

Straight tire talk

BY JOSHUA A. BRADLEY
Special to the Record-Eagle

The time has come for hardy Michiganders to gear up for yet another winter. You know the drill: firewood, long johns, de-icer and maybe some brandy.

But that winter to-do list is not complete without one more consideration — actually, make that four: new tires.

The importance of having four good tires isn't lost on anyone who has attempted to commute to work in the middle of a northern Michigan blizzard. However, after months of going to the beach and eating ice cream, that might be the farthest thing

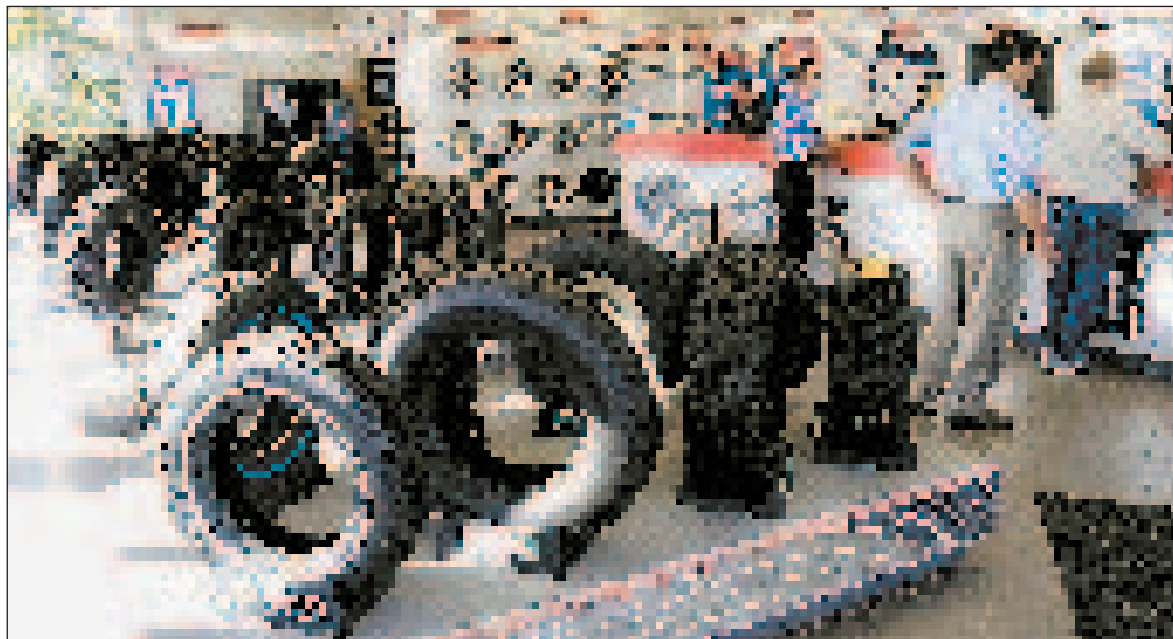
from your mind right now.

But now's the time to check those tires for wear and tear.

"For northern Michigan, especially this time of year, the first slippery roads are the worst," said Lon Kinney, owner of Kinney's Complete Auto Service in Traverse City. "You need the best traction possible."

If your traction isn't up to par, it's time to consider buying new tires. While the sky's the limit in tire options, northern Michigan roads require top-quality traction, experts say.

The first step on the road to buying new tires, then, is to narrow all the possibilities, based on your specific driving



Record-Eagle/Douglas Tesner

Most tire retail stores, like Belle Tires in Traverse City, as shown here, display a range of tires.

needs, desires and of course, budget.

"There are a lot of people who go for appearance or style, but around here, there's a lot more to buying new tires," said Kinney.

To find your perfect match, the first question is: what do you drive? There are specific tires for cars, trucks and SUVs. From there, things get more complicated, but no less important.

According to Garth Story, manager of the Tire Factory in Traverse City, there are specific tire elements that should be kept in mind when driving in winter climates.

"In northern Michigan, you'd want a softer compound, something with a lot of sipes," said Story, referring to the number of little grooves (or "crosscuts") that are part of the tire's tread that help with traction in adverse weather conditions. "That's what gives you the grip on the hard-pack snow, ice and rainy conditions."

To help consumers understand what they're really getting in a new tire, the United States Department of Transportation has developed a rating and grading system called Uniform Tire Quality Grading (UTQG). The system grades a tire's traction, temperature, and treadwear, issuing a grade of A, B, or C for the traction and temperature, and a numeric value for the treadwear.

"For northern Michigan, you'd definitely want an 'A'

for traction, and an 'A' or 'B' for temperature," said Story.

"The treadwear rating is a mileage rating and not as important for safety."

Another government regulation, launched in 2004, requires all tire manufacturers to stamp a Severe Service Emblem (an image of a mountain with a snowflake inside) on their tires if they meet or exceed the stipulated regulations for snow and ice capabilities.

While there are many benefits in chucking those balding tires in favor of new ones,

safety is the primary concern. In fact, overly worn tires are so hazardous that driving on them is illegal in most states. A tire professional can help determine if you need new tires, and if so, which ones are right for you.

"If you go to the supermarket to buy tires, you have no professional input at all," Kinney said. "And there are a lot of bad tread designs for northern Michigan."

He adds, "At our shop, I'll just tell people flat out that I

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