Economy and Labor

Chapter 2 covered who's actually building this; the group's choice about property and labor here is just as foundational, and worth deciding with the same deliberateness as the trial-membership process, not left to work itself out informally.

Property and income: a real spectrum, not one right answer

Two real, documented models sit at opposite ends of the same spectrum, and most working communities land somewhere between them rather than at either extreme.

Cohousing keeps property and income private: each household owns or rents its own home and keeps its own income, and the community itself is a shared common house, tools, gardens, and other explicitly communal spaces and assets layered on top. This is the lighter-commitment end of the spectrum, closer to a well-organized neighborhood than a single economic unit.

Full income-sharing, the model real communities like Twin Oaks, Acorn Community Farm, and Ganas actually run, treats the community itself as one economic unit: income from members' outside work or the community's own businesses goes into a collective treasury, and the community provides housing, food, healthcare, and other needs in return, typically distributed by household size rather than by who earned what. This is a much deeper commitment, and it's not for every group, but it's real and it works, not a utopian theory.

Neither is more correct. The choice interacts directly with Chapter 5's legal structure, a housing cooperative or land trust fits the cohousing end more naturally, while full income-sharing typically needs its own dedicated legal and tax structure built around the community as an actual economic entity, worth discussing with an attorney alongside the governance choice, not after it.

Labor-credit systems, and what one actually looks like in practice

If a group leans toward income-sharing, or just wants a fairer way to track contribution than "everyone just helps out," a labor-credit system is the real, tested tool. Twin Oaks has run one continuously since 1967, long enough to prove the model holds up, not just launch well.

Element	How Twin Oaks actually runs it	Why it matters
Unit of value	1 hour of work = 1 labor credit, regardless of the task	No task is worth more than another; cleaning counts the same as skilled work
Weekly requirement	Roughly 40–42 credits per member per week	A real, fixed expectation, not an open-ended obligation
Task selection	Members fill out their own weekly labor sheet from available shifts	Preference-driven, not assigned top-down, which is part of why it holds up long-term
Verification	Runs on trust; members self-report rather than being time-clocked	Works because Chapter 5's monitoring and graduated-sanctions principles back it up if trust breaks down
Mandatory task	One 2-hour kitchen-cleaning shift a week	The single exception to full preference-based selection
Payment	None; credits convert to housing, food, healthcare, and other needs, not wages	Removes the wage-negotiation problem entirely

The trust-based design isn't naive, it's the same logic Chapter 5's Ostrom principles already establish: cheap, member-level monitoring catches problems faster than an external supervisor would, and graduated sanctions exist for the rare case where self-reporting breaks down. A labor-credit system without that governance backing it up is just an honor system with no real consequence for defection; with it, it's a genuinely durable way to track contribution fairly.

Exchange that doesn't need a functioning outside economy at all

A group that isn't ready for full income-sharing, or that can't count on outside currency or markets functioning normally, has a real third option: Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS) and time banking. Both credit and debit a shared, locally-created unit of value, work done for others earns credits, work received spends them, recorded in a shared ledger rather than backed by any bank or government.

A genuinely on-theme origin story

Michael Linton invented LETS in 1983 on Vancouver Island, after a military base closure collapsed the local economy. Real work still needed doing, home repair, childcare, despite a real shortage of conventional money. The fix wasn't waiting for the economy to recover, it was building a shared ledger of locally-created credit for services actually rendered. Time banking runs on the same core idea: an hour of anyone's time is the unit of value, redeemable for an hour of anyone else's.

The genuinely useful property of both systems, worth stating plainly: they don't depend on a functioning external economy or currency at all. That makes them meaningfully more resilient than a treasury built on selling to outside markets or holding a bank account, which assumes the broader economy those depend on is still working normally.

Disability doesn't fit an hour-for-hour system, and a real model already exists

Twin Oaks' labor-credit table above works because an hour is an hour regardless of the task, but that design assumes every member can actually contribute a comparable number of hours in the first place. A member with a permanent disability, not a temporary illness the community can simply cover around, breaks that assumption directly, and quietly pretending otherwise is what actually excludes someone, not the disability itself.

The Camphill movement, over 100 real, documented communities across more than 20 countries since 1940, is built specifically around this problem, and its answer isn't an hour-credit exception or an accommodation policy bolted onto the system above. It restructures the whole relationship: people with intellectual and developmental disabilities and the people who live alongside them, "co-workers," share housing, meals, and daily work together as equals, not on a caregiver-and-shift schedule, so contribution is measured by genuine participation in a shared life rather than counted hours at all. It's a genuinely different model from the income-sharing system above, not a patch on top of it, and it's real and decades-proven, not a theoretical ideal.

A community doesn't need to adopt the full Camphill model to take the real lesson from it: decide, before the situation is improvised under pressure, what "contribution" actually means for a member who can't meet the standard hour requirement, and build that into the labor system directly rather than treating it as an exception nobody planned for.

Sources

- Twin Oaks' actual, documented labor-credit system: Twin Oaks Community; Wikipedia
- Income-sharing communities (Twin Oaks, Acorn Community Farm, Ganas), how the model actually works: Twin Oaks Community; Foundation for Intentional Community
- Cohousing's private-property-plus-shared-commons model: Wikipedia
- LETS origin and mechanics, including the Vancouver Island founding story: Wikipedia; LETSlink UK
- Time banking mechanics and real-world applications: Shareable
- The Camphill movement, its scale, history, and life-sharing model for people with disabilities: Camphill Movement; Camphill Association of North America