Getting taxes off our backs and on our sides

Alan Thein Durning, author of Tax Shift and founder and Executive Director of Northwest Environment Watch, on July 31 keynoted the Council of Georgist Organizations conference held in Portland, Oregon. Extracts from his speech follow.

Benjamin Franklin said nothing is certain but death and taxes. Our current tax system, by penalizing work, investment, and initiative, is in a way culpable for death indirectly. In the Northwest (Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and British Columbia) at least 3400 people die each year because of life-long exposure to environmental contaminants: air pollution, and toxic materials and pesticides in the water and food. Three thousand four hundred people are dying each year unnecessarily because air and water and food are contaminated with stuff that shouldn’t be there. In the last 50 years the rate of cancer incidents increased by more than 50% in the United States as in most other industrialized countries. Particularly marked are children, those who haven’t had a lifetime of bad habits—smoking, drinking, and unhealthy diet. Most of us carry in our body about 250 chemicals synthesized for the first time during this century. This body burden of synthetic chemicals is of uncertain ramifications. We are barely beginning to understand the implications of cancer and other health problems. Incidents of reproductive problems, both in human and non-human species, are of increasing concern to biologists.

In addition, about 2000 people in the Northwest die each year in automobile crashes. Car crashes are the leading cause of death of people between 2 and 24 years of age in the U.S.

Over the last five years, I have been directing the Northwest Environment Watch, a regional research center that attempts to identify kind of crux solutions to environmental and economic problems; how do we reconcile ourselves and our lives to the natural limits of this place. Prices in the market place do not tell the ecological truth. They ignore environmental costs that businesses pass on to others, either in this or future generations. They do not pay in price of conventionally grown food for increased risk of cancer that falls onto children of farm workers because of pesticides on fields. They do not pay in the price of gasoline for the Pentagon budget which in the Mideast and Persian Gulf is protecting supplies of oil that make our way of life possible.

We tax the wrong things. We are taxing stuff we want more of instead of

continued on page 7

Dr. Nicolaus Tideman was a speaker at "Who Owns American? II" event

There were 78 concurrent workshops during the June 3-6 "Who Owns America? II" event in Madison. Additionally, there were eight plenaries. Dr. Nicolaus Tideman of Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University presented scholarly papers on two panels.

On the June 4 panel on "Land Taxation," Nic Tideman presented his paper, "Applications of Land Value Taxation to Problems of Environmental Protection, Congestion, Efficient Resource Use, Population, and Economic Growth." Sharing the panel with him were U.W.-Madison professors Andrew Reschovsky and Dan Bromley. The panel was moderated by Lincoln Institute of Land Policy president H. James Brown.

On June 5, the "Land and Property Assessment" panel featured Koleman Strump of U.-N.Carolina-Chapel Hill; Kim Reuben of the Public Policy Institute of California; and Nic Tideman. Tideman presented a paper, "Measuring and Improving the Accuracy with which Land Is Assessed."

Other Georgists attending the event included Gilbert Halverson, Madison, WI, representing Common Ground-USA; Nadine Stoner, Beloit, WI, representing Wis. Property Owners League; Dr. Rex Ahone of Lafayette College, and Jeffery Smith, Portland, OR (see related GroundSwell article in this issue.) About 300 persons in all attended the four-day event.