

Winter driving requires vehicle and driver to be in tune

BY MICHELLE ARNTZ

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Soon, Northern Michigan commuters will wake up to a fresh blanket of beautiful white snow and ugly road conditions. Drivers should have their vehicles winterized and allow themselves more travel time to their destination.

"People going too fast might panic if they start to lose control of their vehicle. They may slam on the brakes too hard and slide. But if they just slow down, they'll be just fine," said Terry Wilkins, Grand Traverse County's district foreman.

Most of us have heard someone say that they followed a

salt truck in all the way to town so the roads weren't that bad.

Wilkins said that although it is comforting to see county trucks out clearing the roads, the freshly-laid salt takes a few minutes to work, especially when the air is 15 degrees F or lower.

"Above that, it still can take up to 10 minutes for salt to melt ice on the road," said Wilkins, adding that traffic helps to speed up the process.

Wilkins said drivers need to give snow plows a lot of room.

"Don't crowd the plow. White-out conditions can occur directly behind a truck moving a lot of snow," he said.

Wilkins cautions that drivers need to listen for a plow trucks back-up sounds to avoid sliding into one when entering an intersection. He also pleads with drivers not to try to pass a plow truck as it is just too dangerous. He added to be mindful that the bigger the vehicle, the more room they need to stop. Sometimes ten times more.

A plow driver with 23 years of experience, Wilkins asks that commuters be patient above all.

"Most people are glad to see us," Wilkins said. The Grand Traverse Road Commission shares information with "spotters" from the Traverse City Area Public School, who often begin their days at 2 a.m. He said TCAPS can tune in on the Commission's radio frequency to check on hazards.

This winter season will bring a new batch of inexperienced high school students to the mix. Parents will worry about their newly-insured children as they face the intimidating task of driving safely to school, sporting events and part-time jobs. While experience is necessary to become a good driver, TBA Career Tech Center offers a "Defensive Driving/Winter Driving Education" that will drive home the point.

According to Tom Tarr, a

CTC instructor, between TBAISD, the Michigan State Police and the Traverse City Police Department, first Level One licensed drivers will become safer drivers after completing the \$45 course.

"Reduce speed, allow extra time, and increase following distance," Tarr said. "Make sure that you clean all ice and snow from all windows and lights before leaving for your destination."

By following these simple instructions, students will be less likely to put a scratch on their parents' car or a dent in their wallet. The instructors stress to new drivers the uncompromising need to avoid "distractions." Tarr tells students not to use cell phones while in motion, avoid drinking beverages and to keep conversations with other passengers at a minimum.

"Driving requires 100 percent concentration. Drivers need to make sure to scan ahead, adjusting speed and the direction of your vehicle as the environment and hazards unfold in front of you," Tarr said.

When asked what other drivers can do to be helpful to student drivers this winter, Tarr said that he would ask them to "just share the road."

"We have young, inexperienced drivers, older cautious

drivers, angry drivers and risk takers. It's about being courteous and calm and not losing control," he said.

Getting your mind set to drive defensively is just one piece of the puzzle. Even finding winter gloves, boots and snow scrapers will make for a calmer morning from the start. Your car needs to be ready, too. Automobile clubs and mechanics offer advice that bares repeating.

Before the first snow fall and before your favorite mechanic is booked solid, take your car in for the suggested 30,000 mile full-maintenance inspection.

Also have the cooling-system flushed, batteries checked and make sure the terminal ends are clean. Consider replacing the battery now if it is over four years old. To get optimal road performance, check tire pressure often.

As temperatures outside drop, tire pressure will drop as well. Lights, defrosters, brakes and heater should be inspected. Stock the truck with extra boots, gloves, snow shoes, a blanket, a coffee can with a candle and matches and a flashlight. Cat litter can provide tire traction if needed. Keep the gas tank full. Save your cell phone for emergencies.

If your vehicle can't handle another winter, consumers may be in the market for a new car before winter. More decisions: Will you opt for a large four-wheel drive that need more room to stop and uses more gas? Or will you opt for a gas-conscious, smaller vehicle with all-wheel drive and anti-lock brake systems? New or used? If you are purchasing a vehicle for a younger driver, there is much more than that to consider.

"Shoppers need to do their homework. Safety is always important. Insurability and reliability go hand in hand with that," said Mike McFarlan, sales manager at Cherry Capital Motors.

Michelle Arntz is a local freelance writer.

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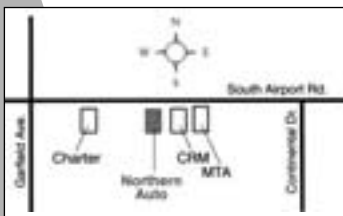
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