam
Venturella

Let George tax it

Municipal maverick says that he's willing to wait

By PAT BUTLER
Staff Writer

Sam Venturella isn't discouraged that there are only four students at the Henry George School of Social Sciences at 4536 N. Ravenswood.

When times start getting bad enough, he expects to see them lined up outside his storefront classroom waiting to get in.

The 67-year-old retired Chicago city planner has spent much of his life spreading the ideas of a maverick 19th Century social reformer who almost got elected mayor of New York urging that all government be funded through a single tax on land, especially unimproved land.

And while Venturella's textbooks range from George's "Progress and Poverty" to former Chicago Revenue Director Patrick Quinn's "How to Appeal Your Property Tax," he concedes it may soon be time to convert the Single Tax message to video to reach a public that doesn't read much anymore.

Put simply, Venturella believes that homelessness, unemployment, the federal deficit, trade imbalance, and even high property taxes could be eliminated in a generation by making land speculation unprofitable.

Because land is the source of food and minerals and therefore the ultimate basis of all wealth, he explained, it only makes sense to tax land for everyone's benefit rather than impose ever-higher levies on wages or even investments.

"Right now," he said, "we tax a piece of property at a low rate, and slap higher rates on any improvement. By turning it the other way around, we'd take the incentive out of holding onto more land than one can productively use."

Forcing owners to do something with their unused land, he argues, would not only create new jobs and products, but put more real estate on the market, lowering both rents and purchase prices.

And because the tax would be collected locally, with appropriate shares passed on to the state and federal governments, "Springfield and Washington would be a lot more accountable to us than they are now," Venturella said.

Although Venturella never got much response to the memoran-

dums urging a single-tax approach to municipal finance he sent to his bosses during his 20 years with the city, he did find a few closet Georgists in City Hall, and says five Pennsylvania cities recently started off on the right track when they began hiking taxes only on land, not improvements.

Still, he agrees the single-tax movement seems to have far fewer disciples today than in the early 1940s when he and his brother, Joe, first learned about Henry George from a customer in Joe's barber shop.

Sam Venturella began going to lectures sponsored by the 100 or so study groups the Georgists had around the city back then, went on to college for a master's degree in social work after his World War II Army service, and two years ago opened the Ravenswood storefront with funds left by Samuel Leonard, a former Chicago Georgist who became a successful Hollywood screenwriter.

All of which is reason enough he's not surprised Henry George's ideas haven't exactly caught on like wild-fire.

Not only are Americans "economically illiterate," but "those who profit from the present system naturally fight to perpetuate it," Venturella said, adding that the single-tax concept has drawn fire from both communists and capitalists.

Still, he believes it's just a matter of time before some form of financial disaster forces its adoption, leaving government to face what Venturella sees as the even greater challenge of "figuring out how to spend all the money that will be coming in."

In the meantime, he works all he can with the handful of students (ranging from "this young fellow two years out of college" to a retired graphic artist) he hopes will someday carry on where he left off.

In just the past year, Venturella has also been talking to everyone from a church-sponsored forum on housing in Ravenswood to the Lincoln Park Builders Club who he doubts agreed with him, "but at least they understood what I was saying."

And as far as Sam Venturella is concerned, that's half the battle.

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