

**COMMON GROUND PRESENTATION AT THE
HENRY GEORGE SCHOOL, May 31**

By Scott Baker, New York, NY

(Scott Baker is the president of the Common Ground-New York City chapter.)

I recently had the pleasure of presenting our four current initiatives at a seminar at the Henry George School of New York, one of which was actually presented by CGNYC member and that project's leader Ron Rubin. I made several contacts, which are already bearing fruit in collaborative efforts.

What follows are among the most developed and long-term initiatives for Common Ground-NYC. This is by no means an exhaustive list, though it is ambitious and some initiatives will have multi-year time frames. One-time events, fund-raising, press contacts, updating the LVT city-wide database based on NYC Dept of Finance data, meeting with Electeds, web site development, etc. are excluded from this list. These things will all prove necessary and require commitment, finesse, and time, but are supportive of larger goals, and are not long-term goals of the organization in themselves.

Support for taxing vacant land higher to promote development in NYC

Project Leaders: Scott Baker and Rita Rowan

This is our oldest and longest running initiative.

Support for policies that would put the city's nearly 24 square miles of vacant land into productive use are gathering force. Although the assembly bill and 2 city council bills to implement this have been tabled since 2009 and 2010/2011 respectively (see more information about them on this e-petition: http://www.change.org/actions/view/tax_vacant_unused_land_to_return_its_value_to_the_community), several politicians and advisory bodies have come out in favor of such Georgist Land Value Taxation policies. These include:

- Manhattan Borough president Scott Stringer, who more than anyone began the process of looking into developing vacant land with his office's landmark vacant land survey, wrote in his recent annual report:

Transforming Vacant Lots & Stalled Construction Sites

Unfinished construction sites and vacant properties litter New York City, leaving neighborhoods in flux and reducing our quality of life. In 2007, Borough President Stringer published "No Vacancy? The Role of Underutilized Properties in Meeting Manhattan's Affordable Housing Needs." The report found that in Manhattan 74 percent of vacant residential buildings and 71 percent of all vacant lots are located above 96th Street. Additionally, more than \$100

million a year was being lost because vacant lots above 110th Street were taxed as Class 1 residential properties.

Borough President Stringer issued a series of recommendations, including advocating for legislation to reform tax policy to spur development of vacant property and prioritize affordable housing. A year later, Governor David Paterson signed a bill authored by Assemblymember Herman D. Farrell and State Senator Jose Serrano that amended the property tax equalizing the treatment of vacant land throughout Manhattan by taxing all vacant land as Class 4 property.

In 2010, the Borough President released "Arrested Development: Breathing New Life into Stalled Construction Sites," a report detailing ways to improve some 650 stalled construction projects throughout the five boroughs by reclaiming sidewalks and introducing beautification programs. The report found over 30 percent of the sites in Manhattan alone could be quickly transformed with temporary projects – including recreational and performing art spaces.

-- Public Advocate Bill de Blasio's recent publication, "Foundation for an Affordable City". Here, de Blasio's second out of eight recommendations is to:

Create new development opportunities by unlocking the potential of vacant buildings, lots and accessory units.

Note this includes even more than just vacant land, but also underused buildings and accessory units.

-- 13 bold ideas put out by the new Progressive Caucus. This report calls out to promote affordable housing, and to:

Conduct an annual survey of vacant units and put them into productive use as affordable housing

-- Page 67 of the most recent "NYC Bar Association Policy Recommendations For New York City's Next Mayor" report. They conclude (emphasis added):

The current system provides significant discounts to home owners, particularly of high priced condos and co-ops in Manhattan, to the detriment of renters.¹⁹² In Fiscal Year 2011, the effective tax rate (ETR) for rentals (Class 2 property) was over five times that of one to three family homes (Class 1 property), condominiums, and co-operatives.¹⁹³ There are further differences between the treatment of one to three family homes and that of condominiums and co-operatives which may not have a sound basis. These differences should be examined with a view toward whether tax treatment of different classes should be rationalized and modernized, as the current tax structure pre-dates the explosion in the number of condominiums and cooperative apartments in the City.

The City taxes land and improvements to the property using the same rates (continued on page 11)