THE REVENUE LAW

Suggestions of Some Amendments Which Would (ure Patent Defects

It is idle for the present legislature to waste any time trying to enact a new law, or to patch up the present one, aiming to insure the assessment of property at its "fair cash value." Property will not be so assessed, no matter how stringent the law, because some way will be found to evade it. The assessed valuation cuts but little figure, whether it be 1 per cent, 10 per cent, 50 per cent, or 100 per cent of "fair cash value," so long as a dollar's worth of property in Dundy county pays no greater and no less state tax than a dollar's worth of property in Lancaster or Richardson.

The constitutional limitation on levy

for county purposes is 15 mills on the dollar valuation, and it is a notorious fact that, no matter what the law says, the grand assessment roll of any county will seldom be so large that a 15-mill levy on that will produce much more county revenue than will be needed. The fact that the county board is at once the spending power and levying power causes the people, through their assessors, to remove the temptation to extravagance by keeping the total assessment roll large enough, and but seldom larger than is actually necessary, when extended at 15 mills, to produce county funds sufficient for actual needs. A look over the assessment rolls of the various counties confirms this. In all the older and wealthier counties property is assessed at a much smaller fraction of its fair cash value than in the newer and less wealthy counties. Out in Dundy county it is necessary to assess property at about one-third its fair cash value in order to maintain county government at all. In Butler and York, 15 per cent is sufficient. In Saunders one-tenth.

Now, if property were assessed at "fair cash value" in all counties, an extravagant board in Dundy could levy only three times as much county revenue as now, but in Butler and York seven times heavier taxes could be imposed-and there seems to be no legal way of preventing such action. Hence, self-preservation dictates keeping down the assessment.

Of course, it does not matter to the people of Dundy county upon what sort of valuation the people of Butler and York raise their county revenues. It is really none of their business.

But as Dundy county property must contribute \$1 of university tax and \$5 of general fund tax on each \$3,000 of "fair cash value" while Butler and York county property contributes only 45 cents for university and \$2.25 for general on each \$3,000 of "fair cash value," it is apparent that a rank in-

justice is done Dundy county. Aside from the question of some better method of collecting the taxes after they are levied (which we shall not here discuss) there is, under our constitution, a way to make the levy state taxes as fair as it seems possible for human ingenuity to devise. For it must be understood that only approximate justice can ever be done. There never was a perfect revenue system and doubtless never wil'

The one which The Independent here proposes will be fair as between the railroads and other property interests, and fair as between counties. The railroad assessment feature is the fruit of study by Hon. M. F. Harrington and the method of fixing the levy is partially The Independent's idea. Bills covering both points will probably be introduced in the near future.

Mr. Harrington's idea is that the state board should be empowered to ascertain the "fair cash value" of railroad property-but not to assess it. That it should certify to each county board the "fair cash value" of the railroad property in that county. And that the county board, with this information before it, should assess tha property on an equality with other property in the county." Let us illus-

We shall take four counties through which the Republican Valley line of the Burlington runs Dundy, Nuckolls, Jefferson, and Richardson. Suppose the property returned by the assessors to show (as actually occurred a year or so ago) as follows:

Dandy 399,490
Nuckolls 1,692,432
Jefferson 1,975,437
Richardson 2,842,059
The Republican Valley line has
mileage in these counties as follows:
Dundy
Nuckolls20.41 miles
Jefferson26.44 miles

Richardson12.70 miles We will suppose that the state board has certified that the "fair cash value" of this line is \$53,488 per mile, and here is where the pinch will roads, because it can secure the ne-

and that the county boards assess as

Per mile.	Total.
Fundy\$17,829.33	\$740,630.36
Nuckolls 13,372.00	272,922.5 :
Jefferson 10,697.60	289,983.34
Richardson 6,686.00	84,912.20

When returns are received by the state board, it would have no difficulty in arriving at the conclusion that property generally was assessed in Dundy at 1-3. Nuckolls at 1-4, Jeffer-

\$13,734.77 \$1,388,448.42

son at 1-5, and Richardson at 1-8 of "fair cash value," because the presumption would be that the railroad assessment was made in accordance with the valuation placed on other property.

Now, to the state levy: Suppose the present legislature shall appropriata \$2,485,993.82 to be paid out of the general fund. The levy for 1903, then, should be at least \$1,242,996.92, and the same for 1904. This would, if all collected, leave the office fees and miscellaneous collections, and old delinquent taxes to gradually wipe out the floating debt.

It is evident that by multiplying the Dundy county return by 3 we shall have approximately the "fair cash value" of all assessed property in the county. Having done similarly by the return from each county, we can ar rive at the "fair cash value" of all assessed property in the state. Suppose it totals \$1,367,296,612. Using this sum as divisor and the \$1,242,996.92 of appropriations for the dividend, we find that 91 cents on each thousand dollars of "fair cash value" will make the levy "sufficient to meet the appropriations," etc.—if the tax collectors do their duty.

The rate of levy for state general fund purposes, on the four counties under consideration, would be as fol-

Dundy .												1	.2.7	mills
Nuckolls														
Jefferson			×		*	*	×						.4.5	mills
Richards														
Annual A	1502				10									

The criticism which thoughtless people might urge against this plan, viz: that the same line of road is assessed at so widely varying valuations per mile, falls to the ground when we find that a mile in Dundy would pay \$48.14 of state general fund tax, the identical amount a mile would pay in Nuckolls and Jefferson, and only a few cents less than in Richardson.

Inasmuch as the levies for temporary university and temporary school are about equal, and as the two together ought to aggregate about onethird as much as the general fund, the levy for all three could be made consolidated and the taxes divided as received in the proportion of \$6 general to \$1 university and \$1 school.

Referring now to the assessed valuation of all property in the four counties named, exclusive of the property assessed by the state board, we find that the ascertained equitable rate of levy for general fund purposes would. on the valuation given (the figures are for 1898), give the following levy:

AN EQU	ITA	BLE LEV	Υ.
Dundyat	2.7	mills\$	1,078.62
Nuckollsat	3.6	mills	6,092.76
Jeffersonat			
Richardsonat			

The levy as actually made was 5 mills on each county and amounted

to:	
AN INEQUIT.	ABLE LEVY.
Dundyat 5	
Nuckollsat 5	mills 8.462.16
Jeffersonat 5	
Richardsonat 5	mills 14.210.30

Total\$34,547.10 Hence, of every \$100 collected from Dundy, \$46 was extortion; of every \$100 from Nuckolls, \$28 was unfairly levied; Jefferson paid \$100 when \$90 was right; but Richardson should have paid \$131,50 instead of \$100.

Under either method, with no average rise in the assessment, the railroads would pay the same amount of state tax per mile. As a matter of fact the R. V. was assessed at \$4,500 a mile and paid \$21.50 state general fund tax on each mile of road in the four counties. Assuming that this \$4,500 AVERAGED high enough (which it doubtless did not), if it had been left to the local boards to make the assessment the figures should have

been:					n and min	5.50. 15.44.	COLUCE	mave
Dundy					\$	7.963	per	mile
Nucko	lls					5,972	per	mile
Jeffers	on					4,777	per	mile
Richar	dsor	1 .				2,945	per	mile
which	WO	uld	in	die	ate	a. "f	air	cash
value"	of	ab	out	\$2	3,886) per	mil	e in

each county. But for local taxation, Dundy, Nuckolls and Jefferson would have a greater railroad valuation to tax, while Richardson would have less-

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1 Electric Seal Cape, reduced from \$35.00 to	
2 Electric Seal Capes, reduced from \$40 to	
1 Fur Lined Electric Seal Fur Cape, 30 inches long, reduced	-
from \$40,00 to	00
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10 Fine Electric Seal Muffs, reduced from \$3.50 to	25
2 Astrachan Fur Muffs, reduced from \$4.50 to	75
2 Imitation Stone Marten Muffs, reduced from \$3.75 to \$2 5	
4 Imitation Brown Marten Muffs, reduced from \$5.00 to \$2 (
2 Imitation Beaver Muffs, reduced from \$5.00 to	
3 Genuine Marten Muffs, reduced from \$8.50 to	
2 Genuine Marten Muffs, reduced from \$10.00 to	00
2 Genuine Marten Muff, reduced from \$15.00 to	00
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come. The railroads will not permit local assessment if they can help it -and they surely can in this legislature-because experience has shown that they can always better escape paying their fair share by having the assessment made by a state board, not necessarily because the board may be corrupt, but because of the extreme difficulty of doing justice where a given assessment per mile is laid on a road running through counties where the standard of assessment varies widely.

It is better that the state board determine the "fair cash value" of the

cessary information more readily than the county board. But the county board knows best how much to assess a \$50,000 mile of railroad to make it on an equality with other property in the county.

Here is an opportunity to solve the question of equitable taxation. The Omaha city tax question will be set-tled by it. The state debt will cease, to grow and will shrink as rapidly as it is good for it to do. Justice can be done as between counties and as between the railroads and other interests. Will the legislature ever con-

sider it? Hardly likely.