

'Use And Abuse Of Land In St. Louis County'

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Our November meeting was of particular interest because of the subject discussed. It was a panel discussion of the proposed land use plan for St. Louis County, and while the general objectives of the plan seem to be desirable, it is certainly true that a hardship would be imposed upon certain property owners while others immediately across these somewhat arbitrary lines of demarcation will be benefited financially. Just how such a thing can be ethically justified, even if a legal means may be found for its accomplishment, is another facet of the problem. Certainly Herman Wagner is a sincere and dedicated man and his knowledge of the County is probably very great. It is possible that another approach to the problem might relieve at least one part of the problem, the shortage of buildable land moderately close to the city.

The most obvious feature of the development of St. Louis County is the suburban sprawl; and this wasteful and illogical land use is caused by the owners of vacant or farm lands being able to cash in on the development that surrounds them, paying only minimum taxes while they wait for land values to increase by leaps and bounds. The private ownership of land is such a basic part of the American system that we will have to accept it with its emotional satisfactions and its obvious disadvantages.

There is, however, a method of combating this particular weakness in the private ownership principal which is being used with great success in New Zealand, Australia, and Western Canada. This is called "Site Value Taxation, i.e., exempting improvements from taxation and taxing only the unimproved value of the land.

This reduces taxes on the majority of residence where improvement values are high, and so benefits all well improved properties. Site value taxation aids the improvement of the central business district, and by taxing land only and not its obsolescent "improvements" discourages ownership of slum properties. Since the improvements are not taxed, this encourages reconstruction and rehabilitation without wholesale destruction. This method would gradually improve neighborhoods rather than destroy them and make it necessary to start over from the ground up, with the doubtful results that attend some of our slum clearance projects.

Let me repeat: the disadvantages of our present system of low taxation on vacant land is that it encourages land speculation which in turn forces development far beyond the proper logical areas. In many places in

St. Louis County the zoning requires a one acre minimum per house which creates the above mentioned "sprawl."

The weakness in the Land Use Plan is that some properties will be increased in value, and some downgraded and the people who would benefit will be for the plan and the people who are to lose will be against it. The truth of the matter is that there is so much land in the county that is not properly used now, and all of this land must be considered and placed into some category. No matter how impartial the body of experts who are assigned to this job are, there will be great opposition and even inequities.

The suggestion of increased taxes on vacant land has the advantage of being a reform which will apply to all land in relation to its present as well as potential value. It does not work to the advantage of some who own land in a special relationship to a man made development. If the tax structure could be raised very appreciably on vacant land, this would force more of the land which is close in to the city onto the market and would inevitably reduce taxes for homeowners.

Throughout the world governments are working in various ways on the problem of how better to use their land. The Russians have used the rather extreme method of executing the landlords. Cuba is forcing idle land into use by breaking up the big estates and giving them to the peasants just as Mexico did fifty years ago. Iran's Shah has given many areas of his vast holdings to the peasants in the hope that this will inspire other landowners to do likewise. Italy is buying up large areas to resell on easy terms to small landowners. However to break up large estates into small farms is not economically sound for agricultural pro-

duction; and so examination of other approaches seems to be in order.

In Sweden the government anticipates the need for expansion areas by buying up the land ahead of the city's growth. Thus, having control of the land the city not only profits by the appreciation of its value, but controls its development for the good of all of the people. Denmark, a small country without natural resources is emerging even between Russia and Germany as one of the most progressive and forward looking countries of Europe. It imposes a 3% a year tax on increased land values and taxes land at a higher rate than the improvements on said land. Pakistan has imposed a 3% tax on unused land in order to force it into productive use.

These various ways that are being adopted in many parts of the world indicate that our problem is not just one for The United States or for St. Louis County, but is international and historic. It does appear that taxation of vacant land harking back as it does to Henry George and the single tax is the best way for us in The United States to make an attack on the problem within the framework of our Democratic institutions of government. It is of course obvious that the individual owners of land are blameless in now following the pattern established by our present tax policies. There is nothing that a single person could accomplish by ignoring the principles of enlightened self-interest in this matter. The thing which should be done is to change the present direction by changing the tax structure which makes land speculation the safest and most anti-social ethically acceptable force in our present economy.

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TITLE PRIVILEGE to land, one of man's finest incentive devices, assures private, exclusive and inheritable use of land perpetually, and private ownership of all improvements placed in and on land by labor and Capitalists. If the publicly earned rental value of land is fully appropriated for public use all rights of title remain. This, plus abolishing of all taxes on housing and other improvements would end harmful land speculation and greatly reduce urban sprawl and all costs of both private and public improvements; would assure easier application of better land use planning. Write for our literature and its constructive ideas.

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