

# Venture could be vehicle for you

Continued from 13B

turous and daring. This doesn't reinvent the minivan, nor is it a leap forward. The Venture is better than the vehicle it replaces by leaps and

bounds.

Is it the best minivan on the road? That's hard to say. I can say it's a very good choice if you are looking for such a vehicle. The LS long-wheelbase equipped like my test vehicle

is about \$25,000, not bad if you've looked at minivan prices lately. This will be a hit. How big a hit will be determined by the buying public. I think that public will be very impressed.

# SUVs from Lincoln add luxury

Continued from 13B

than rural off-road fun. The big SUV differs from its Ford twin by its distinctive Continental-type chrome grill,

a softer ride and an array of luxury features such as burl walnut accents and optional rear bucket seats - the latter seen previously only on mini-

vans. The Navigator goes on sale in the summer, giving Lincoln-Mercury dealers their second SUV.

# Smart air bags will take awhile

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DETROIT - Ford Motor officials are making plans for so-called "smart" air bags, but they say it could be years before the safety system will adjust to different drivers and passengers.

Fears about the safety of air bags, which have caused injury or death to children and small adults in low-speed accidents, have spurred the federal government to call for another look at air bag policy.

Proposals to make air bags safer have ranged from deactivation or reducing their power to computer sensors that could determine if a small child was sitting in the front seat of a car.

Current air bag specifications call for high speeds of inflation to protect drivers and passengers not wearing seat belts. While that may have been realistic when air bags were introduced in the early 1980s, almost 70 percent of passengers now wear seat belts.

"To better reflect the reality of today's world, we think we need to shift the priorities,"



said Lou Camp, director of automotive safety at Ford.

He and other Ford executives spoke Wednesday at the Detroit Auto Show about the automaker's vision of air bags in the future.

The easiest way to increase the safety of air bags is by depowering them, said Jim Boland, manager of vehicle safety.

But, he said, that can take time. Many tests are performed on new safety products, including several with various crash test dummies in different conditions.

If the National Highway Transportation and Safety Administration issues revised guidelines in early February, Camp said Ford would be able to put depowered bags in 1998

model year vehicles.

After that, plans to go with more high-tech solutions will take until at least the year 2000, he said.

Technical specialist Matt Niesluchowski laid out three stages by which air bags would be made safer. The first stage, mandated by NHTSA, calls for air bag deactivation if a weight sensor detects a passenger under 66 pounds in the passenger seat.

But those sensors can be easily fooled, he said. Leaning on arm rests or putting one's feet on the floor can easily change the reading, for example.

A more sophisticated system, in the second stage, would contain a switch in the seat belt to tell the system whether a passenger was wearing it. Crash sensors would be placed in the car to vary the speed of the air bag's deployment depending on how fast the car was going at the time of the accident.

In the final stage, an overhead sensor would tell a computer the position of the vehicle's passengers. But that development is still several years away, Niesluchowski said.

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