

Incentive Tax League of Pennsylvania

Dan Sullivan,
western regional director
3243 Parkview Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15213
(412) 687-LAND

TALKING LAND TAX TO POLITICIANS

WHO SHOULD TALK? Promoting land tax is mostly a matter of selling. The techniques that have worked for us are more sales techniques than political techniques. Our format for promoting land tax is primarily a sales format, and our most effective behavior has had characteristics of effective professional salesmanship. Good candidates for this job are people who have characteristics of professional level salespeople, including;

- *respect for the politician and the community
- *genuine, creative responsiveness to questions
- *a strong desire to achieve success
- *real faith in the proposal

PREPARE YOURSELF. The more political leaders you visit, the better your chances, so don't let yourself waste energy trying to be too selective. Still, you have to learn about the community and the person you will visit in order to make an effective presentation. In the process you will get a sense of who are your better prospects. Quiet politicians who work within the party and within community organizations are usually easier to reach than flamboyant politicians, and having them on your side is more valuable. Try answering questions like the following:

- *What problems will land tax abate in this community?
- *What events or conditions most clearly illustrate the connection between land tax and these problems?
- *What are the official responsibilities and the expressed concerns of the politician you will visit?
- *What clearly illustrates how land tax will help in these areas?
- *What are the biases of the politician and the community, and how is land tax compatible with these biases?
- *How many mills of land tax will raise what one mill of property tax will raise?
- *How will it affect some properties the leader is familiar with?

PRIME TARGETED LEADERS It is valuable to be known to political leaders you will visit. The more they have heard of your reform, the more likely they will take you seriously. Most Pennsylvania city and state officials and some officials in other states receive Incentive Taxation. You can get a list from Steve Cord, and you can have him add to the list for \$2 per official. You can also send a news clip with a letter offering to meet. Call about two days after the letter is expected to have arrived and ask for an

appointment, or, if you're in the neighborhood, just casually drop in.

PREPARE YOUR PRESENTATION You need a basic sales presentation, complete with props. The booklet Pittsburgh's Land Value Tax was designed as a presentation prop. It shows, in order, a satisfied user, a description of the product, two important practical uses, major endorsements, a sense of history, answers to common questions, and who we are. Give this to the leader to hold and focus his attention on while you make your presentation.

The booklet follows a standard presentation format you can use. I always tell the leader that I will be leaving him the booklet. To save him reading time, I briefly go through the booklet, and highlight important points from each page. This gives me a chance to:

- *Talk about the cities that have adopted land tax.
- *Describe concerns they had which are similar to the leader's concerns.
- *Describe, in simple, modest terms, the land tax and how it works. Use as few numbers as possible, and have the math memorized.
- *Describe advantages, and illustrate with familiar properties and events from within the leader's community.
- *Use the endorsements page to show that land tax is recognized as fundamentally just.
- *Refer very briefly to the history, to show that land tax has historical depth.
- *Refer to the questions in a way that encourages the leader to ask questions and make comments.

Look for clues as to what the leader has picked up on. Don't be discouraged if you get tough questions or objections. It means you are being taken seriously. The leader may be asking what he or she expects to be asked when promoting your issue.

CLOSE Assume the leader will want to pursue the issue farther, since you know the issue is worth pursuing. To close the presentation, give the booklet and other materials to the leader and ask what he or she thinks the next step is.

PRACTICE your presentation until you are comfortable with it. Try it on some small-city council members and work your way up to big-city mayors. The big shots are harder to convince, less likely to give you a second chance, and more important to sell well. You will also find that leaders who can introduce and vote on this directly respond better than those who can't. Don't be discouraged if the head of some department or some cause responds poorly to what you have to say.

GO ALONE. Once you get your presentation down, you can bring a trainee--if he keeps out of the way. It is easier to control your end of the presentation if you work alone, and leaders become less candid when there are more people present.

Gaining the leader's personal confidence is crucial. Dress well, near the level at which the leader dresses. Speak respectfully of community leaders and their jobs, even if the leader doesn't. Avoid personalities, partisan politics, and any issue that does not effectively promote land tax. Act professional.

STRESS THE POSITIVE. You will be asked who will pay more, and you will have to answer accurately. You will also have to justify their increase to some extent. However, you must not convey a sense of hostility or indifference toward members of the community. After all, the leader is supposed to represent their interests too.

DON'T MAKE IT LOOK GRANDIOSE. We might want to save the world, but most leaders just want to do what the community would consider a good job. The bigger, the more radical and fundamental and the more morally compelling a reform is, the more difficulties are assumed to accompany it. We know enough about land tax to convince people 100 times over, and to scare them away in the process. Show the leader the significance of his actions after he has taken them.

LISTEN. The time spent listening to the leader is what makes a successful presentation. It shows you care about the leader's point of view, it gives you valuable information, and it gives the leader a chance to make commitments.

DON'T ANSWER TOO QUICKLY. A fast answer conveys impatience, as if the question was stupid, and gives a sense that you shoot from the hip without considering all sides. Taking time to answer a question conveys effort on your part and is appreciated. This is even more true when answering objections. The longer you take, the more time the other person has to get out of his objecting mind set, and the less he will feel like he is being argued with. Sometimes he will answer his own question. Calling or writing back the next day with an answer that involves research in his community is a great way to impress any leader. And the answer you give after some thought will be at least as good as the answer that comes to mind instantly.

Sometimes a good compromise is a qualified stock answer ("What we usually find is...") coupled with the suggestion that there might be differences here that ought to be examined. Then you can still give a better answer down the road.

ACKNOWLEDGE THE LEADER'S CONCERNS. Behind every objection there lies a genuine concern. Sometimes that concern is hidden because the leader is afraid you will not respect that concern. Look for these concerns as you listen, and respect them as you answer. Remember, all concerns are legitimate, even though they have to be reconciled with other concerns.

BE CASUAL. It is the leader's job to accept or reject your proposal as he or she sees fit. A strong sense of your expectations will make most leaders feel pushed and less inclined to cooperate. Your job is to present yourself and your proposal in a clear, friendly, professional way.

EVALUATE YOURSELF. Judge the leader only in terms of how much energy you want to invest in him or her, and what approaches might be most (or least) effective. Go over your presentation, and ask where you could have done better. Important questions include when you could have said less, what you could have asked for and got, and how you could have tailored your answers to more tightly fit the leader's questions.

FOLLOW UP. Mark your calendar with things you commit yourself to do, and make a file on each person you visit. A hot lead is what all this is for. When you get one, give it your best. Keep digging up answers and suggesting preliminary actions. Involve the leader in a process that brings land tax closer to adoption. Set aside visits to other cities and focus on people in the hot lead's city, including other city officials and business, community, labor and party leaders.

DO NOT MAKE DEALS, especially on behalf of your organization. You are offering something for the community, not asking something for yourself. This issue carries its own rewards to the leaders who properly promote it. A politician who appreciates that will not expect you to bribe him or her with support. All you need give the politician is credit for saving the taxpayer money and for helping the community grow.

INTRODUCE SUPPORTIVE LEADERS to each other and to other supporters of your cause, giving them a sense of community and making their commitment more and more public. Be sure members understand the extent to which the leader is committed, and the kinds of extreme statements that might make leaders wary.

VISIT THE OPPOSITION and sincerely express your concerns and your viewpoint, without insisting that you are right. You might not win anyone over, but you at least make them unable to act like they are being conspired against. Placating public opposition is at least as important as inspiring public support.

SUSTAIN YOURSELF. Discuss meetings with other people in your organization. The psychic boost of sharing your experiences is as important as the insight you can get through these conversations. Get people to help you with research, mailings, stamp licking or anything that keeps you from working alone. If you are putting in substantial hours (as somebody should be) ask for contributions and ask to be paid a wage from them. Even though not everyone can help directly, many people want to help, and every time you fail to invite them to help you do them a disservice.

STUDY. There are a lot of good materials on salesmanship and on political organizing. Even if you already know what you want to do, you will find more confidence and less confusion if you have various techniques systematically laid out.