

Fuel-efficiency only *starts* with vehicle make

BY BETHANY BROADWELL
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Nathan Tarsa and his family looked for a car all summer to replace their '89 vehicle that the Traverse City husband and father of four had driven for 10 years.

As Tarsa watched fuel prices rise from \$2.30/gallon to about \$2.80/gallon, he and his family became increasingly serious about finding a more fuel-efficient vehicle.

When comparing fuel prices in Traverse City with other parts of Michigan, Jim Rink, AAA Michigan spokesperson, said, "Traverse City tends to be higher than other urban areas due to seasonal increases in

demand driven largely by tourist traffic."

Tarsa, who commutes 56 miles one way to his East Jordan Public High School teaching job, was searching for a used five-passenger vehicle that would get at least 35 miles per gallon.

In August, the Tarsa family bought a 2002 Hyundai Elantra. Three days after they bought the car, local gas prices hit \$3.55.

The Tarsas' purchase of a more fuel-efficient vehicle is indicative of the choice many customers are making on Traverse City car lots.

"We are seeing more and more people hovering at vehicles that get better mileage

"Each five miles per hour you drive over 60 mph is like paying an additional 10 cents/gallon."

Model Year 2005 Fuel Economy Guide

than their current vehicles," said Tom Wysocki, sales and leasing consultant for Cherry Capital Subaru.

Wysocki added that customers are typically trading in vehicles whose warranties have expired. Those who buy new cars not only are getting better miles per gallon, but they are also getting the full warranties that come with a new buy.

"With the high price of gas, they don't have to worry about unexpected repairs that are very costly," he said.

When Tarsa traded in their old vehicle — which had 281,800 miles — the family went from a vehicle that averaged 18 miles per gallon to one that gets 34.

"Due to the amount of driving I do during the school year, the fast rise in gas prices is causing us to first adjust our budget and to reconsider everything we do that uses gasoline," Tarsa said. "If we can wait to make a trip somewhere or can double up on errands, we do."

Choosing a more efficient

vehicle as well as planning and combining trips are two of the four main gas mileage tips posed on the AAA-recommended Web site, www.fueleconomy.gov. The other two tips suggested in the government publication are driving more efficiently and keeping your car in shape.

As obvious as these tips may sound, they can amount to measurable savings.

According to the online Model Year 2005 Fuel Economy Guide: "Aggressive driving (speeding and rapid acceleration and braking) can lower your gas mileage by as much as 33 percent at highway speeds and 5 percent around town."

Observing the speed limit is another guide suggestion: "Each five miles per hour (mph) you drive over 60 mph is like paying an additional 10 cents/gallon."

Mark Hammerberg, service director for Williams Chevrolet/Honda/Kia, said his center is trying to make oil changes affordable so customers can apply savings to an additional service that will enhance their fuel economy.

Tire inflation, Hammerberg said, is a factor that can significantly impact fuel economy. Vehicle owners can usually find the manufacturer's recommendation about tire inflation either on the drivers' inner door or on the tire, itself.

"Most vehicles we inspect have improper PSI in their

tires which can affect fuel economy by as much as two or three miles per gallon," he said. "This can also lead to premature tire wear and that, in turn, will cause a rougher ride and use even more fuel."

Manufacturers' guidelines about proper tune-up procedures can be found in owners' manuals and dealerships, too, sometimes make recommendations.

"Spark plugs, spark plug wires, fuel filters, air filters, distributor, cap and rotor on some models, are just a few items that need replacement for optimum performance," Hammerberg said.

Front end alignment and suspension inspection, he explained, will ensure the vehicle is tracking straight down the road and it is free of drag caused by misalignment. Worn struts and shocks, he added, cause bounce, another fuel consumption issue.

"The amount of money saved would vary with each driver, but by keeping their vehicle properly maintained, a savings will definitely be noticed over time," Hammerberg said.

George McBath, assistant executive director for Bay Area Transportation Authority, said the BATA fall promotion campaign will be aimed at getting the general public information on the available bus services.

He described fares as economical as 50 cents to a \$1.

"We continue to absorb the large increases in fuel costs for the present time without raising prices or cutting services," McBath said.

When the Tarsa family wants to switch from their newly purchased, fuel-efficient Hyundai, they have found manual pedal power to be a good alternative.

Their home is close to the TART Trail, which is a safe, easy path to Traverse City.

"We, partly for the exercise, have even ridden bikes the seven-eight miles to town for appointments. Every little bit helps," Tarsa said. "We bike a lot as a family but now we sometimes bike a little further and for more reason than pure family time."

Bethany Broadwell is a local freelance writer.

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