QUALITY CITIES AND THE HOMELESS

(This Op Ed was submitted to the Providence Journal 4-18-16)

by Catherine Orluff, Providence, RI

Former Mayor Joseph Paolino is struggling with a problem that too many U.S. cities now share: how to respect the rights of people who are homeless to use public streets and parks and to exercise their rights of free speech to ask passers-by for money, while at the same time keeping downtown Providence an attractive and fun place for residents and visitors to shop, attend cultural events, etc. (op-eds 3/30/16 and 4/10/16) It is an almost unsolvable dilemma, because for many of us just seeing the homeless makes us feel sad or helpless or may cause anxiety about our own financial future; so we will probably gravitate toward other locations for dining and entertainment.

But perhaps this dilemma may also start to bring about a solution both for the homeless and downtown property interests. Note that even before services for them existed, the poor and homeless have largely been found in cities because that's where the most job possibilities are, but it's also where rents/land prices are highest. Those who own city land are unique in financially benefiting from the large population, as well as good fire, police, schools, highway access, etc. What can this mean but that land values are community-created and therefore the logical source of public revenue? If in doubt, see how many owners, expecting land values to increase, decline to sell unless at next year's price, which potential businesses and banks often see as too risky. Adjusting the property tax up on land values and down on buildings will make many of those parcels affordable. This will allow businesses to open and operate profitably, free of a killer lease or mortgage, enjoying a lower tax on building, inventory, etc.; and thus able to offer the high-wage jobs that the homeless ultimately need more than any shelter, meal site, or counseling. In honor of Tax Day 2016, google Henry George or Single Tax and help improve the economy for everyone.

(Catherine Orluff is a life-long Georgist and retired Providence teacher who helps serve meals at the Harrington Hall men's shelter.)

March-April 2016 GroundSwell Page 3