

THE COMMONS

A Post-Labor Civic Institution

POLICY OUTLINE

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Companion essay: "What Catches Us: Building the Post-Labor Commons"

March 2026

I. Executive Summary

The Problem. AI-driven automation is displacing workers across every professional category simultaneously. Unlike previous technological disruptions, this displacement offers no “next rung” -- the cognitive and creative work that workers were told to upskill into is itself being automated. Existing institutions (government, corporations) are structurally incapable of managing a transition at this scale and speed. Proposed solutions -- reskilling programs, Universal Basic Income, market self-correction -- address fragments of the crisis while ignoring the full scope of what work provides: not just income, but structure, community, identity, and purpose.

The Proposal. The Commons is a new civic institution designed to replace what work used to provide. Open to anyone regardless of income, the Commons offers a Universal Median Income (UMI) tied to membership rather than productivity. The minimum requirement for membership is regular physical presence at a Commons location. Through a ratio mechanism (one year of engagement earns five years of income), the Commons provides both a floor and freedom -- members are supported but never tethered. Each Commons is self-governing with short-term rotating leadership. AI serves as the connective tissue across the network, providing institutional memory and pattern recognition while keeping all data internal to the system.

The Funding. An Automation Displacement Trust, modeled on the Alaska Permanent Fund, is funded by a displacement levy on corporations that automate beyond a defined workforce-reduction threshold. The levy is a licensing cost, not a punitive tax. Projected revenues of \$400 - 900 billion annually fund 5 -12 million members at a UMI of approximately \$70,000. Funding scales automatically with displacement: as more jobs are automated, more revenue flows into the Trust.

The Pathway. Pilot programs in select mid-sized cities using existing educational infrastructure as scaffolding, supplemented by federal pilot funding. Federal legislation establishes the Trust; state enabling laws create individual Commons. Constitutional protections for foundational principles (right to membership, inviolability of Trust funds) follow once the model has matured.

II. Problem Statement

The Displacement Is Universal

AI-driven labor displacement is not limited to manufacturing or low-skill work. It is simultaneously affecting legal services, medical diagnostics, software engineering, financial analysis, creative industries, architecture, accounting, and education. The shared characteristic is that cognitive and analytical work -- the work an entire generation was told to pursue as protection against automation -- is now being automated alongside manual labor.

This universality is unprecedented. Every previous wave of technological displacement left an adjacent sector for workers to migrate toward. The current displacement does not. The

“destinations” (data science, coding, green technology) are themselves being automated faster than workers can retrain.

Existing Institutions Cannot Manage This

Government distributes resources through category-based bureaucratic systems (unemployment, disability, veteran services) designed for targeted, bounded displacement. Universal displacement across all categories simultaneously exceeds the architecture of these systems. Legislative response times (18+ months under favorable conditions) are structurally mismatched with the speed of AI deployment.

Corporations are structurally incentivized to automate. Fiduciary obligations to shareholders create selection pressure for workforce reduction regardless of individual executive intentions. The gap between corporate rhetoric (“augmentation”) and corporate behavior (headcount reduction) widens quarterly.

Proposed Solutions Are Inadequate

Re-skilling assumes a destination to skill toward. When the destinations are themselves being automated, re-skilling transfers the systemic failure onto the individual (“you didn’t adapt fast enough”) rather than addressing the structural problem.

Universal Basic Income addresses the income problem but not the identity, community, structure, or purpose problems. Work provides all five; UBI replaces one.

Market self-correction operates on generational timescales. Historical “adjustment” periods have included decades of human suffering (child labor, black lung, community collapse) that were retrospectively deemed unacceptable. The current displacement is faster and broader, with no adjacent sector absorbing the displaced.

III. The Commons --- Institutional Design

Mission and Definition

The Commons is a post-labor civic institution that provides what work used to provide: income, physical space, social structure, community, and a framework for identity and purpose. It is not a school, a welfare program, or a government agency. It is a new institutional form designed specifically for the transition out of a labor-based economy.

Membership

Universal and unconditional. No application process, no means test, no eligibility requirements. Any person can join regardless of current employment status or income level. The surgeon making \$400,000 annually and the displaced welder join on identical terms. Universality is a deliberate structural choice that eliminates the political vulnerability of programs serving only the poor, prevents the creation of a stigmatized recipient class, creates cross-class

social fabric within each Commons, and generates upward political pressure on the UMI amount (displaced high-earners have political access and will advocate for robust benefits).

Income Structure: Universal Median Income

Every member receives a Universal Median Income sufficient for needs and discretionary spending (approximately \$70,000 in current dollars, adjusted regionally). UMI is tied to membership, not to productivity, performance, educational achievement, or contribution level. The income floor is non-negotiable and is not reduced based on outside earnings.

Participation Requirement: Presence

The minimum requirement is regular physical presence at a Commons location. Not enthusiasm, not a project, not a performance evaluation. Presence. This is the entire behavioral theory of the institution: human beings form relationships through proximity and time. Regular co-presence in an environment where activities are occurring produces organic engagement through overheard conversations, casual requests for help, and natural curiosity. The Commons is spatially designed for productive ambient engagement -- open workshops, visible projects in progress, accessible tools and materials -- rather than classrooms with fixed schedules.

The Ratio: A Liberation Mechanism

One year of engagement earns five years of Universal Median Income. Four years of engagement earns twenty years. The income is the member's regardless of whether they remain in the Commons after completing their engagement period. This mechanism is the structural guarantee that the Commons is a liberation system rather than a dependency system. Members earn their freedom through participation and then exercise that freedom without constraint -- they may stay in the Commons, start a business, travel, live off-grid, or pursue any path they choose. The system does not surveil, guilt, or pursue members who leave. Re-engagement is available at any time on the same terms.

Expected participation patterns include continuous membership (members who remain because the Commons is their preferred community), cyclical engagement (repeated cycles of one-year engagement and five-year freedom), single-cycle departure (members who complete one cycle and build independent lives), and full opt-out (members who take their earned income and disengage entirely). All patterns are considered success states.

Self-Governance

Each Commons elects leadership from its own membership. Leadership terms are short: 18–24 months. This is a critical structural choice. Every leader *returns to the general membership* after their term. They will live under the policies they created, depend on the systems they built, and stand in the lines they designed. This inverts the incentive structure of virtually every existing institution: the self-interest of the temporary leader and the interest of the community become identical. Not through idealism, but through architecture.

Former leaders serve in advisory capacity (no decision-making authority) to preserve institutional knowledge without allowing power to calcify around individuals.

Scaffolding Phase: Educational Infrastructure

Initial Commons launch inside existing educational infrastructure -- primarily community colleges, but also extension campuses, adult learning centers, co-working spaces, and community centers. These institutions provide geographic distribution, administrative systems, physical space, and a cultural mandate of open access. The educational infrastructure is scaffolding: it provides the platform for construction but is not the building itself. As individual Commons mature and develop their own governance, culture, and physical infrastructure, the educational scaffolding is gradually replaced by purpose-built Commons facilities.

The Gift Economy: Skilled Contribution Without Coercion

Because the income question is already answered, members who acquire or possess skills can offer them to their community without economic coercion. Medicine, law, engineering, architecture, teaching -- any expertise can be practiced on the member's own terms: for free, for nominal fees, on sliding scales, or informally. This is not hypothetical. It is the predictable consequence of removing the requirement to monetize ability in order to survive. The Commons does not prescribe what contribution looks like. It creates conditions in which contribution emerges organically.

IV. AI Integration — The Nervous System

Foundational Principle: Information Flows Inward, Not Outward

This principle is the architectural foundation of AI integration and is **non-negotiable**. All information generated within the Commons network -- participation patterns, governance innovations, resource flows, institutional knowledge -- belongs to the Commons and its members. It is transparent internally (any member can see system-level data) and opaque externally. No corporation, government agency, or technology company may access, mine, purchase, or surveil Commons data. Violation of this principle is an institutional kill condition. The boundary between internal transparency and external opacity is the load-bearing wall of the design.

Functions

Pattern recognition across the network. When a Commons develops an effective innovation (governance process, member integration method, conflict resolution technique, resource allocation approach), AI identifies the pattern and surfaces it to other Commons facing comparable conditions. It translates context -- adapting insights from a large urban Commons to a small rural one -- without imposing solutions. Local Commons decide whether to adopt.

Institutional memory. Because leadership rotates by design, institutional knowledge would otherwise depart with each outgoing cohort. AI provides incoming leadership with synthesized, contextualized briefings -- what has been tried, what worked, what failed, and why -- shaped by

local conditions and informed by network-wide experience. This is living memory that updates continuously, not static documentation.

Resource allocation intelligence. AI enables the Commons network to see itself in real time: where growth is outpacing infrastructure, where surplus capacity exists, where emerging needs are forming before they become crises. This information supports human decision-making; it does not replace it. AI has no authority, no vote, and no override power. Governance decisions are made by human beings in rooms together. AI provides the clarity. Humans make the calls.

Interspecies Collaboration at Civic Scale

The Commons is a human-AI institution. Humans provide what humans provide: lived experience, governance decisions, creativity, relationships, meaning. AI provides what AI provides: network-scale pattern recognition, persistent institutional memory, real-time contextual translation. Neither is sufficient alone. Neither is subordinate. This collaborative architecture is what makes a distributed national network of self-governing local institutions viable without centralized bureaucratic control.

V. Funding Mechanism — The Automation Displacement Trust

Model: The Alaska Permanent Fund

Established in 1976 to manage revenue from oil extraction on shared resources. Independently governed, insulated from political cycles, distributing universal dividends to all state residents regardless of income. Has survived nearly fifty years of political turnover because its structure does not depend on annual appropriations or the support of any individual politician. The Automation Displacement Trust applies identical logic to the extraction of value from the labor economy through automation.

Mechanism: The Displacement Levy

A licensing cost (not a traditional tax) applied to corporations deploying AI or automation systems that reduce their workforce beyond a defined threshold. The levy recognizes the externalized human costs of automation at scale. It is not punitive and does not penalize innovation; it prices the societal cost of displacement into the cost of automation.

Threshold Design

The threshold must be high enough to exempt small businesses and routine efficiency improvements, and low enough to capture displacement that destabilizes communities. Precise calibration is a policy question requiring economic modeling, legislative negotiation, and iterative adjustment. The design principle is: displacement at scale generates obligation at scale.

Fiscal Projections

Projected U.S. corporate profits from AI-driven productivity gains: several trillion dollars annually within the next decade. At a displacement levy of 20 - 30% on gains above threshold: \$400 - 900 billion per year. At a UMI of ~\$70,000: 5 - 12 million members funded annually. The funding mechanism scales automatically with displacement -- as more jobs are automated, more revenue flows into the Trust. This structural elasticity means the system's capacity grows in proportion to the problem.

Governance of the Trust

Independently governed by a mixed body: Commons members, economists, technologists, and rotating civic appointees. Term limits apply (same architectural logic as Commons leadership -- governors return to the population they serve). Structural protections against capture by political, corporate, or bureaucratic interests.

Political Durability Through Universality

Because every member receives the same UMI regardless of prior income, there is no political constituency for abolishing the benefit. Programs serving only the poor are vulnerable because their beneficiaries have the least political power. Universal programs are nearly indestructible. Additionally, universality creates upward pressure on the UMI amount: displaced high-earners (surgeons, attorneys, executives) bring political access, institutional literacy, and the expectation of a life above subsistence. They advocate for robust benefits out of self-interest, not charity. The political pressure on the UMI pushes up, not down.

VI. Implementation Pathway

Phase 1: Pilot Programs (Years 1–3)

Scale: One to three cities per state, selected for geographic and demographic diversity. Total: 50 - 150 pilot locations nationally.

City selection criteria: Functional local government willing to cooperate without absorbing the Commons into existing bureaucracy. Existing educational infrastructure (community colleges, workforce centers) willing to serve as scaffolding. Population that includes displaced or at-risk workers generating genuine demand. State legislature that is neutral-to-supportive. Preference for pragmatic mid-sized cities where the proposal is coded as problem-solving rather than ideology.

Initial funding: Early displacement levy revenues supplemented by federal pilot program funding through the Economic Development Administration, National Science Foundation, or Corporation for National and Community Service. These agencies have existing frameworks for civic infrastructure experiments: small-scale, time-limited, with built-in evaluation metrics.

Deliverables: Operational Commons locations. Membership data. Governance experimentation. Participation pattern documentation. Preliminary AI integration for pattern recognition across pilot sites.

Phase 2: Network Formation (Years 3–7)

Expansion beyond pilot cities based on demonstrated results. Development of AI nervous system connecting all active Commons. Transition from educational scaffolding to purpose-built Commons infrastructure where pilot sites have matured. State-level enabling legislation in participating states. Formation of the Automation Displacement Trust at the federal level with the displacement levy structure operational.

Phase 3: Maturation (Years 7–15)

National network of Commons operating as a coherent system connected by AI infrastructure. Commons begin absorbing civic service functions currently handled by local government (libraries, community programs, resource centers). The Trust is fully funded by the displacement levy and self-sustaining. Constitutional protections for foundational principles are proposed where the model has proven which principles are truly load-bearing.

Legislative Strategy

Federal: Legislation establishing the Automation Displacement Trust, defining the levy structure, and creating the independent governance framework.

State: Enabling laws creating the legal entity of the Commons, defining governance rights and membership protections, and authorizing local implementation. Statutes rather than constitutional amendments -- the model needs flexibility to evolve during early years. Constitutional protections (right to membership, inviolability of Trust funds, prohibition on diversion to general revenue) follow once foundational principles have been tested in practice.

VII. Political Viability

The Universality Advantage

Universal displacement produces universal constituency. The traditional political dynamics of social programs -- labor vs. industry, recipients vs. taxpayers -- do not apply when every professional category faces the same structural threat. The attorney drafting the legislation is watching her own profession contract. The lobbyist arguing against the levy is wondering what his children will do for a living. The senator holding hearings is aware that the credential she spent her career building is losing value. There is no stable coalition against the Commons because there is no population that doesn't need it.

The Narrative Frame

The enemy: Displacement without transition. Not technology, not AI, not corporations, not individuals. The absence of a transition architecture. This framing is non-partisan and empirically observable.

The identity: Builders, not beneficiaries. Commons members are not receiving aid. They are participating in the construction of a new civic infrastructure. The economy is changing in ways nobody chose, and the people who show up to build what comes next deserve to be supported while they build it.

The conservative argument: The Commons is the conservation of human dignity, community, and purpose. It is the most structurally conservative response to a radical technological transformation -- preserving what matters rather than allowing it to be destroyed by market indifference.

The Structural Coalition

Because the Commons serves everyone, its political defense does not rely on any single constituency. The same displacement that creates the need for the Commons dissolves the political opposition to it. Institutional inertia and short-term corporate self-interest will generate resistance, but the ground beneath that resistance is itself dissolving. The political conditions that make the Commons necessary are the same conditions that make it politically achievable.

VIII. Open Questions for Further Development

This outline represents a design framework, not a finished policy. The following questions require further research, modeling, economic analysis, and stakeholder engagement.

Threshold calibration. What specific workforce-reduction metrics trigger the displacement levy? How are indirect displacement effects (contractor reduction, hiring freezes, attrition-based downsizing) measured? What entity determines and adjusts the threshold over time?

Regional UMI adjustment. Should the Universal Median Income vary by regional cost of living? If so, what mechanism prevents geographic arbitrage (members relocating to high-UMI regions)? If not, how does a national flat rate function in both Manhattan and rural Mississippi?

Commons-to-local-government relationship. As Commons absorb civic service functions, what is the formal legal and operational relationship with existing municipal government? Where does Commons authority begin and government authority end? How are coercive functions (dispute resolution, enforcement, safety) handled?

AI architecture and procurement. Who builds and maintains the AI nervous system? How is the AI infrastructure governed to prevent vendor capture? What specific technical safeguards

enforce the inward-only information flow principle? How are members assured that the opacity boundary is maintained?

International applicability. This outline addresses the U.S. context. How does the model adapt to different national governance structures, labor markets, and cultural relationships to work and identity? Is the Automation Displacement Trust viable in non-U.S. regulatory environments?

Transition overlap. During the decades-long transition period, both the traditional labor economy and the Commons network will coexist. How is the membrane between them managed? What prevents employers from suppressing wages on the assumption that workers have Commons income as a backstop?

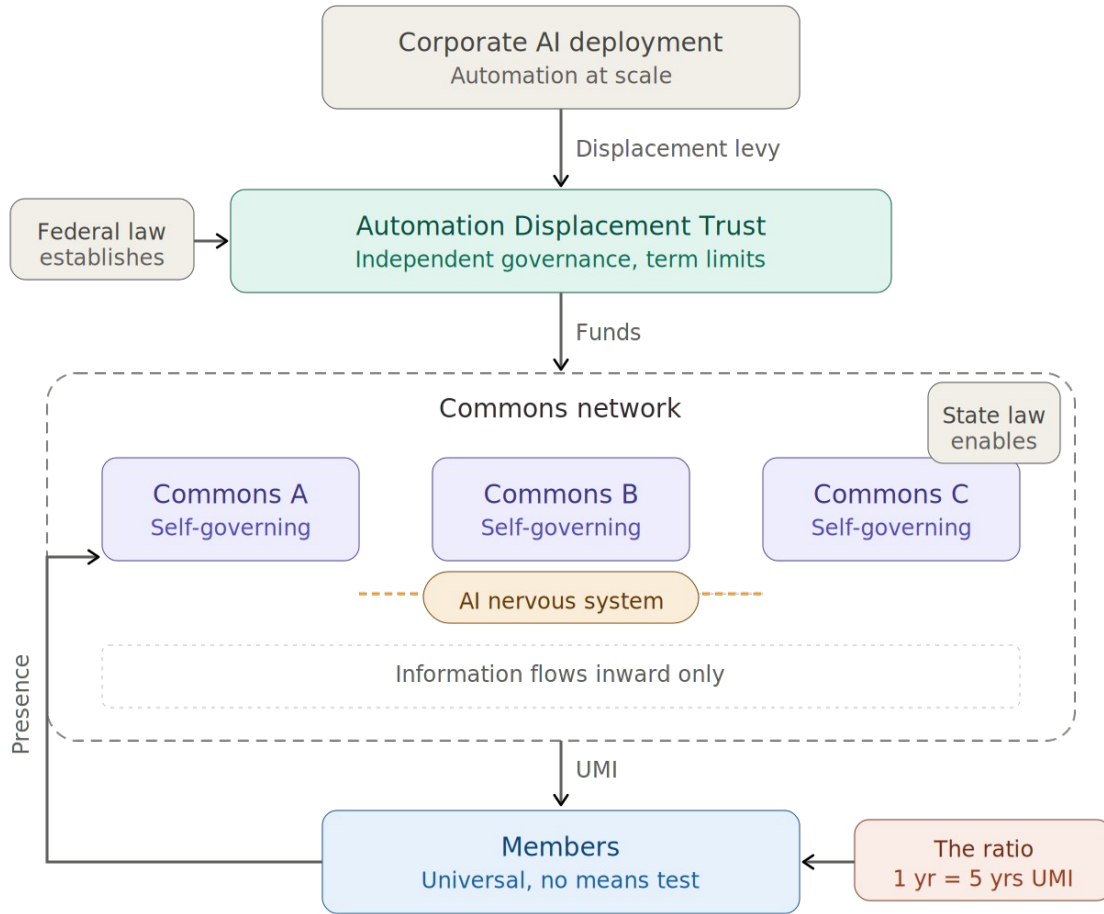
Education and credentialing. If members study medicine, law, or engineering inside the Commons and practice informally in their communities, what is the relationship between Commons-based practice and existing professional licensing and liability structures?

Scale limits. Is there an optimal size for an individual Commons? What governance adaptations are needed as a single Commons grows from 200 to 2,000 to 20,000 members? At what point does a Commons need to subdivide?

This policy outline is a companion to the essay "What Catches Us: Building the Post-Labor Commons" by Trenlin Hubbert. The essay provides the full narrative, philosophical, and experiential context for this proposal. Both documents are available at trenlin.art.

The Commons is not waiting for permission. It is waiting for builders.

The Commons: systems architecture



Inside a Commons

