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AUTO SHOWCASE

Chrysler, Ford roll out SUVs

By Brian S. Akre
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DETROIT - Chrysler Corp. officials say their new Dodge Durango sport utility vehicle won't compete for the same customers who buy the automaker's popular Jeep Grand Cherokee.

Chrysler unveiled the '98 Durango on Tuesday during the media preview of the North American International Auto Show, which opens to the public Saturday.

It is the first sport utility for Dodge dealers since the demise of the big Ram Charger a few years ago.

But in deciding to produce the midsize Durango, Chrysler had to reassure its Jeep dealers who fear the new truck will take away sales from the popular but aging Jeep Grand Cherokee, another midsize model.

Chrysler insists the Dodge will have a different image.

"It's somewhat less affluent, less genteel, less preppy, less upmarket and less restrained than the Jeep image," Vice Chairman Bob Lutz said. "It's more outgoing, more controversial, more in your face, more mainstream America."

Lutz also said the Durango could be used as the "platform" to resurrect the upscale Jeep Grand Wagoneer nameplate, though he said there are no plans to do so. He said Jeep dealers are being told, "We will keep you competitive."

The four-door Durango is larger than its direct competition in the midsize SUV segment, but smaller than the highly popular full-size models like the Ford Expedition and Chevrolet Suburban.

Chrysler expects to sell 100,000 to 110,000 Durangos in the first year, and its Newark, Del., plant eventually will have the capacity to build 200,000, said Bernard Robertson, vice president of Jeep Truck engineering.

The Durango is unmistakably a Dodge, with the Ram pickup-style grill and muscular fenders. No fake wood trim or other styling affectations here.

It is the only midsize SUV with an optional third row of seats, and Chrysler says it has the highest towing capacity and interior space in its class.

Scott F. Merlis, an industry consultant in Westport, Conn., said the Durango should sell well despite the number of competitors in the increasingly crowded midsize SUV segment.

"It's a lot of vehicle for the price, a lot of utility for the price," Merlis said. "The more utility and space you get for the dollar, the more it sells."

No price has been set yet, but the Durango is expected to sell in the upper \$20,000 to lower \$30,000 range, similar to a Ford Explorer. The Durango goes into production in July and on sale by October.

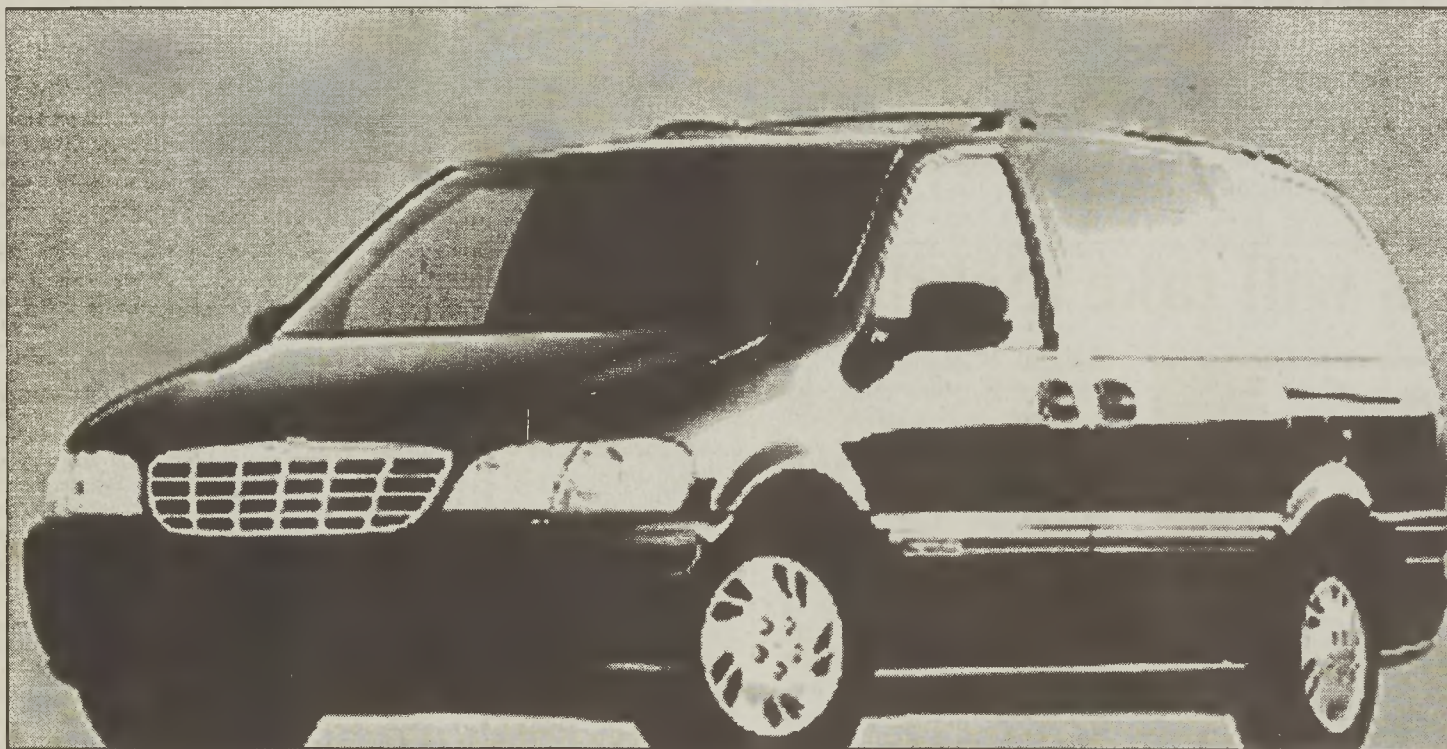
Robertson said Chrysler kept costs down on the Durango by designing it to share 79 percent of its parts with other Chrysler vehicles, mostly the Dodge Dakota pickup, which shares the same chassis. Owners of Chrysler and Dodge minivans, for example, may recognize the Durango has the same tailights.

Ford Motor Co., meanwhile, unveiled the Lincoln-Mercury division's luxury version of the Ford Expedition full-size sport utility, called the Lincoln Navigator.

The four-door Navigator is aimed at the high end of the market, with the emphasis on urban creature comforts more

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TEST DRIVE



1997 Chevrolet Venture LS extended wheelbase minivan

Chevrolet's Venture is a great new minivan



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Take a glance out your window while driving and you'll see minivans galore. They've been a popular mode of transportation since Chrysler put the first one on the highway in the mid '80s. And the company's held the sales lead since that introduction, only challenged once by Ford's spiffy Windstar.

There's a new kid on the

minivan horizon from a familiar company. General Motors is making a strong attempt to become king of the hill with a new family of minivans that are about as good as anything else on the road.

Actually, the vans are the redesigned versions of the company's TransSport, Lumina APV and Oldsmobile Silhouette people haulers. The Lumina is now called the Venture, which was my test vehicle. GM decided to rename the vehicle because it's all new and not really based on the old vehicle, which is a real good thing. The Lumina APV was OK, though the styling was wacky. The nose was way too long and there was an unusual amount of space between the dash and base of the wind-

shield.

That's all gone, banished to the bad design place in the sky. The Venture is a handsome vehicle, with a well-proportioned nose that has a big chrome grill. I don't really like big chrome grills, but it works well on this van. The middle section of the van reminds me of Chevy's Blazer. The rear quarters are very much like those found on Ford's Windstar. In all, it's a good looking vehicle on the outside.

It's not bad on the inside, either. I will never get used to GM's use of injection-molded dashes but it is better-looking than the APV's. The gauges are bigger and arranged for easy reading. The audio and climate controls are bigger and easier to use. They do have a

cheap feel, however.

The seats are available in a number of different configurations. My long wheelbase test vehicle had captain's chairs and seats seven. The seats are not as innovative as Chrysler's, which have wheels, but they are light and very easy to remove and store. The fabric covering the seats was bland, but comfortable.

There are 27 storage areas for little, big and medium-sized stuff. There's even a cargo net behind the last row of seats to hold stuff in place. There are also 17 cupholders, which would allow all passengers to have access to more than two drinks apiece. Why? You'll have to ask the folks at GM.

There are plenty of standard

and available amenities to make the Venture a very livable place. Dual sliding doors makes it easy to enter and exit, as does a low step-up height. One of the doors can be power operated. There's a clever radio option which allows passengers up front to listen to a separate source than those in the rear. The driver's seat is height adjustable. And there is a pollen/dust filter for the climate control system, something that's usually found on higher price vehicles. Dual air bags and anti-lock brakes are standard as well.

All passengers will be relatively comfortable. There's ample space for adults and children. The 117-inch wheelbase and tidy packaging do the trick. The van is more narrow than Chrysler or Ford models, but it's not that noticeable. The storage area is larger than the Windstar and on par with the Grand Voyager/Caravan/Town & Country triplets.

The Venture's engine is the venerable 3400 V6. It makes 180 horsepower, more than in any minivan. It's a proven engine but it's also a bit coarse sounding. It does make the Venture feel quick, probably quicker than any other minivan except maybe Toyota's departing supercharged Previa.

As minivans go, the Venture is close to the best in the road manners department. It's a very capable vehicle on the road, offering a smooth ride and competent handling. The suspension soaks up bumps very well and hardly ever gets ruffled. There is a bit of engine noise, otherwise, the ride is nearly as quiet as it is smooth.

Any major complaints? Not major, but I think GM could have been a little more adven-

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Car makers expecting another good sales year for cars, trucks

By Justin Hyde
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DETROIT - Barring a financial disaster, 1997 should be another in a string of very good years for the auto industry, according to several experts at the North American International Auto Show.

"Right now, we are in an economic fairyland," said W. Van Bussmann, a Chrysler economist. "If you liked last year, you'll like this year."

Economists for Ford and General Motors gave similar assessments Monday during a meeting of the Society of Auto Analysts. All three said the domestic car business was fine, their customers were doing well and only an unforeseen mishap, such as a spike in gasoline prices or interest rates, would spoil a good year.

The U.S. auto industry sold about 15.5 million cars and light trucks in 1996, and the industry expects to sell about the same number in 1997. The experts also said trucks, including sport utility vehicles and minivans, would continue to lure buyers away from passenger cars.

But there are a few trouble spots. While consumer demand is good, many people have not bought a car because they already have too much debt, said Diane Swonk, an analyst for First Chicago-NBD Bank.

Consumers "are clearly more constrained than they have been in the past few years," she said. "They're concentrating on their incomes and high debts."

Buyers have also come to expect incentives, even on highly popular trucks, said Joseph Phillippi, an analyst for Lehman Brothers.

"The car companies will do what it takes to move products off the showroom floor," Phillippi said. "If you make \$9,000 on a (Ford) Explorer, would you give up \$500 to move it? Of course."

Phillippi also cited a short list of companies - Chrysler, BMW, Honda and Toyota - that he thinks are doing well. But he also expressed concern about GM's future, saying it had spent a lot of resources on cars while its truck designs age.

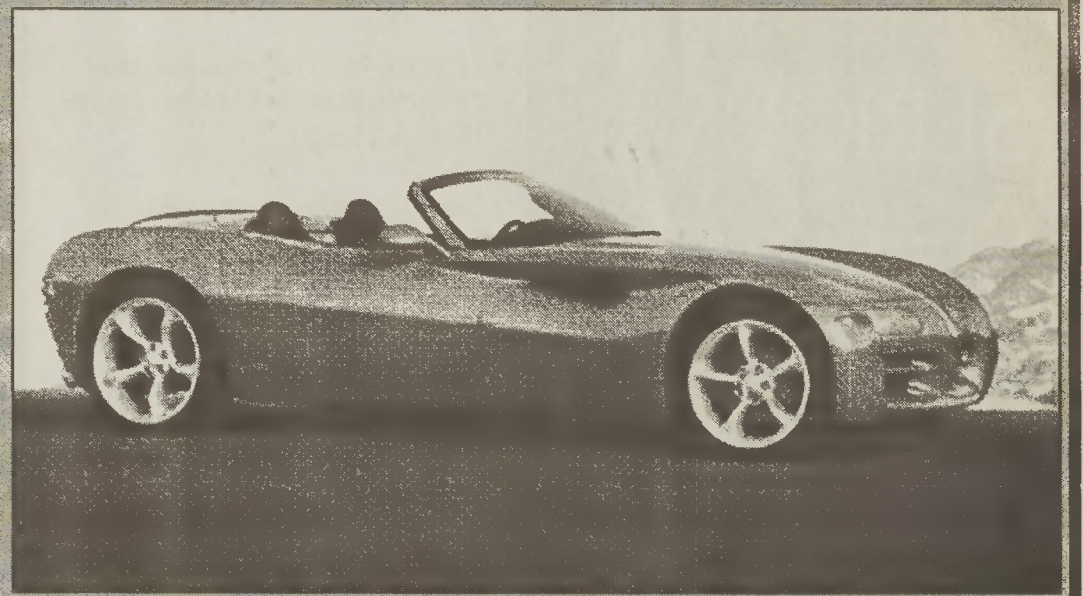
"They've thrown a tremendous number of cars on the marketplace over the past year or two, and the competition is getting intense," he said.

As for the company economists, they said they were more concerned about the exchange rate with Japan. The yen has been weak against the dollar lately, making American goods more expensive while making imports cheaper.

G. Mustafa Mohatarem, an economist for GM, estimated that the Bank of Japan had spent \$120 billion to make the yen weaker.

"We really need to look at the Bank of Japan's intentions to explain why the yen has moved as it has," Mohatarem said.

Auto show has enough for every age



1998 DODGE COPPERHEAD CONCEPT CAR

By B.J. Reyes
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DETROIT - Young and old, men and women, families and single people got their first look at the glitz, glamour and gaudiness of one of the world's largest auto showrooms Saturday.

The 1997 North American International Auto Show opened to the public with displays that included everything from interactive and touch-screen exhibits to strobe light, flood light and blue spotlight enhancements.

It was the first auto show for Brian Paterson of London, Ontario. An hour into his visit, he realized it wouldn't be his last.

"I don't think I've been through half of it," said Paterson, 43. "It's an impressive display of vehicles."

Carole Strait, 26, of Birmingham said she had been to the show for the past three years.

Browsing in the Chevrolet exhibit with an armload of brochures and pamphlets, Strait said she wasn't in the market for a new car.

"I just like to see what's coming down the road," she said.

Subtlety was not a trait of most exhibits. Music from a Cadillac commercial blared while people examined the automaker's new Catera. The car was cut in half and placed on a rotating platform to give a better look inside.

A few feet away, some people got down on all fours for a better look at the underside of a Hummer military-style sport utility vehicle already propped up on artificial boulders.

Some sat in the cars while others, like Edward Larkin, were more content to just look.

An admitted "truck man," Larkin, 62, of Detroit, couldn't help but take a closer look at a 1997 Porsche 993 convertible.

"They catch my eye," he said of the expensive cars. The Porsche carried an \$87,025 sticker price. "But that's all they do is catch my eye, because I can't buy any of them."

Kevin Mac, 26, of Canton said that because his dad works for one of the Big Three automakers, he's attended the auto shows since he was 4.

As he exited a BMW 318i convertible - he liked a similar but roomier Mercedes model better - he recalled how the cars and the show have changed over the years.

"Overall, I think the image of Detroit has been upgraded," he said. "It used to be just the Detroit Auto Show, now it's the North American International Auto Show. I think it takes a more national stage."