



Spring maintenance can add to years to vehicle's longevity

BY BENJAMIN PEEK

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While several types of maintenance should be performed on automobiles in the spring, technicians place emphasis on year-round vehicle maintenance for reasons of safety and economy.

"This is something you should be doing all year long," said Bob Guenther, service manager for Auto Service Center in Traverse City. "Ask yourself, what is the maintenance schedule and where am I going with this car?"

Guenther said to make use of the vehicle's manual in order to ensure the maintenance schedule is properly followed.

Industry studies have indicated that as much as \$60 billion of maintenance is left unperformed by vehicle owners each year. The impact was felt on the roads, where 5 percent of all vehicle accidents occurred as a direct result of unper-

formed maintenance. These accidents account for the deaths of 2,600 people each year, as well as an economic toll of \$2 billion.

To increase personal safety — and save money — several spring maintenance tasks should be addressed as a part of a year round car-care program.

"Probably the biggest thing we look for is unfamiliar noises, like squeaks or banging," said John Redmond, owner of Redmond Automotive in Traverse City.

Those noises could indicate problems with the suspension system, brakes, wheel bearings or exhaust.

"Suspension is the biggest problem we get this time of year," said Redmond.

Road salt on vehicles is another serious concern during the springtime.

"Salt can create a lot of anti-lock brake problems," explained Todd Fowler, service manager for Cherry Capital Oldsmobile and Cadillac of Traverse City.

"Also, growling noises can indicate a lot of salt has built up in the wheel bearings."

Fowler recommended having the underside of the vehicle washed thoroughly to remove salt and prevent corrosion of metal.

Thinking ahead toward the hot summer months to come, Fowler suggested having the coolant system checked, and making sure the car battery is in good, working condition.

"We normally recommend an air conditioning service check in the spring," Fowler added.

Spring car care should be just one component of a larger, year-round vehicle maintenance schedule.

Within such a schedule, some common tasks are: Regularly replacing the spark plugs, fuel and air filters, checking levels of oil, transmission fluid, brake fluid, and coolant; having the oil changed periodically, keeping tires properly inflated and aligned and

using fuel injector cleaner every 6,000 miles.

Failing to perform maintenance could be costly. According to Consumer Reports magazine, "A poorly tuned engine can cut gas mileage by 10 to 20 percent." The same article goes on to say, "A clogged air filter alone can cause up to a 10 percent increase in fuel consumption, according to the EPA, one tire that's underinflated by only two psi will result in a 1 percent increase in fuel consumption."

In addition to maintenance in the spring, vehicle owners may make a number of non-essential improvements to their vehicles as well.

"We do a lot of work installing hitches, basic accessories, audio systems and sun roofs," said Redmond.

However, Todd Fowler indicated that most improvements are done for owners of newly purchased vehicles, pointing out that many made within one month of purchase.

Previously observed in October, National Care Care Month has been changed to April. The goal of the project was to raise consumer awareness of the negative impact poor vehicle maintenance can have on both safety and long-term costs of ownership.

Those in the industry say the key to proper maintenance lies in the relationships consumers have with their auto service technician, as well as an understanding of their own vehicle and the maintenance history.

"Ultimately, the consumer is responsible for their car and its condition, our role is to communicate with the consumer to identify and resolve automobile issues," said Bob Guenther. "Your car is part of your family; treat it as such, with respect and care."

Benjamin Peek is a local freelance writer.

Options in car ownership

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new one.

More Americans are choosing to lease their new vehicles than ever before, mainly because they can end up with lower payments. Leasing is now used in more than 30 percent of the more than 15 million new cars and trucks sold each year.

Most leases are for a term of two to three years, when warranties are typically still in effect, depending on mileage. When the agreement for it expires, the vehicle is simply turned back over to a dealer, with the buyer paying for any damages and excess mileage but no responsibilities to sell or trade it in.

Ron Hoffmeister, vice president of consumer banking for Traverse City State Bank, suggests that shoppers visit a bank or credit union to get preapproved for a loan or lease first.

"If you go into a deal being preapproved, you take a lot of headache and guesswork out of the equation," explained Hoffmeister. "What often happens is that everyone wants something more than they can really afford, the classic tale of champagne tastes on a beer budget. Preapproval grounds you in a little more reality and keeps you from avoiding trouble down the way."

One final option that buyers may want to consider is to keep the car they have but give it a makeover.

"Sometimes, you can give your car a second wind or life by giving it a little attention and TLC," said Steve Novarro, owner of Love Your Car in Traverse City. "When you can spruce it up, it can seem more like a new car and your attitude about it gets a pick-up, as well. We've seen people come in to get their car fixed up to sell, and after, then change their mind about doing it because they liked how it looked so much."

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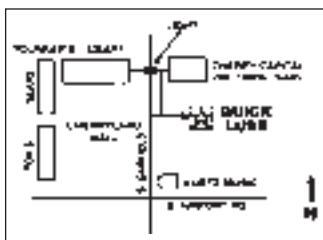
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