

16B AUTO SHOWCASE

First non-Japanese Mazda president steps down. See story on page 14B.

High Speed not factor in Michigan traffic fatalities, new study says

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PONTIAC, Mich. — Higher speed limits on Michigan freeways have not led to a corresponding increase in traffic deaths and fatalities, a state consultant says.

Michigan motorists are driving no faster now than they were in December 1996, when the speed limit on 1,592 miles of state freeways was raised from 65 mph to 70 mph, Professor William C. Taylor told The

Oakland Press. "The average speed on the freeways has not changed by more than 1 mph" in the past 11 months, Taylor, former head of Michigan State University's Department of Civil

Engineering, told the Pontiac newspaper in a report published Saturday. "There's absolutely no reason for the state to draw back on these increased speed limits." Taylor said his preliminary

studies for the Michigan Department of Transportation indicate 85 percent of freeway drivers are averaging 75 or 76 mph, essentially the same speed they averaged when the speed limit was 65.

Complete accident statistics for 1997 will not be available until April, but Taylor said it appears the number of deaths and serious injuries in freeway crashes has not increased.

Mercedes A-Class under fire

By Ian Mader
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

FRANKFURT, Germany — The tendency of the new "Baby-Benz" to tip during fast swerves puts the venerated Mercedes-Benz in an unfamiliar position: defending its reputation for safety.

Pictures of the new A-Class model tipping during tests have been ubiquitous in the German media since a Scandinavian journalist reported the car had overturned during the high-performance "moose test" — which mimics a driver avoiding a moose.

The luxury car firm initially denied there was a problem with the Mercedes A-Class, which last month marked its first foray into the compact market. But subsequent independent testing confirmed the problem.

The company offered last week to refit the 2,600 models already on the road in Europe with an electronic stabilizing system. Then, it halted all deliveries for three months so the chassis could be redesigned.

On Wednesday, Mercedes took out a full-page ad in German newspapers pleading for patience while it re-engineers the new model.

"Nobody regrets more than we do that we have shown weakness in safety," wrote Mercedes, which along with Volvo is virtually synonymous with safe automobiles.

"The scratch-free image of Mercedes is gone," Michael Klein, an auto analyst with Delbrueck and Co. in Frankfurt, said Wednesday. "Every new class of Mercedes that comes on the market is going to be much more strenuously scrutinized."

The automaker said redesigning the chassis to lower the car's center of gravity would take care of the tipping problem.

There were some 2,600 buyers, all in Europe, since the four-seater became available Oct. 18. Buyers can take the bubble-shaped, snub-hooded car back to dealers to install a stopgap electronic stabilizing system.

The company has acknowledged it will take a profit loss of \$172 million through the delivery delay, the re-engi-

TEST DRIVE No bull! Taurus improvements puts it back in hunt for No.1



1998 Taurus



Winfred B. Cross

Everyone's out to get you when you are No.1.

I'm sure that's what Ford thinks. Barely two years after it redesigned the Taurus — the best-selling sedan in the land — it's given up the sales crown to an Asian competitor.

I'm sure FoMoCo isn't happy, but at least it's familiar ground. It happened in the early '90s just before it freshened the Taurus. The car then vaulted back to No.1, albeit with help from fleet sales.

Guess what Ford has done for '98? Yep, it's freshened its Taurus. But it is no longer concentrating on fleet sales. This year's Taurus offers fewer trim lines, but more value in content and lower price.

There are three trim lines: LX, SE and SHO. The LX is the base model, SE, the top model, and the SHO is, well, the truth.

The freshening consists of a modified front end. A small chrome bar with the blue Ford oval in the center behind a black background gives the impression of a grill. The parking and turning lamps are fluted, looking more expensive. The new rear tail lights are monochromatic, giving the car a more finished look. Frankly, I think the Taurus is a very attractive car, but it has met with some resistance from buyers.

The interior didn't need much work, especially the ergonomics. Everything is within easy reach. Controls are grouped in logical arrangement inside a unique pod.

There are new seating arrangements. Six-passenger seating is standard, but front buckets with a low center console are a no-cost option on the SE. A full console with a floor-mounted shift column is optional with the Vulcan V6

engine. My SE had leather bucket seats, which were very comfortable. The rear bench is comfortable for three, though long-legged folk may wish for a tad more leg room.

It's a quiet place to sit. At 65 mph, very little wind or road noise gets in. Conversations can be held without screaming.

The SE comes standard with the Vulcan V-6 which makes 145 horsepower with 170 pounds-feet of torque. The horsepower isn't great but the ample torque gives the car more kick than expected. It never became noisy, even under hard acceleration, but the engine noise is a little less than pleasant. It's responsive and gets the job done.

The four-speed automatic transmission generally worked well, but it had a few problems. Kicking down to a lower gear was sometimes a violent thing. Applying the throttle too quickly, even gently, seemed to be the problem. It was more annoying than anything else. Moving up to the Duratec V6 with AX4N non-synchronous four-speed

automatic overdrive would probably be the best bet. It's now a free-standing option.

There is nothing wrong with the way the Taurus rides or handles. The ride is comfortable, if not somewhat European feeling. The suspension soaks up road imperfections fairly well, quelling most of the bad stuff before it reaches the cabin. The handling can best be described as surefooted. I was surprised at how well the car feels in curves and on twisty roads. It's not a sports car, but it's wonderfully stable.

Ford has done a good job with pricing this year. Base price for the SE is \$19,445. With options — leather seats (\$895), comfort group (\$1,450), anti-lock brakes (\$600) and floor mats (\$55) — and destination, the as-tested price was \$22,920.

That's a pretty good value for a really nice car.

That and the few, but significant improvements, will put the Taurus back in the hunt for best-selling sedan. Competition is stiff, but the blue oval isn't down or out.

Dealers changing tactics

By John Hughes
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

STERLING HEIGHTS, Mich. — Martha Theis expected high-pressure sales tactics when she went car shopping.

But at Jerome-Duncan Ford, a saleswoman greeted Theis not with a pitch, but with spreadsheets that they used to determine what she could afford.

The women met at a round table in a neutral, glass-enclosed space, not an office. And there was no bargaining on price, since Jerome-Duncan has a no-haggle policy.

"Look at how nice and open and refreshing it is — and relaxing," Theis said during a break from the meeting. "It's actually very comfortable."

Auto dealers have tried for years to offer good cars at good prices. But with competition overheating, many dealerships have renewed their focus on one of the oldest commands in retailing: Make the customer happy.

Saturn dealers and superstores are known for placing such a premium on customer service. But now the more traditional, family-owned auto dealerships are beginning to experiment.

For some that has meant remodeling showrooms, beefing up service departments and allowing customers to check vehicle inventories at computer kiosks.

And there's more: These days in car dealerships, you might find a nail salon, a diner or movies for children.

"Most of the car dealers in the United States have realized customer satisfaction is where it's at," said Ramsay Gillman, president of the National Automobile Dealers Association. "That's not a new theory, it's just become more intensified."

At Jerome-Duncan, a \$6 million renovation resulted in a brightly lit atrium with glass walls, a play area where kids can watch Disney movies and 27 computer terminals for customer use.

The dealership also includes a car museum, an insurance company and a cellular phone store. In the planning stages are a coffee shop, food court and an outdoor park.

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Lawsuit charges Ford with selling defective Aerostars to public

By John Hughes
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SOUTHFIELD, Mich. — A \$2 billion class-action lawsuit against Ford Motor Co. accuses the automaker of selling some Aerostars with a defective part and failing to promptly notify the minivans' owners of the problem.

Attorney Geoffrey Fieger said Friday that Ford waited more than a year before telling the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration about the problem. Ford and NHTSA waited two months before issuing the recall or making the

problem public.

Ford on Thursday announced a recall of 82,000 Aerostars for the defect described in the lawsuit, which was filed Oct. 29 in Wayne County Circuit Court by Robert Cox of Walled Lake.

Ford spokesman Chris Vinyard said Ford will aggressively defend against the lawsuit. "It's baseless," he said.

Vinyard said Ford notified NHTSA as soon as the company's investigation determined that a recall was warranted. He said Ford issued the recall as soon as parts to fix the problem became available.

The recall affects certain 1992 to 1997 four-wheel-drive Aerostars. Some of the vans when operated at high speeds — especially in hot weather — may develop structural failure of the transmission or transfer case. That could result in fluid loss and cause driveshaft separation.

If that happens, the minivan is unable to accelerate and loses power to its wheels, Vinyard said. He said it would not affect braking or steering.

Owners will be notified of the recall by mail before the end of the year, and work will be com-

pleted at dealerships at no charge, Ford spokeswoman Karen Shaughnessy said.

Vinyard said Ford has received 150 reports of the transmission problem, which it has known about since July 1996. Two of the occurrences allegedly resulted in loss of control of the vehicle — including the one reported by Cox, Vinyard said. He said the only injury claim from the problem is Cox's. But Fieger contends many more unreported injuries may have resulted from the



FILE PHOTO

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1997 Ford Aerostar