

Consumer Problems With Auto Repair



A Consumer Fact Sheet

Office of Public and Consumer Affairs

Automobiles Number One Consumer Problem

If you have a problem with your automobile, you have plenty of company.

State and local consumer offices and the Office of Consumer Affairs at the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare report that automobile complaints have been at the head of the list for the past several years. In fact, nearly 20% of the complaints received by HEW's Office of Consumer Affairs relate to automobiles. About 11% of the complaints received by the Better Business Bureau are concerned with automobiles.

A significant portion of consumer automobile problems center on automobile repair.

There are nearly 110 million automobiles and 134 million motorists in the U.S. They spend nearly \$50 billion each year to repair and maintain their cars.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that \$120 billion are wasted on poor, needless or fraudulent auto repairs and maintenance. In this fact sheet, we explore some ways to help reduce this waste.

Most consumers know little about how their cars work and what types of maintenance are advisable. They go into a repair shop with open wallets, and all too often come out a good deal poorer.

Poor auto repairs cost society as well as individual consumers. Mechanical defects can contribute to accidents. Improperly maintained cars consume more energy and produce more harmful emissions. So everybody loses when cars are not properly maintained and when they are fixed incorrectly.

Congress Looks For Ways To Improve Auto-Repair Process

"What do you mean this repair isn't covered by my warranty?"

"But I didn't authorize you to do this repair."

"This is the third time I've had my car in with the same problem, and it still isn't fixed."

Millions of Americans have found themselves in an auto-repair shop saying something like that. Many have gone on to write letters seeking government help.

Nevertheless, there has been little coordinated attention to auto repairs on the part of the Federal Government. Now all that may be about to change.

The Department of Transportation, the Federal Trade Commission, the Department of Justice and Congress are all looking at consumer problems with auto repairs.

And there is growing recognition that a coordinated approach is needed. It matters little to individual consumers if their cars weren't fixed properly because of mechanic incompetence, complex design of the car or outright dishonesty. They want help.

Some possible ways to reduce consumer problems with auto repair were explored at March 1978, hearings of the Consumer Subcommittee of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation. Chairman of the Subcommittee is Sen. Wendell H. Ford (D-KY).

Joan Claybrook, Administrator of the DOT's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, was the leadoff witness. She proposed



Archie Richardson, President of the Auto Owners Action Council, and Ina Katzin, an unhappy consumer, testify at Senate hearings.

several Federal initiatives, including:

- continued support to State and local governments in developing diagnostic vehicle inspections that would be separate from repair facilities and would embrace all aspects of the vehicle, not just safety and pollution control.
- vehicle standards that can reduce maintenance requirements and warn owners of the need for repairs (for instance, brake warning systems).
- information to aid consumers in their choice of vehicles and to improve their understanding of maintenance requirements.
- fostering the development of consumer auto-repair cooperatives.

Many problems require State or local action. So, Claybrook urged States to develop programs for mediating consumer complaints,

See *Auto-Repair Hearings*, page 4.

State Approaches to Auto-Repair Problems

Your rights in the auto-repair process depend greatly on where you live. Why? Because less than half of the States have any laws governing auto-repair practices. What is a matter of law in California depends on company policy and your assertiveness in Virginia.

Prior to 1973 only three States provided any protection for consumers in their auto-repair dealings. As a result of increasing attention on auto-repair problems, now 21 States, the District of Columbia and at least three localities (Dallas, TX, and Prince Georges and Montgomery County, MD) provide some consumer rights and protection. (See chart on page 3, for list of State auto-repair laws.)

A central element of such laws is DISCLOSURES.

The idea is to give the consumer a better chance of understanding what repairs are needed, how much the repairs will cost, when the repairs will be finished and what guarantees accompany the work.

In some States, auto-repair regulations extend to definitions of deceptive practices and call for correction of shoddy repair work.

Here are some typical provisions:

1. WRITTEN ESTIMATES

Written estimates are required for work that costs over, say, \$25 or \$50. The estimate must include a description of the car's problem as described by the consumer, plus a description of repair work to be performed, an estimate of all charges for this work and an approximate time and date the car can be picked up.

If the repair is going to exceed the initial estimate by more than 10%, the consumer must be informed and asked to OK the total charges.

This can create a problem for "early bird" consumers—people who drop off their cars on the way to work, before the shop opens. California makes its disclosure law flexible enough to accommodate "early birds"; the shop still has to fill out a written estimate but then

can go over it by phone with the consumer, get an oral authorization to go ahead and note the time and circumstances on the estimate.

Laws requiring written estimates generally permit the shop to charge a reasonable fee for making the estimate, but require that this fee be disclosed to the consumer in advance, too.

The shop also must disclose the nature, extent and duration of any warranty on the work.

2. RETURN OF REPLACED PARTS

The shop has to return replaced parts to the consumer unless a warranty agreement requires that they be returned to the manufacturer or distributor, or unless the parts are so big as to make return impractical.

Even then, the consumer is entitled to see the replaced parts.

3. INVOICES

At the time the bill is paid, the shop must give the consumer an invoice noting all repair work, stating whether new, rebuilt or reconditioned parts were used and identifying the mechanic who did the work.

Shops must keep copies of these invoices for a specified period of time.

4. MECHANIC'S LIEN

Most States have what is known as a "mechanic's lien law"—which means that if you refuse to pay a bill, no matter how outrageous, the shop can keep your car, no matter how valuable.

In some cases, however, States that require written estimates and authorization for repairs have gone on to say that the mechanic's lien law doesn't apply if the shop hasn't complied with these rules.

5. POSTED NOTICES

Shops must post signs prominently notifying consumers of their rights to a written estimate, a written copy of any guarantee, return of replaced parts and a detailed invoice. Some States require facilities to post a notice on where complaints can be filed.

6. DECEPTIVE PRACTICES AND PROHIBITED ACTS

Typical regulations prohibit shops from making false promises

to get a consumer to authorize repairs, from allowing consumers to sign blank documents relating to any repairs, from charging for any work not performed, from performing unnecessary repairs or from misrepresenting the cost of authorized repairs.

The effect of disclosure rules—especially those calling for a written estimate—has been to "end the five o'clock fury," as Robert Wiens, Chief of California's Bureau of Automotive Repair puts it. By that he means the rage consumers feel when they arrive to pick up their cars and find out that they will be paying far more for repairs than the shop said.

Industry spokesmen sometimes argue that requirements for written estimates simply mean that the shop estimates high rather than get caught short—and thus drive up the costs of repairs.

California's Robert Wiens rejoins that the answer is for the consumer to use estimates to look for a shop that will offer a fair price for the repair.

"I don't think anybody argues that you can end the need for consumers to protect themselves," adds John Reistrup, chief of DOT's Division of Consumer Affairs. "But how can consumers do that when shops can actually mislead them into allowing repairs and then keep the cars unless they pay an inflated bill?"

"It seems to me a written estimate is just a basic, common-sense right for consumers. And if it's a right, why not recognize it in law?"

Six States have complemented and strengthened their disclosure laws by requiring repair facilities to register with the State government. Repair facilities generally do not have to meet any specific requirement to register with the State, but they have to obey the law in order to stay in business.

Michigan, Hawaii and the District of Columbia carry auto-repair legislation one step further by requiring mechanics to pass a certification test for the type of repair work they usually perform.

Shops Follow the Law—Or Else

Like many consumers, Mr. X was attracted by the advertised price of \$7.55 for a front-end alignment for his car. And like many consumers, he got ripped off.

But because Mr. X lived in Michigan—one of the States that makes auto-repair shops accountable for the work they do and don't do—his story has a happy ending.

The shop told Mr. X that his car had defective ball joints. In fact, it refused to do the alignment unless the ball joints were replaced.

Although the shop's mechanic said he wouldn't drive the car around the block in its current condition, Mr. X did more than that. He told the mechanic he wanted to think it over and drove straight to the Michigan Bureau of Automotive Regulation.

They checked the ball joints and found them in good condition. But at the Bureau's request because it would help other consumers, Mr. X took the car back to the shop and had the work done anyway. Then, exercising his rights under **Michigan's Motor Vehicle Service and Repair Act**, he asked for the old parts and got them.

The Bureau turned the case over to the State's Attorney General. Faced with a suit under the Repair Act and the **Michigan Consumer Protection Act**, the shop agreed to pay a fine of \$7,000 and repay Mr. X for the unnecessary ball joints.

Very few of the complaints that the Bureau receives actually allege fraud. A major portion of consumer complaints involves shops exceeding the written estimate, giving no estimate at all, or not doing the repairs properly. Michigan, because of its tough auto-repair law, is able to deal with these and many other auto-repair problems.

Michigan is among the jurisdictions which require auto-repair shops to register with the State and to pay a fee which finances the enforcement program. The law gives the Department of State—of which the Bureau of Automotive Regulation is part—the power to deny, suspend or

see *Shops Follow the Law*, page 6

SUMMARY OF STATE AUTO REPAIR ACTIVITY

(from Summary of Auto-Repair Legislation and Regulations of the Fifty States, Automotive Parts and Accessories Association)

| STATE | DISCLOSURES | MECHANIC CERTIFICATION | DEALER REGISTRATION/ LICENSING |
|------------------|-------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Alaska | • | | |
| Arizona | | | K |
| California | • | | • |
| Colorado | • | | |
| Connecticut | • | | • |
| Delaware | P | P | |
| Florida | • | | |
| Georgia | K | | |
| Hawaii | • | • | • |
| Maryland | • | | |
| Massachusetts | • | P | P |
| Michigan | • | • | • |
| Missouri | K | | |
| Montana | • | | |
| Nevada | • | | |
| New Hampshire | • | | |
| New Jersey | • | | |
| New York | • | | • |
| North Dakota | K | | |
| Ohio | • | | |
| Oklahoma | P | | P |
| Oregon | • | | |
| Pennsylvania | P | | P |
| Rhode Island | | | • ¹ |
| South Carolina | P | | P |
| Texas | • | | |
| Utah | • | | |
| Virginia | K | | K |
| Washington | • | | P |
| Washington, D.C. | • | • | • |
| Wisconsin | • | | |

(•) Regulations in effect.
(P) Pending 1977 or carryovers into 1978 sessions.
(K) Proposals killed in 1977.
States not listed do not have auto-repair legislation.

¹ Auto body shops only.

Shops Follow the Law

from page 3

revoke a registration if, after a hearing, it can prove that a shop violated the State's auto-repair law and regulations under it. However, Michigan places its major emphasis on voluntary settlement of consumer problems. Penalties are sought only when a voluntary agreement cannot be reached or when a shop continues to violate the repair law.

Between November 1976 and the end of 1977, the Bureau recovered over \$100,000 for Michigan consumers—plus additional or corrective repair work worth several times that amount.

In California, another State with a law that says auto-repair shops must register and be held accountable for what they do or don't do, the State's Bureau of Automotive Repair calculates that it got consumers \$800,000 worth of adjustments, refunds and rework in the single year ended last June 30.

Both States use the registration fees from shops to finance their auto-repair program and both operate toll-free hotlines staffed with people trained to handle consumer complaints. Because many auto-repair problems are caused by a lack of communication, hotline staff are often able to settle problems not covered by the State law.

In each State, if it's a complaint over which the Bureau has jurisdiction but which the hotline staff can't handle, it's turned over to field investigators.

Both programs have won wide consumer support.

Surveys by the California Bureau consistently have found that more than half the consumers were satisfied with the results of the Bureau's handling of their complaints—not bad, the Bureau says, considering that the main complaint is incompetence and that isn't covered by the California law.

The Michigan Bureau has a fat sheaf of favorable letters from consumers whose complaints it handled.

"Your representative was most courteous," wrote one. "I'm very glad we consumers have someone like this to help us out when mechanics get the best of us. . . ."

Diagnostics Serve Consumers and Auto Mechanics

Diagnostic motor vehicle inspections—annual or semi-annual physical checkups for cars—offer "great promise to consumers and repair industry alike," DOT's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) concludes in a recent study.

Diagnostic inspections involve running a series of tests on a car and giving the consumer a status report on its condition, complete enough to serve as a prescription for getting proper repairs. The inspections are more detailed than State safety or emissions inspections.

NHTSA's report concluded that car owners can achieve greater safety, lower pollution, improved gas mileage and lower repair and maintenance costs for their cars by using diagnostic inspections.

The report is based on pilot diagnostic projects set up in Alabama, Tennessee, Arizona, Puerto Rico and Washington, DC. These projects carried out 125,000 in-depth diagnostic inspections of safety-related and exhaust emissions systems during 1975 and 1976, on a representative sample of 1968 to 1973 autos.

If a car was diagnosed as defective, the consumer was asked to have it repaired at a garage of his or her own choice, then return for re-inspection with repair bills and fuel consumption records. By having the car re-inspected after repairs, consumers were able to make certain that the proper repairs were made. The program was totally voluntary and the inspections were free.

It turned out that consumers relied on the inspections enough to get \$2.4 million worth of repairs, an average of \$57.25 per car.

And, the NHTSA reports says, the investment paid off:

- Particularly where more complex repairs were involved, the repairs helped consumers get either better quality or lower-cost repairs, or both.

- Participants showed an average improvement in fuel economy of 4.7% right after repairs. Projected nationally, this would

mean a saving of 1.8 billion gallons of gasoline a year or \$1.1 billion for consumers.

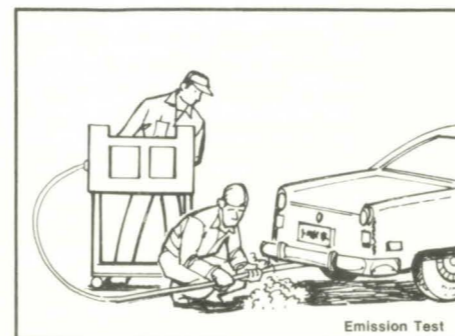
- Pollution from the cars also went down—hydrocarbons (HC) by 22% and carbon monoxide (CO) by 12%.

- The failure rates for safety systems like brakes dropped by about 50%.

- Consumers reacted positively to the program—93% said that they would rejoin it if they could; 85% felt that the inspection should be required by law; 63% said they would pay \$10 or more for the service; and a third said they would pay \$15 or more. (Actual costs of the inspection ran from \$10 to \$28, depending on the site, but the report states that they could be brought down further.)

- Performance of the auto-repair shops around the diagnostic centers tended to improve in the direction of doing only what was needed and doing it right the first time. The number of cars that failed re-inspection decreased during the period the centers were open, and a study at one center showed that the number of unnecessary repairs also decreased.

Copies of the report—**Motor Vehicle Diagnostic Inspection Program**, NHTSA Technical Report No. DOT HS-802 760—are available from the National Technical Information Service, Springfield, Virginia 22161 for \$6.00, PB No. 274538.



AAA Runs Program to End Under-the-Hood Guesswork

The owner of a 1969 Chevrolet Impala had been to several repair shops to complain of a knocking noise in the engine and a backfiring noise when he accelerated.

"They just kept tuning the engine and replacing parts, but the engine kept making the same noises," he told the staff at the St. Louis Diagnostic Car Clinic operated by the Auto Club of Missouri.

Finally, one of the shops referred the car owner to the clinic. "He wanted to keep the car if we thought the whole car was worth fixing," recalls Larry Pipes, then manager of the clinic and now manager of technical services for the club.

They did find repair was worthwhile. Using its \$125,000 worth of equipment, the clinic performed an exhaustive check of the car—including not only the engine but also brakes, lights, horn, electrical system, transmission, tires, alignment. And they gave him a detailed prescription of what should be done to put the car in top condition.

The main source of the engine noise, it turned out, was a flat lobe, or bump, on the camshaft which opens and closes the valves that feed the engine a mixture of air and fuel and take away exhaust.

The owner took the car back to a repair shop and had the prescription filled—and this time

the problem was cured.

It cost him another \$620, but he didn't have to buy a new car as he had feared.

The Auto Club's Larry Pipes calls this "a classic example of how a diagnostic clinic can help a consumer."

"Our No. 1 objective is to protect the consumer's pocketbook—to help protect his or her investment," observes Pipes.

Because AAA does not do repair work, consumers can have extra confidence in its diagnostic facilities.

The clinic charges club members \$22.50 and non-members \$30.50 for a complete diagnosis. For an additional \$1, the clinic will re-inspect the car after repairs to be sure that they were done right. State safety inspections are also performed at the clinic.

More than 400 checks are performed on the average car going through the main-lane inspection, compared to about 120 for cars that went through pilot diagnostic centers operated under a recent program of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) within DOT. (see "Diagnostics Serve Consumers," page 6). The NHTSA diagnostic program focused solely on safety, emission and fuel economy features.

Since it opened in October 1967, the pioneering St. Louis clinic has performed inspections on nearly 15,000 cars a year.

Similar auto-club clinics are now operating in Kansas City, San Francisco, and Toronto, Canada.

John Noettl, director of membership services for the Auto Club of Missouri, says there is evidence that the existence of such clinics not only helps the individual consumer but also raises the quality of repair generally.

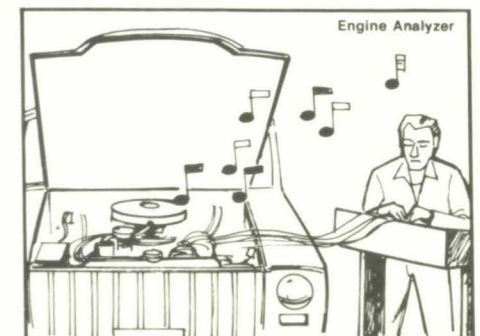
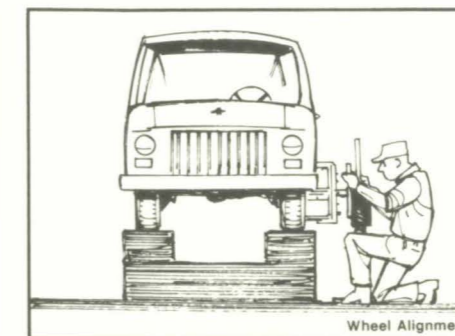
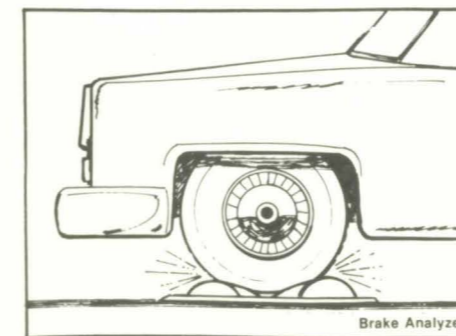
He reports that since the St. Louis and Kansas City clinics opened, the number of complaints about auto repairs to the Attorney General, the Better Business Bureau and newspapers have dropped.

The Missouri club has contracts with NHTSA to provide information on defects. The clinic's data were important, for example, in establishing that there were problems with engine mounts in 1965-1969 Chevrolets. Eventually 6.8 million Chevrolets were recalled for correction of these defects.

Pipes would like to see more diagnostic facilities available across the country, even if they all weren't as thorough as the main-lane inspections carried out at the Auto Club of Missouri.

"Naturally I would like to see the Nation get going on a program that would save all Americans some money," he says. "If NHTSA's vehicles-in-use standards were upgraded," he says, "an effective program could be set up that would cost around \$15 per car."

A Few of the Checks in the Diagnostic Process



Industry Acts to Improve Auto-Repair Process

Industry recognizes that auto repairs are a real source of consumer frustration and dissatisfaction and, over the past few years, has taken several steps to make the auto-repair process more responsive to consumer needs. Although these programs are generally voluntary, they can be helpful to consumers in choosing a repair facility and in seeking resolution of a repair problem.

To improve mechanic competence, the domestic auto manufacturers and automobile dealers in 1972 established the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence (NIASE). Since that time, independent repair facilities, service stations and other segments of the repair industry have added their support and encouragement to the program.

The goal of NIASE is to organize and promote the highest standard of automotive service. A major element of its program involves the voluntary testing and certification of mechanics. Mechanics can take competency tests in eight different specialty areas. Since 1972, over 100,000 mechanics have been certified in at least one area of automotive repair.

Each year NIASE publishes a booklet which lists repair facilities employing NIASE certified mechanics. The booklet **Where to Find Certified Mechanics for Your Car**, is available for \$1.95 from NIASE, 1825 K St., NW Washington, D.C. 20006. If you want to know only the shops in your State, NIASE will send such a list free, on request.

The Certified Automotive Repairmen's Society (CARS) also operates a voluntary training and certification program. Over 5,000 mechanics have been certified by CARS which is headquartered in Radnor, PA.

During the past few years, some repair facilities have become more consumer oriented. Oil companies and manufacturers have organized programs to raise the standards and practices of many of their repair facilities. For example, the Shell Oil Company has established standards for those stations who want to operate a

Shell Auto Care Center. Under the program, service stations must meet specific criteria with regard to the equipment and personnel working at the facility. Qualifying service stations also agree to provide written estimates and guarantees on repair work and to submit any repair disputes to a third party for mediation.

In many localities automobile dealers have developed their own mechanisms to deal with customer disputes in the form of Automotive Consumer Action Panels (AUTOCAPS). The National Automobile Dealers Association developed the AUTOCAP program in 1973, and there are now more than 40 programs throughout the country operated by State and local auto dealers associations.

Some AUTOCAP programs rely on one person to mediate disputes while others have a panel of consumers and dealers propose solutions to difficult repair problems. Before a dispute is submitted to an AUTOCAP, the local dealers association first attempts to solve the problem informally with the particular dealer. In fact, the majority of repair problems are resolved in this way. If the problem cannot be resolved informally, it is submitted to the AUTOCAP.

Although an AUTOCAP decision is not binding either on the dealer or the consumer, most auto dealers have abided by AUTOCAP recommendations.

To find out if there is an AUTOCAP in your area, phone your local automotive trade or dealers association or inquire at any automobile dealership.

The Ford Motor Company is now experimenting with a similar way of handling consumer disputes. Under the pilot program now being run in North Carolina, Ford and the dealer must first be given a reasonable opportunity to correct the customer's problem. If the customer remains dissatisfied, he/she may bring the problem to a Consumer Appeals Board composed of consumer and industry representatives. Ford and the dealer are bound by the decision of the Board. If the pilot

program proves successful, Ford plans to initiate similar procedures throughout the U.S.

These complaint-handling mechanisms do not always settle the case in favor of the consumer, nor should they. But they do offer a significant opportunity to the consumer and to the dealer by providing a fresh look at the problem and ways of solving it.

Auto-Repair Hearings

from page 1.
rating repair facilities, and providing consumer education. She indicated that DOT could help States by developing a model law dealing with repair shop accountability and disclosure.

Michael Pertschuk, Chairman of the Federal Trade Commission, focused on warranty problems—an FTC concern. He recommended the following changes in the Moss-Magnuson Warranty Act to make it a more effective tool for consumers:

- automatically award attorney's fees and other costs to consumers who win warranty suits.
- eliminate the requirement that 100 people with exactly the same problem be found for class action suits.
- allow a consumer to sue a manufacturer to buy back a lemon, even under a limited warranty, and to use the car until the dispute is settled. If the consumer wins, the refund would be reduced to reflect this use of the car. Under many State laws, a consumer may sue to force repurchase of a lemon, but he or she must give up the car during the dispute—impractical for most consumers.

Both Pertschuk and Claybrook agreed that consumers need an alternative to lawsuits and recommended the establishment of third-party mechanisms to settle repair and warranty disputes. Pertschuk went so far as to say that if industry doesn't develop some informal process to settle warranty disputes that Congress should seriously consider making such procedures mandatory.

Robert Sussman of the National District Attorneys Association described his group's efforts to curb auto-repair fraud. Under a grant from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, district

attorneys in five communities have been investigating and prosecuting dishonest shops. Sussman testified that diagnostics could be a valuable tool for prosecutors conducting auto-repair investigations.

The House Subcommittee on Consumer Protection of the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce may hold similar hearings later in 1978. The Subcommittee is chaired by Bob Eckhart (D-TX).

Rating Repair Shops

Taking your car to the right repair facility can prevent many needless auto-repair problems. Unfortunately there are very few programs which help consumers judge the quality of repair shops.

The American Automobile Association (AAA) has attempted to take some of the risk out of the repair process by identifying shops which provide quality repair in selected areas. An Approved Auto Repair Program is now operating in parts of Texas, Florida, Minnesota, Southern California and Washington, DC.

Under this program AAA inspects willing repair shops according to strict standards covering a shop's personnel, equipment, appearance, customer services and community reputation. Those shops which meet AAA standards and decide to participate in the program agree to:

- Provide AAA members with a written estimate
- Make available replaced parts, except those parts which must be returned to the manufacturer under a warranty agreement
- Guarantee repair work for 90 days or 4,000 miles
- Abide by AAA decision in any dispute between the customer and repair shops.

AAA members in the pilot areas have responded quite favorably, and AAA hopes to expand the program to other areas of the country.

In the Nation's capital, the Washington Center for the Study of Consumer Services—a private, non-profit consumer organization—rates different service industries in the metropolitan area. For a special publication on auto repair, the Center surveyed consumers on the

Auto Repair Tips

When Choosing a Repair Facility, Consider

- Reputation
 - Consult with your friends and neighbors.
 - Check with your local consumer office, Better Business Bureau and voluntary consumer groups.
- Qualifications
 - Are the mechanics certified or licensed?
- Facilities
 - How long has the shop been at its present location?
 - Does the shop appear to be well equipped?
 - Is it clean and organized?
- Repair Practices
 - Will the shop give you a written estimate?
 - Will it advise you on additional costs?
 - How does it handle complaints?
 - Does it guarantee its work in writing?
- Cost
 - Do the shop's prices seem competitive?
- Convenience
 - Is it close to where you live or work?

After You've Selected a Repair Facility

- Call ahead for an appointment.
- If only a few of the shop's mechanics are certified, ask that a certified mechanic do the repair work on your car.
- Describe the problem as specifically as possible to the mechanic who will work on your car.
- Don't tell the shop what repairs to do unless you are absolutely sure that the repairs are needed.
- Ask for a written estimate and tell the shop to get your OK for any additional repair work.
- If you are asking for a diagnosis of the problem, ask the shop how much the diagnosis will cost if you don't have the repair work done.
- Ask for the return of replaced parts.
- Make sure to get any guarantees in writing and ask the shop to explain time limitations or other restrictions on guarantees.

If You Have a Complaint

- Discuss the problem with the repair shop. If necessary, talk with the shop manager or owner. Many problems are caused by a lack of communication and can be resolved easily when you talk with a person in authority.
- Contact your local consumer office, Better Business Bureau or voluntary consumer agency. If they can't help you, at least they can warn other consumers.
- If your problem is with a new-car dealer, contact your State or local automobile dealer association to see if it operates an AUTOCAP program to settle disputes.

quality and costs of the repair services they received, looked at the complaint records of the Better Business Bureau and the local consumer offices, and surveyed repair facilities on their equipment and personnel. The survey results and the Center's recommendations have been published in a book to help Washington consumers select good

repair shops.

If you belong to a consumer organization that would be interested in conducting a similar survey in your community, write to the Washington Center for the Study of Consumer Services (1518 K Street, N.W., Suite 406, Washington, D.C. 20005) for materials that will give you guidance; enclose \$3 to cover costs.

Auto Owners Join Forces

Over 6,000 consumers have become so frustrated with their auto-repair problems that they have joined a group known as the Auto Owners Action Council.

Archie Richardson, Jr., AOAC President, organized the group in 1973 after going through several repair battles of his own. He recognized that many consumers do not have the expertise or time to take on automobile manufacturers and dealers.

Residents of the Washington, DC, area form the bulk of AOAC members. But the Council does handle a limited number of cases outside the metropolitan area.

The AOAC assists members with specific problems and often testifies on their behalf at legislative hearings. If a case is of sufficient merit, the Council will even represent its members in court. The consumer, however, may be asked to contribute toward the costs if the case involves considerable expense.

The annual membership fee is \$15. But if you join at the time of a complaint, the fee is \$25.

For further information, contact Archie Richardson, AOAC, 733 - 15th Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20005.

AUTOMOBILE PUBLICATIONS

The following publications are available from the Consumer Information Center, Pueblo, CO 81009:

Automotive Rust—Its Causes and Prevention 501F. Free. 4 pp. 1975.

The Backyard Mechanic. 001F. \$1.25. 58 pp. 1976. Illustrated step-by-step instruction on how to inspect your car for needed repairs; change the oil; tune-up; lubricate; and maintain the transmission, disc brakes, radiator, emission control devices, battery and automatic choke.

Battery Hazards. 502F. Free. 5 pp. 1975. Tips on jump starting.

Car Care and Service. 002F. 35¢. 16 pp. 1974. How to recognize the symptoms of common automotive problems; tips on working with your mechanic.

Common Sense in Buying a New Car. 693F. Free. 32 pp. 1978. Tips on how to select a new car and what to do if you have problems.

Common Sense in Buying a Used Car. 503F. Free. 10 pp. 1976.

Checkpoints for inspection before you buy; also discusses the odometer law and used car warranties.

Consumer Tire Guide. 504F. Free. 15 pp. 1977. Defines bias, belted bias, and radial tires; tells how to select and care for tires for maximum safety and wear.

Cost of Owning and Operating an Automobile. 505F. Free. 15 pp. 1977. Cost breakdown for purchase, depreciation, maintenance, gas, insurance and taxes for standard, compact and sub-compact cars; includes worksheet for figuring your own costs.

How to Deal with Motor Vehicle Emergencies. 506F. Free. 15 pp. 1976. How to handle such emergencies as overheating, brake or steering failure, blowouts and fires.

Motorcycle Safety. 507F. Free. 19 pp. 1976. Causes of motorcycle accidents; buying the right motorcycle and protective clothing; what to do in emergency situations.

Vehicle Exhaust Systems. 509F. Free. 4 pp. 1976. Functions, maintenance and safety precautions.

This fact sheet was prepared by the Division of Consumer Affairs in the Office of the Secretary of Transportation. The major portion of the fact sheet was originally published in the April 1978 issue of **Transpo Topics for Consumers**, newsletter published by the Division of Consumer Affairs. Should you have any comments or suggestions, contact: John Reistrup, Chief, Division of Consumer Affairs, S-83, U.S. Department of Transportation, Washington, D.C. 20590 or call (202) 426-4518.

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