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received.

Attendees Street Roots spoke with said they had general frustration with the effects of capitalism and were eager to hear about something new – although no one was ready to commit on that particular afternoon in May.

“What Copiosis is in my mind,” Gruber told them during a presentation, “is a transitory solution that gets us from where we are now to the system that Charles Eisenstein and the Zeitgeist Movement and the Venus Project talk about. ... When we get the right momentum, they’re going to start paying attention.”

He imagines that transition will come once 1,000 demonstration projects, intended to prove his thesis that people will do things for each other within his system, are up and running. Then, he said, legislation will pave the way for full-scale transition away from capitalism and government.

“This is the paradox,” he told his audience at Taborspace. “In order for us to get to that, we have to get through capitalism, and to get through capitalism, the organization needs money. And it needs to have money to pay people to spend the time they need to spend in order to make this system a reality; it’s just common sense to me.”

With ongoing donations of about \$110 per month coming in from the crowdfunding site Patreon, Copiosis is making enough to pay for technical assistance and Gruber’s traveling expenses between Portland and Chico, but no one is on salary.

Gruber said he spends about 10 hours a week on Copiosis and is working on two other start-ups: Tiny House Podcast on iTunes and Transamorous Network, an online network for men who are attracted to trans women, which will launch on Valentine’s Day.

Community sharing is not new. In North Portland alone, Little Free Libraries abound with free books, and the North Portland Tool Library offers tools for people to borrow at no expense. Additionally, time banks and exchanges have operated nationwide for decades; these are usually online platforms where members exchange time helping one another.

But Copiosis is far more complex than these other share-economy structures and nonprofits.

It’s a system based on the work of Larry K. Mason, a former sociology instructor and computer programmer. He spent 35 years developing the system and ultimately wrote a science fiction book, “Invisible Hand,” to help explain it. During an interview with the Portland Business Journal in 2009, Gruber listed it as the book that most influenced him.

Gruber said he sat down with Mason at his home over dinner in North Carolina three years ago and promised him that he was going to make “Invisible Hand” a reality. He said Mason gave him permission to build upon his model.

Gruber said Copiosis and Mason’s

organizations have since clashed, although Mason has remained cordial. Street Roots made multiple attempts to reach Mason for comment but received no reply.

The culmination of Mason and Gruber’s work, Copiosis, is highly technical and based on an elaborate algorithm Gruber initially designed.

In a nutshell, here’s how it works:

In Copiosis, participants are “producers,” meaning they produce some sort of good or service. Artists might offer paintings. Those who enjoy gardening might offer vegetables.

All exchanges are recorded in an online software program that uses Gruber’s algorithm to calculate “Net Benefit Reward.” This software was created for Copiosis pro bono by a group of Portland State University students as a school-related computer science project.

If the product is a necessity, such as food, shelter or clothing, other participants can obtain it from that producer, we’ll say for the sake of clarity, for “free.” Every time a producer gives someone a good or service, he or she receives Net Benefit Reward, or as Copiosis members call it, “NBR.”

The person who’s providing the product doesn’t receive the NBR points from the person receiving it; they receive it from the software program as reward for providing the good or service.

The algorithm determines how much a product “benefits” society, and awards points based on that determination. For example, if a product feeds people, it’s beneficial – the producer gets points. If it’s healthy and grown organically, they would receive more points than if it’s unhealthy or its production harms the environment.

Participants use the NBR they’ve accrued from benefiting society to buy “luxury items.” These are goods and services available that are not necessities. The more a participant benefits society, the more luxuries he or she can afford. When a participant spends NBR, it isn’t transferred to the producer; it simply disappears from their account.

This is not an attempt to explain the system in its entirety. Both Gruber and Mason have written volumes about it online, attempting, it seems, to think of everything.

A common question about this system, said Gruber, is, “If everyone has a job they’re passionate about, what about jobs like garbage collecting?” Gruber said the algorithm takes supply and demand into account. High-demand products in short supply will earn a producer more NBR than low-demand products in abundant supply – so essentially, the garbage collector would earn more NBR.

But, he also said he believes his system would lead to innovations that would rid the world of things such as garbage and sewage, so the need for those jobs would eventually disappear.

In the Kenton demonstration project, participants can use their NBR to receive a discount at B’s Preschool, run by Copiosis Steering Committee member Bridget Towles, who is also Gruber’s significant other.

Most of the Kenton project participants have children who attend B’s Preschool. It

was Gruber’s intention to use the school’s patrons as a starting point for the project.

For Stefano Iaboni, the discount on his daughter’s tuition was half his motivation for joining the group, he said.

Iaboni was an Italian living in Spain prior to moving to Portland two years ago. He said



PHOTO BY JOE GLODE

Perry Gruber joins Bridget Towles in the kitchen at B’s Preschool in North Portland. Towles is holding jars of homemade black bean and corn soup and cranberry sauce that another Copiosis participant picked up moments later.

in the United States, capitalism is more prevalent and people work harder and are more isolated than in Europe, so he was intrigued by Gruber’s offer of an alternative.

“Everything has a price; nothing is for free,” he said, noting it’s the first time in his 38 years he’s had to pay for health care. He was surprised by the cost of education, too, and said when it’s time for his daughter to go to college, his family will move back to Europe.

“It’s like it’s a way to also divide society. If you’re wealthy, you can get an education, and if you’re not, well I’m sorry then you’re not going to get a very good position in your career,” he said.

A comedic performer, Iaboni lists living room entertainment, Italian and Spanish instruction and laughter therapy among his offerings to participants in the Kenton demonstration project.

“It’s a great way to bring people together,” he said.

So far he’s received business consulting through Copiosis, but no one has accepted any of his offers yet.

As far as Copiosis taking over the economy, he said, “I think it’s the only solution for the future.”

While Kenton’s demonstration project has seven participants, Chico’s has 15.

“We’ve found it really is taking a genuine effort to reach out to each other and offer something, or making it a point to accept something on the page,” Erica Charlesworth said hours before receiving a free massage courtesy of her Copiosis community in Chico.

“It’s a lot more involved than I had realized, but also really, super enriching,” she said.

At least one participant said she’s not anti-capitalism, although she said she likes the idea of Copiosis catching on.

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