

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MASTER PLAN

A View From the Trenches

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The purpose of this paper is to express my views on how a master plan would fundamentally improve our effectiveness. Everything in this paper is intended to serve that purpose.

To make my case, I have found it helpful to examine weaknesses in the ways we do things now. This will no doubt trigger some defensiveness. This is unfortunate, as it distracts from the central issue. However, I believe these criticisms are necessary.

My purpose is not to criticize particular actions of particular people. We need to improve our overall approach--things we all do, or many of us do, and to improve the overall climate we operate in. All this ties into the need for a master plan.

Moreover, I do not intend to mince words. What we do in the trenches of the political battlefield is critically important. It is also demanding, tedious, stressful and unrewarding. Every time Steve or I open our mouths, we know that we might be wasting time, or we might be winning or losing an opportunity to shift millions of dollars in taxes. That creates stress.

For people outside Pennsylvania, being a Georgist activist is even harder. Activists in other states have very difficult jobs, and we risk losing them by our failure to support them, yet we invest so little in finding out what help they need.

A sound master plan will focus attention on the needs of the activists and help get those needs met. In this way we can become a more dynamic movement. Yet there is resistance to the idea of a master plan, which comes from two sources.

The first is disagreement about what a master plan is. Some view it as a grand scheme. Under this view, all actions must fit into the scheme. The grand scheme idea implies the need for national or international hierarchies to coordinate activities so they all fit into the scheme.

The grand scheme concept has several drawbacks. One is that our proposals are most likely to be adopted at local levels. This dictates that decisions be made locally by people who are focused on local dynamics. Another is that most Georgists are not easily subordinated to central authorities. Attempts to create central authorities invite power struggles, resistance and demoralization.

I see central authority and grand schemes as contrary to the philosophy of Georgism. It is logical for socialists to make their plans and beat their drums and try to get everyone to march together, for that is what socialism is all about. People who fit in the socialist campaign style would also fit in a socialist government.

Our common asset is our love of liberty, coupled with the sense that we know of a key to liberty, and with our desire to use our own personal liberties for the benefit of mankind.

What we need is a key to the realization of our own goals. I view a Georgist master plan as a "master key" that will fit all situations and help us get past all barriers.

A master key contains the necessary parts of all related keys, without any parts that interfere with opening any of the locks. A master plan contains the essence, and only the essence, of all plans.

It is a core plan that can be built upon by any of us as we develop into a diverse but focused, goal-oriented movement.

Before detailing my concept of a master plan, I would like to deal with the other source of resistance to having a plan, which is institutional inertia.

My impression is many leading Georgists and most of our Georgist institutions have developed their agendas without a primary focus on the needs of the movement. This is intolerable, because that focus is vital to our success, but it is excusable, because there has been no master plan.

The "needs of the movement" means the needs of those in the movement who are doing the movement's essential work. Since we have no master plan, we have no clear definition of what our essential work is, so we have no way of identifying who is doing that work and what their needs are.

Unable to allocate resources to advance a master plan, we have allocated resources according to what we would like to do in support of the movement and according to what we think we do well. Without a master plan, "support of the movement" becomes a nebulous term. We end up going in circles with nothing to guide us.

Is the Schalkenbach Foundation supporting the Henry George School by providing them with books, or is the Henry George School supporting Schalkenbach by getting those books studied? What is the ultimate purpose of all this? Who is working toward that end? Is anyone even paying attention to that question?

We do not need to make wholesale changes in our institutions. They can do things similar to what they are doing now, for what they are doing is generally useful. To improve, they need to keep a master plan clearly in mind and tailor their activities toward advancing that plan. I am confident that if we had such a plan, improvements would follow.

The essence of our work is not something we have to invent, but only something we have to recognize. It is not something for all of us to decide upon, but for each of us to agree with. Regardless of official proclamations or what not, we will work together only to the extent that we individually agree on what we are trying to do.

With this in mind, I am putting forward my view of the essential work, or the master plan. Anyone who finds this view/^{acceptable}can work with me. Other versions may be wholly or partially compatible with this one. To the extent that two versions complement one another, the people who hold to them can work together.

I believe the essential work of Georgists is to get rent collected for the common good. Other benefits--reducing taxes, breaking monopoly, ending poverty, freeing the market place, etc.--are logical extensions of that accomplishment.

In order to avoid the pitfalls of the grand scheme approach, I will start with the simplest possible model and add complications only as necessary.

The simplest approach would be for us to collect the rent ourselves and turn it over to the community. However, our right to that is not recognized by the public.

The public recognizes the right of landlords to collect rent as rent, and the right of governments to collect rent as a tax. This leaves us with two possible core plans.

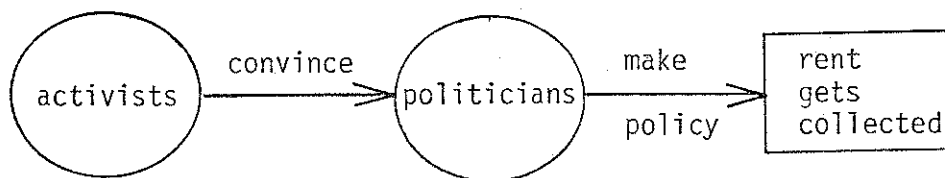
The land trust plan--convincing landlords to collect the rent collectively, and to return more and more of it to the community.

The land value tax plan--convincing top government officials to shift their tax base toward the collection of land value tax.

While both of these plans have merit, the second plan is the one in which the most energy is being invested. We are talking to politicians about taxing land far more than we are talking to landlords about voluntarily socializing rent.

This is a crucial distinction, because we are looking for a living master plan, not a hypothetical one, so that support plans can be evaluated. Essential work can be supported only if it is being done.

If the land value tax plan is the primary master plan, I would construct a model that looks something like this.



Although the operation proceeds from left to right, the plan could only be constructed from right to left, and decisions about how to implement the plan in any situation must also follow the right-to-left stricture.

Getting rent collected is the purpose, and is therefore the logical starting place. The appropriate policy to be made is whatever has the best chance of getting rent collected. Where a local land tax option is not available, it may be advocating property tax, which collects some rent, over other taxes which collect no rent; it may be fighting for higher land assessments, or it may be campaigning to the state government for a local land tax option.

Still building from right to left, the next step is choosing which politicians to convince. The answer is those who are most likely to advance targeted policy changes. People who head (or at least sit on) appropriate committees, people who are respected by and influential with other key politicians, and people who are generally responsible are the best first choices.

It is tempting but fallacious to rely on politicians primarily because they are friends of ours or in our camp. This is violating the right-to-left rule. The hard road to success is better than the easy road to failure. Allies are good people to talk to to get a better idea on where to start. However, the job is to convince the key people, not to hope people you have already convinced become the key people.) ?

Another easy road to failure is to go to a politician who will get lots of publicity but no results. Publicity is nice, but it is not a basic component of the master plan.

It is helpful to generate public support in addition to (but not instead of) convincing politicians directly. Public support is merely a part of the convincing process. If you ask, the politicians will let you

know how much support and what kind of support they want, just as they will let you know what questions they want answered.

The best approach then is whatever will sufficiently convince the politicians to adopt the policy change. Usually they tell us what they need to become convinced, but sometimes we have to "figure them out." In either case, the right-to-left rule is still in effect. When we start by trying to tell them what we know, expecting them to appreciate our answers, we fail. When we start by appreciating their concerns and addressing them, we have a chance of success.

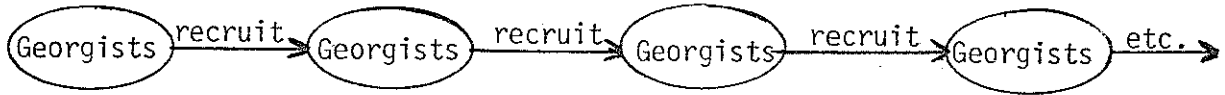
Finally, the activists chosen to do the convincing depends on who can best identify the convincing approaches--not on who is in charge or on who wants to talk.

This master plan is not complete, for two reasons. One is that the activists need help and support. The other is that there aren't enough activists working on enough politicians.

Before talking about help and support, let us talk about getting more activists. I believe that existing activists should be centrally involved in recruiting new activists. Their own experience as activists makes them better suited to both screen and convince potential recruits. Besides, the old activists will have to train the new activists.

Non-activists are put in the position of asking others to do what they are unwilling to do themselves. Most importantly, non-activists are not focused on the master plan, and often lose sight of that plan.

Many Georgists start by recruiting other Georgists, hoping that someday someone will lead them all to victory. Too often this becomes an end in itself. The model looks like this:

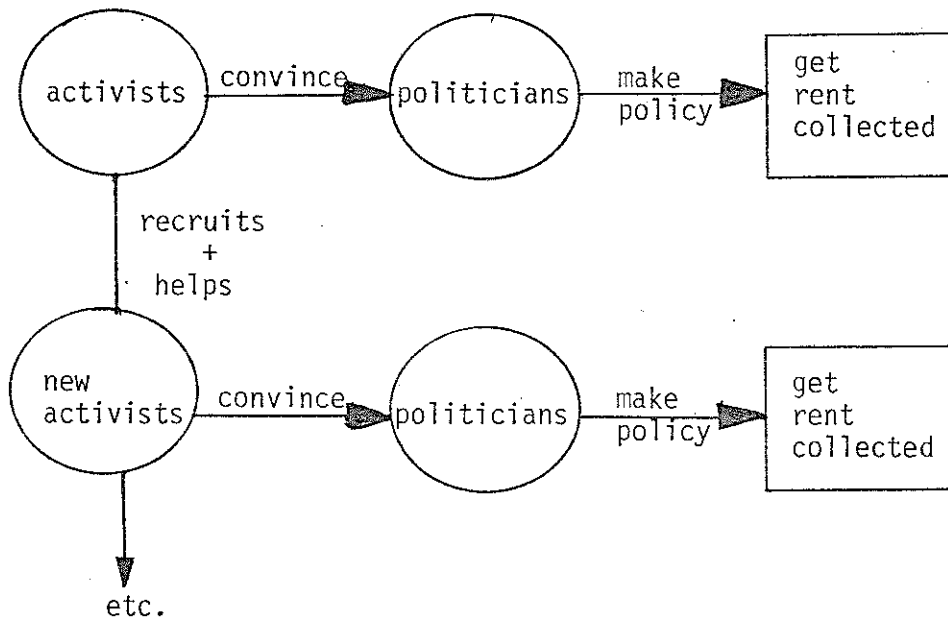


It goes on and on without leading to collection of rent, because it is not tied to a master plan, or because it started at the wrong end of the plan.

A Georgist who branches out and becomes an activist finds little help from the others. They don't know what to do because they are out of touch with the plan. Also, they have invested a great deal of energy in the above model, and defensively insist that cloning Georgists is the essential work.

Many Georgists expect the activists to be more like them. Activists cannot do this and still be activists. We have to be focused on the job before us and not on our own ideologies.

If activists are to recruit other activists, the model looks like this:



Still, the model is not complete. Activists need the help of all the Georgists to maximize their success. Again we must build from right to left on the master plan. The central question is what will help the activists do their two jobs--convincing politicians and recruiting new activists?

Most Georgist activists are dedicated people with a reasonable understanding of the economics involved. We all need training in political lobbying techniques, community organizing, volunteer recruiting, management and fundraising.

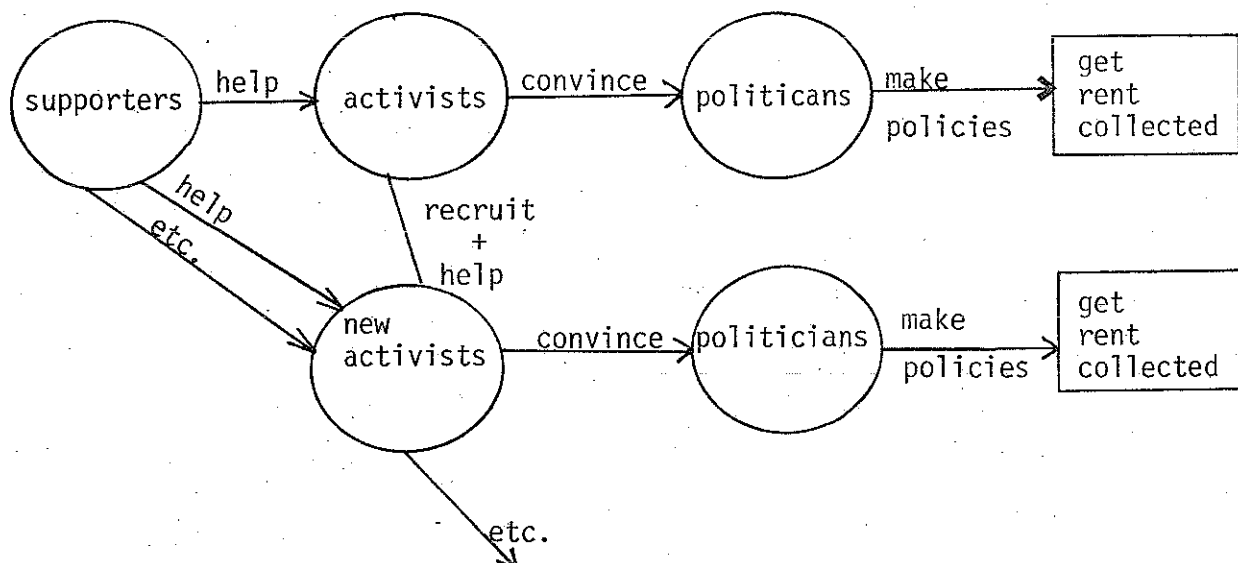
We need literature tailored for the politicians we hope to convince and for the new activists we hope to recruit. With all our literature, we have very little of this type.

We need procedural manuals for major aspects of our campaigns so we do not have to work in fear of having overlooked important steps. We have almost no material of this type.

If we are going to invest substantial amounts of time and energy, we need to be paid.

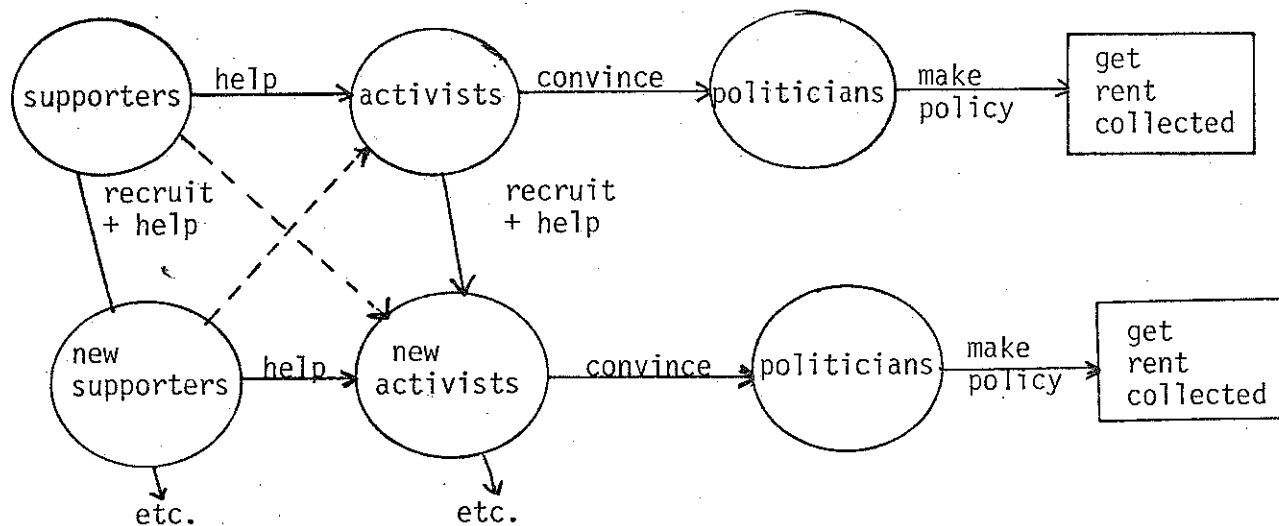
Each activist has unique talents and shortcomings, and each situation has its own peculiar opportunities and obstacles. We need free reins where we are strong, and special help, sometimes special staff, to help us where we are weak. We also need access to a reserve of resources to make the most of special opportunities and to overcome major obstacles.

By focusing on the master plan, Georgists can tailor support to the needs of the front-line activists. The model then looks like this:



It is necessary for the activists to be clear about our needs, and it is necessary for supporters to respond to those needs. Again, the work goes from left to right, but the planning is based on information flowing from right to left.

Although activists must assume primary responsibility for recruiting and developing new activists, supporters should continue recruiting and developing new supporters.



Detailing how supporters are organized, and what support consists of is beyond the scope of this paper, as it is not part of the master plan. Different supporters can work with different activists, and some groups can specialize in particular kinds of support.

The important point is that the support be tailored to assist the master plan. Running classes is fine, provided there are specific plans for the graduates. Are they to become activists, work in support groups, or contribute money?

When these plans are worked out in advance, they serve as guidelines for how activities such as classes will be run. They also insure that we will capitalize on the results of these activities.

No student should complete a class without being asked to support essential work in one way or another. If nobody is prepared to involve these graduates, there is little point in running the classes. It is like teaching people parts in a play that nobody is putting on.

We have a video tape on the land tax in Pennsylvania. It is one of the best media pieces to come out of the Georgist movement, because it focuses on the essential work. It deals directly with advantages that are important to politicians and help convince them to get rent collected.

Yet it fails as a project because it is incomplete. With all the time, money and talent invested in making the film, little or no attention was invested in getting the film shown. The result is that the film's virtues are being wasted.

Activists are usually strapped for funds. It is wrong to assume that they will come up with \$200 for a copy of a video tape and \$600 for a TV and a video recorder. It is also wrong to assume that they will know how to make the best use of the film.

The film also tries to do everything at once. It is too long to show politicians and activists because it is also supposed to be a 1/2 hour TV piece. Even Pittsburgh's city council, which is immersed in the land tax issue, does not want to see a 26-minute film.

The core problem of the film is that it does not address the needs of the activists who are supposed to use it.

We need to give politicians concise written materials that deal strictly with the politicians' concerns. The place for audio-visual materials is in recruiting new activists and appealing for community support.

I showed the film to professional activists from other organizations and got the following criticisms:

1. It is too long.
2. It does too much convincing and not enough motivating.
3. It does not talk directly to potential supporters.
4. It does not "close" with an urgent appeal!
5. It is inflexible and unalterable. A slideshow would have been better.
6. The equipment is expensive and cumbersome. Again, a slideshow would be better.
7. There are no procedural guidelines for using it effectively.

Again, it is the best film we have. Most of the above criticisms can be made of any of the Georgist films. The central error is in not consulting the people who would use the film to advance the master plan. People with resources decide on their own what to do and how to do it, as if the activists should rearrange their priorities to fit these projects.

Criticism should not be leveled at the big institutions alone. From the ranks of our most serious Georgists come ideas that are judged in a vacuum.

We have a proposal for a Georgist registry. Anyone who pays \$25 is supposed to become a Georgist for life, even if they completely lose interest a few years later. Backers insist that such people should not be lost to us.

Judged on its own, it sounds like a nice idea, but how will it get rent collected? As an activist looking for support, I want a list comprised entirely of people who have contributed recently or have at least kept up an interest. The idea of spending time and money on mailings to people who had a passing interest years ago runs counter to my desire to get on with the job.

From the Henry George School of Los Angeles we get bombarded with insulting literature from a non-activist telling us how to do our jobs. The literature is full of statements about what people would say. Those of us who are actually talking to the public know that little of this is what they actually do say. We get too few people asking how they can help and too many telling us how to do our jobs.

I do not expect overnight changes, as habits die hard. Yet it is important that top Georgists do not find comfort in activities that fail to help get the essential work done. I realize it is far less enjoyable and far more difficult to humbly support frustrated, cranky, burned-out activists than it is to do impressive but unessential work in time-honored ways.

Our institutions have been funded by people whose hope for the world is that land rent will someday be collected for the common good. Yet most of the people who are struggling to make that dream a reality have access to a tiny portion of these funds.

John Weaver worked for the land tax in Pittsburgh for over 40 years without results, before he finally interested councilman Coyne in the issue. He had to move to a retirement home in New York, and never did get to glory in the chain of victories that followed--yet without him they might never have occurred.

God bless the John Weavers, Nadine Stoners and Mary Davises of the movement. They struggle for the elusive victory with little hope of success, but whatever successes we get are due to people like those, for they are working the master plan.

The Georgist activists need and deserve the support that can only come from the Georgist movement, and the movement needs and deserves the kinds of victories that can only come from well supported activists.

If at least one board member of each Georgist organization calls attention to the master plan when proposals are being made and evaluated, I believe we will have those victories.