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Auto enthusiasts pay \$200K+ for customizable condos for their cars

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A condo belonging to Millennium Sounds owner Bill Lehman includes space for his 2020 C8 Corvette and two racing simulators. (Photo courtesy of Bill Lehman)

Jay Farmer had a problem, and it led to a solution that has become a community for car enthusiasts in central Indiana.

Fifteen years ago, Farmer decided he wanted to construct a garage at his Florida home. He envisioned it as a place he could build a collection of cars and hang out.

But Farmer quickly ran into problems and mistakes. Worst of all, when he finally finished the garage, he realized it was a solitary place.

“I found I was all by myself,” said Farmer, who now lives in Carmel and described himself as a semi-retired real estate developer.

The desire to connect with others who are passionate about anything with wheels and a motor led to the creation of Motor District Garage Condos near the intersection of State Road 32 and Ditch Road in Westfield.

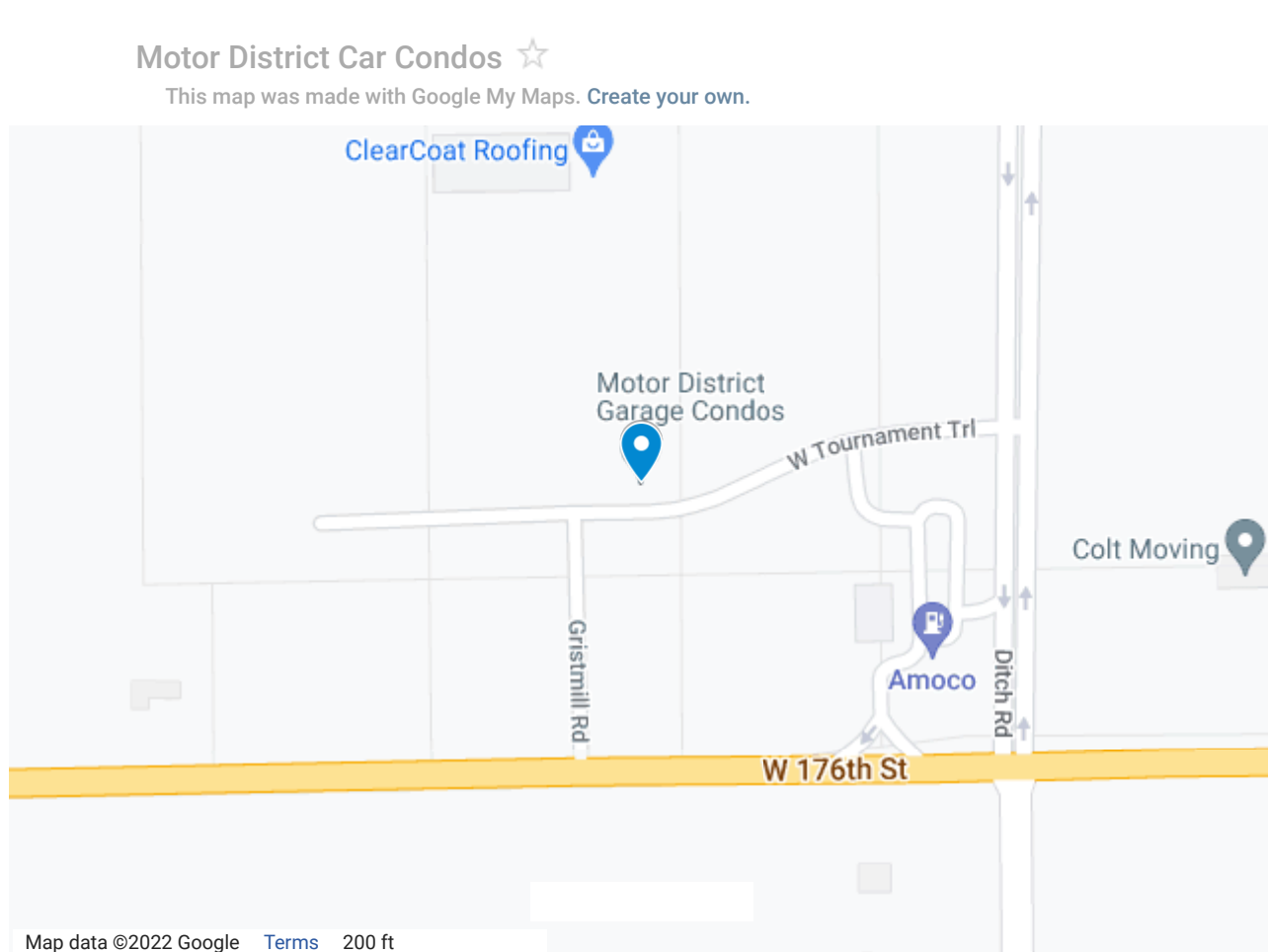


Jay Farmer

Motor District opened its first two buildings a year ago, and plans call for a total of 13. Two are currently under construction. All 26 completed condos have been sold, and 14 more are nearing completion.

Farmer described a garage condo as an urban cabin, a second office and a hangout space where people can store cars, motorcycles, all-terrain vehicles and RVs. He said Motor District will eventually have 150 condo units, averaging 1,000 to 3,000 square feet on the ground floor, plus mezzanine options. The \$40 million development will eventually comprise about 180,000 square feet of ground-floor space, including retail and an event plaza.

Farmer said California-based Superformance—which designs, develops and sells replica classic cars—plans to open a location at the southeast corner of Motor District. The complex sits on 12 acres in the Springmill Trails Planned Unit Development, which includes residential, mixed-use and commercial projects.



Motor District’s condos cost \$200,000 to \$500,000 and are the first of their kind in Indiana. While garage condos are still a relatively new concept, they have proven successful across the country.

Farmer pointed to Minnesota-based AutoMotorPlex, which has two locations in the Minneapolis suburbs, as inspiration for what he wants to do at Motor District. “In many markets, it’s been really successful and really popular, and there was nothing like this in the Indianapolis area,” he said. “And I thought, with our racing car heritage here, this would be a great fit.”

Standard Motor District units typically include 20- to 22-foot ceilings, a mezzanine, in-floor heating, a 14-by-18-foot garage door, exterior surveillance and a fire suppression sprinkler system.

“One of the things I learned was how difficult it can be when you don’t have all the utilities running to your building in places where you need it,” Farmer said. “And, so, we’ve made that easy for people to do whatever they want to do in the unit.”

The way people customize garage condos at Motor District runs the gamut from basic to elaborate.

While some stick to a simple buildout, Farmer said, others have gone all out with kitchens, bars, a game room, TVs, sound system, couches and a dining area.

The garages aren’t technically required to be used for car storage. Some people store their hunting and fishing equipment in a garage, while others might have a woodshop. The one restriction is that Motor District is not zoned residential, so Farmer said people are asked to not live in their garages.

“Some people spend more on the buildouts than the garage,” he said. “People build the units out to fit their specific needs.”



Condo customization at Motor District runs the gamut from basic to elaborate. (IBJ photo/Eric Learned)

Getting started

Location was crucial to Farmer when he began thinking about Motor District in 2017. He wanted a place in Hamilton County, because of its higher-income demographics, and said Westfield “just turned out to be the perfect spot.”

“From our side of Indianapolis to Fishers to Zionsville and well north of where we are, with U.S. 31 being so easy with no stoplights to travel up and down, it’s good access to the demographic that we were targeting,” he said.

To begin Motor District, Farmer partnered with auto racing veteran and team owner Eric Bachelart and Travis May, principal of Westfield-based William Tres Development LLC. (Bachelart has since left Motor District to focus on running his Conquest Racing team.)

Despite pandemic-related delays that doubled costs—the price estimate in 2019 for Motor District was \$20 million—Farmer and his group began construction in January 2021.

They also started at a time when competition is picking up for vehicle-oriented communities in central Indiana, where passion for automobiles has been part of the lifeblood of the region since the invention of the internal combustion engine.

Mike Simmons, an Indianapolis resident, opened Silo Auto Club & Conservancy in 2019 in downtown Indianapolis, and IndyCar driver Graham Rahal hopes to expand his car-related operations that now include events, vehicle sales and car storage as he plans his move from Brownsburg to Zionsville's Creekside Corporate Park.

And about 30 miles west of Indianapolis, The Club at Putnam Park has been open for more than a decade. The Club's facility features a track, club events and leasable garages.

In Westfield, Farmer consulted with AutoMotorPlex founder Bruno Silikowski, who he said provided guidance and access to intellectual property throughout the planning process. Silikowski operates a 200,000-square-foot garage condo community in Chanhassen, Minnesota, and a 250,000-square-foot community in Medina, Minnesota.



Bruno Silikowski

“We were able to really streamline our project and avoid a lot of mistakes by learning from what they did,” Farmer said.

The most important thing, Silikowski told IBJ, is to give people what they want.

“The majority of people who join us have the passion to begin with. They have the resources, but most of them don’t have time, so we make it easy,” he said.

Farmer said the ownership model at Motor District appeals to people because they can design their garage condos to suit their needs. He added that garages have appreciated in value over time, so people can make money off their purchase if their situation changes and they need to move out.

“We have buyers who are very successful businesspeople, but we also have our regular-guy buyers who have one or two cars, maybe a ’70s-era muscle car that’s not going to win any awards, but it’s their pride and joy,” Farmer said. “Everybody fits in around a common interest in really anything with a motor.”

A community

Bill Lehman was one of the first people to buy a Motor District condo after May pitched him the idea about two years ago.

Lehman, who owns Indianapolis-based audio/visual system retailer Millennium Sounds, said he spent about six months customizing his garage. A friend created a 3D rendering to help lay out the space exactly how he wanted.



Bill Lehman

Lehman uses his 1,500-square-foot garage condo as office space and home for his 2020 C8 Corvette and two racing simulators, which sit on the ground level.

The mezzanine features a kitchen with a refrigerator, dishwasher, sink, stove and 21-foot black walnut countertop. There’s a full bathroom with a walk-in shower.

“I would consider myself a car guy, and so the car enthusiast part intrigued me,” Lehman said. “And then we are actually using the space for work, so I’ll go there and work as an extended office.”

Lehman also hosted a fundraiser in his condo in April for the not-for-profit Firefly Children & Family Alliance. The event featured IndyCar driver Tony Kanaan, who competed against people in Lehman’s racing simulators.

Lehman said “being around a lot of other car guys” intrigued him and that he has developed friendships at Motor District. “We’ve met people that we already knew, but then they bought a garage there, so then we have more in common and we talk and communicate more now because we have a common interest,” he said. “We’ve also had current customers that have bought garages.”

Building that sense of community is something both Farmer and Silikowski emphasized sets their car condo communities apart from merely being places to store vehicles.

“Golfers, where do they go?” Silikowski said. “They go to the country club. Where do pilots go? Where do they hang out? They hang out in the hangars. This is where the automotive enthusiasts go.”

John Leonard, who does marketing and promotions for Motor District and organizes the annual Artomobilia show in Carmel, echoed that sentiment. Along with charity events, Motor District also hosts a take on cars and coffee called Mocha District, car shows and road driving rallies.



John Leonard

“You get a bunch of like-minded guys together that all have a common interest,” he said. “And rather than having a garage on your own property where it’s basically just you and your cars, you get the added benefit of being surrounded by a bunch of guys that share your same interests.”•

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