

## In Branson, Missouri, a Two-Wheeled Fix for the Commuter Blues

Much of the affordable housing in the tourist town is far from its famous entertainment strip. One solution: motor scooters offered for no money down.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/17/us/branson-missouri-motor-scooters.html?>

By Richard Fausset Photographs by Chase Castor Reporting from Branson, Mo.

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Christie Schubert fired up her new motor scooter — Taiwanese-made, with mod midcentury Italian lines — and zoomed off to work on a Friday night in Branson, Mo., the ultraconservative tourist destination in the Ozarks that touts itself as one of the most “patriotic cities in America.”

It was here, amid the brassy country-music variety shows with their tributes to the troops and salutes to the flag, that Ms. Schubert, 43, once blazed a path of excess and poor choices. Eventually, she was evicted, her car was repossessed, and she found herself living at first in the woods, and later in one of the old motels around the city’s gaudy entertainment strip.

By some estimates, close to 20 percent of the people living in Branson are homeless or staying in motels. They are workers and drifters, service industry strivers and worn-down honky-tonkers, some struggling with addiction, some raising children under trying circumstances.

These days, Ms. Schubert, who is recovering from drug addiction, has a new job as an usher at the Clay Cooper Theatre, home to a star-spangled musical revue. And, miraculously, she has the new scooter, a model called a SYM Fiddle, the benefits of which she described in the most Branson-like of terms.

“It feels like freedom,” she said.

Ms. Schubert is barely getting by on her paycheck, but she was able to finance her scooter with no money down and no credit check as part of a new program launched by a nonprofit group, Elevate Branson, that seeks to alleviate the city’s interrelated transportation and housing challenges. Such problems are shared by many rural communities, but in Branson, they have been exacerbated by the unique characteristics of a place that Homer Simpson once described (at least according to Bart) as “like Vegas, if it were run by Ned Flanders.”

In the 1980s and ’90s, Branson, a city of about 13,000 close to the Arkansas border, erupted as a kind of country miracle, attracting aging and beloved musical acts like Roy Clark, Mickey Gilley and Mel Tillis, who set up theaters that drew heartland fans by the busloads.

Restaurants and T-shirt shops followed, as did opulent biblical dramas, a Ripley’s Believe It Or Not! museum, a Trump- themed gift store and plentiful low-paying jobs. But quality affordable housing has been scarce.

The Branson Housing Authority runs one 40-unit property for older adults and disabled people. Locals say developers are generally less interested in building housing for low-wage workers than custom vacation homes. Much of the affordable housing that exists is a long way from the jobs on the strip.

“You can find affordability, but then you’re five, 10, 15, 20, 30 miles away from your job,” said Jonas Arjes, interim head of the local chamber of commerce and visitors bureau.

That leaves many of the workers who power Branson with a tough choice. They can live on the outskirts, with long commutes. Or they can live in town, in the motels. But even for motel dwellers, getting around can be difficult. There is a limited downtown tourist trolley, and ride-share companies, but the latter can drain the pockets of the working poor. Plans for the construction of a monorail or a gondola on the strip, to move tourists and workers alike, have never materialized.

The scooter idea was hatched by Elevate Branson's executive director, Bryan Stallings, 56, who came to Branson in 1987 to run a karaoke recording studio. Later, he had a religious awakening and founded Elevate Branson with his wife, Amy.

The couple began handing out meals to motel dwellers beginning in 2009, and still feed hundreds each week. They learned that Branson's working poor need help with job training, medical care, financial literacy, access to government agencies, and rides to doctor's offices and other appointments.

The rough estimate that 2,500 Branson residents are homeless or live in motels comes from Elevate Branson's grant applications, and is based, Mr. Stallings said, on participants in its meal programs, the number of motels in town and public school statistics of children with motel addresses.

"A lot of tourists, a lot of Midwesterners, come to Branson to celebrate America, the American way of life and Christian values," said Mr. Stallings, who plans to soon build the city's first tiny house community for low-wage workers. "Behind all that, though, we have this really struggling population that's serving these tourists.

The city government, Mr. Stallings said, can be averse to confronting its toughest challenges, in part because doing so would work against Branson's squeaky-clean image. (City officials declined to speak for this article.)

Mr. Stallings first heard about a scooter program for the poor in Memphis, where a nonprofit called MyCityRides has put more than 450 working people on wheels. His fledgling project in Branson, an extension of the Memphis project, had fewer than 20 participants as of early June.

But he envisions scooters everywhere — a taste of Ho Chi Minh City in the Ozarks. Soon, he said, hundreds of temporary foreign workers will arrive, under the State Department's J-1 visa program, filling jobs to meet the summer tourist crush. Mr. Stallings plans to offer them smaller scooters to rent for \$50 per week.

Early-adopting locals are already seeing benefits. A scooter owner named Ryan Booth, 31, lives 15 miles from his job at a place called Crazy Craig's Cheeky Monkey Bar. "I've got an old car that's about to blow up on me at any point," he said.

The workers are co-signers on their scooter loans along with Elevate Branson, making payments of about \$160 per month toward eventually owning the vehicles outright. The nonprofit pays for scooter training, insurance, maintenance, repairs, a helmet and motorcycle jacket. At about \$5 per day, Mr. Stallings said, it is a relative bargain, particularly compared with a round-trip Uber ride.

On that Friday in May, Ms. Schubert emerged from her motel, stubbed out a cigarette and cranked up her engine. She turned left onto the strip, where a towering King Kong clung to a fake skyscraper over the Hollywood Wax Museum. She drove past the Belgian Waffle and Pancake House, the Ozarkland souvenir shop, and a mini-golf place.

Just beyond a spaghetti restaurant — which announces itself with a 50-foot-high dinner fork protruding from a 15-foot meatball — she turned left into the theater parking lot, on time for her 5 p.m. shift.

The scooter has her imagining other possibilities, even small ones, like a leisurely ride to Table Rock Lake, where she has always dreamed, like so many tourists to the Ozarks, about building a house.

For the time being, she said, it will be enough just to get there.

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