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Warning! Consumers at Risk!

Will America's Seniors Lose the Right to Repair Their Cars and Buy Affordable Repair Parts?

Times, as they say, have been hard. The financial markets have been up and down, business has been lagging, credit remains tight in many areas, new jobs are still scarce, and unemployment is at record levels. Having, in many cases, seen lower home values and depleted savings, consumers have been and are scared. Of course, that resulted in fewer car sales. Then, as we all know, some American auto companies went to Congress, hat-in-hand, to beg for taxpayer bailouts. They have gotten several "loans," worth billions of dollars (in total, some \$80 billion), even as they've gone through bankruptcy. According to the Government Accounting Office (GAO) taxpayers will never recoup the tax dollars that have been poured into saving Chrysler and General Motors (GM). We (American taxpayers) now own 61 percent of GM, and 10 percent of Chrysler. Unfortunately, that's just the beginning.

Taxpayers now own 56 percent of GMAC, the finance company funding car loans for GM and Chrysler dealerships. The federal government recently added \$3.8 billion in new aid to GMAC, following the \$12.5 billion in government aid that GMAC has already received. The government will also hold about \$14 billion in loans that GMAC *may* eventually repay. But wait, as they say in the commercials, there's more. Taxpayers have also funded direct aid to the new car dealers.

That aid comes under the banner of the "Junker Clunker" laws where the federal government paid people to trade in their less fuel efficient vehicle to buy a new, supposedly more fuel efficient car or truck. A total of \$3 billion was spent on this 2009 effort, of which the automotive Web site Edmonds.com estimates the cost per vehicle that would not have been sold or traded anyway at \$24,000 each. This is yet another major expenditure of your tax dollars to support the car companies and car dealers. What are all these bailouts funding? What are your taxes buying?

Unfortunately, your taxes help fund high-priced car company lawyers and lobbyists working tirelessly to create car company/car dealer monopolies on car repairs and common collision repair parts. The numbers are big. As an example, GM spent \$2.8 million on federal lobbying in the 1st Quarter of 2009, Chrysler spent \$1.1 million, and Ford spent \$1.8 million. In the 3rd Quarter of 2009, the National Automobile Dealers Association reported federal lobbying expenditures of \$778,000, and the American International Dealers Association added another \$200,000 in lobby expenses. If, because of this aggressive lobbying, these car company/car dealer monopolies become complete, the cost to consumers, including older Americans on fixed incomes, will be staggering.

How many seniors will be impacted? Over the next 20 years, the United States will experience a substantial growth in senior drivers. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the population of

those over 75 will grow from 18 million to 31 million between 2008 and 2028. The National Institute on Aging has estimated that almost 10 percent of the nation's drivers are older than 65, and that percentage could increase rapidly in the next decade as the "Baby Boom" generation continues to reach that milestone. By 2030, projections suggest one in five Americans will be age 65 or older. What are the feverishly sought monopolies that will affect millions of seniors?

The first is the "right to repair." While most people take it for granted, the critical right to repair one's motor vehicle is quickly eroding, and America's seniors stand to lose heavily as the erosion continues. What is the "right to repair?" It is the option to have your car repaired at the repair facility of your choosing, the one you think is the most convenient, the one that has the record for honesty and integrity, and the one that provides the finest service and parts at the best price. Unfortunately, unless something is done to protect consumers, that right to repair and the ability to purchase affordable high-quality repair parts may soon disappear forever.

If that happens, millions of older Americans could end up stranded, forced to go to an ever-dwindling number of car dealers for their vehicle maintenance and repairs. A record total of 881 dealers closed in 2008. Ford reduced its dealer network by 700 from 2005 through May of 2009, and may still cut more. Chrysler has closed or will close nearly 800 dealers. GM announced last year that they would close 1,100 dealerships, as the first phase of a 40 percent reduction in dealers, from 5,900 down to 3,600. As one car dealer Web site notes (in fighting the closures), the Detroit car companies have gone from 40,000 dealers servicing 50 million cars in the 1950's to 13,000 dealers servicing 150 million cars in 2008. And that's before all of the 2009 closings.

While direct car dealer pressure on Congress will stop some closures from taking place, clearly huge numbers of dealers have closed and are closing, and if only dealers can fix our vehicles, thanks to the coming car dealer service monopoly, we're all in serious trouble!

Again, while most people have not begun to focus on this issue, the battle lines have been drawn and the spoils now in sight for automakers and their remaining affiliated dealers will be huge. According to a statement by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), "U.S. consumers spend \$80 billion annually to repair and maintain the two hundred million cars currently on the road." The FTC spokesman noted in his testimony before a Congressional subcommittee that consumers "have a significant interest in automobile repair and maintenance markets that operate properly and efficiently. Consumers and independent car repair facilities must have access to tools needed to diagnose, service, and repair vehicles, but access to that information is not as easy or relatively inexpensive as it once was," the testimony said.

What a bureaucratic understatement! If the independent repair shops continue to lose the ability to access the necessary diagnostic and repair information, one day soon motorists will be stuck with no feasible alternative to the car dealers and the repair shops directly or indirectly tied to the automakers. Car owners, having perhaps spent tens of thousands of dollars for their vehicle, will lose the right to have that vehicle repaired at a shop of their choosing -- all thanks to modern technology and the fact that the technology in question can be used against them by the car companies.

1996: Anti-Consumer Turn

How did the situation take this anti-consumer turn? There are federal government regulations that require all 1996 and newer cars to be equipped with a computer system that alerts the owner of the vehicle to a mechanical problem. The computer system is designed to help automotive technicians diagnose and repair the problem. Currently, only the automobile manufacturers and their dealers have access to *all* of the information stored in the vehicle's computer about the mechanical problems, and the parts and repairs needed to fix the problem. This puts the independent shops, and the motorists who depend on them, in an untenable position. **Again, only carmakers, car dealers, and their favored repair shops have access to all of the critical technical data.** To address this problem, the "Motor Vehicle Owners' Right to Repair Act" (H.R. 2057) has been introduced in the U.S. House, as well as in several states. A U.S. Senate Right to Repair bill is expected to be introduced soon as well. These measures would ensure the availability of *all* of the information needed by the independent shops for all repairs, putting consumers back in charge of their vehicle repairs.

Although many car dealers provide fine service, many do not. A *Washington Post* article related the trials and tribulations of a vehicle owner seeking fair treatment at a car dealer that, apparently, refused to honor his parts warranty (for a part that had failed twice before), tried to convince him that he was at fault, kept his car for a month, and charged him \$3,122 (about a third of that for 60,000-mile regularly scheduled maintenance). Then, after his failed attempt to find justice via the customer advocate provided by the carmaker, the motorist turned to the *Post's* *Consummate Consumer* column writer. Finally, after investigating the dispute, the car company conceded that the dealer was at fault, and sent a refund check of just \$979.55, not the \$2,000-plus the customer was charged for the repair. On inquiring, the customer was told that the rest of the bill covered "other repairs," repairs he hadn't asked for and didn't expect. Along with the check, he received no apology, no explanation, and no best wishes, indicating the car company in question still didn't own up to its responsibility. That's simply one dealer-repair horror story among many, but it clearly illustrates the position many drivers could face, if the anti-competitive car dealer monopoly on repair information closes the present repair options provided by the independent shops.

An online 2003 comparison of Dealers vs. Independent Repair Shops by Bankrate.com quotes Robert Krughoff, then the President of *Consumer's Checkbook*, which has rated auto repair shops since 1976, as saying, "People are more satisfied with independent repair shops." "And they tend to be less expensive than dealers," he noted. As the article also reflected, "Independent repair shops rely on word-of-mouth recommendations and customer referrals for much of their business. So it's no surprise that many independent garages place a high premium on customer service and satisfaction."

In a CBS 47 *Cut costs on car maintenance and repairs* piece in Jacksonville, Florida, *Consumer Reports* indicated car owners could save "plenty of money" by using independent shops rather than car dealers for routine maintenance. They noted that, "many people think that they will jeopardize a vehicle's warranty by not taking it to a dealership, but federal law protects you. You can have your vehicle serviced anywhere you like without losing your warranty." That will remain true only *if* the maintenance and repair data can be accessed by repair facilities other than car dealers. That piece also noted that *Consumer Reports* had called seven different car dealers in the same area for a 60,000-mile service price quote, on the same vehicle. They got seven different dealer quotes, and the quotes varied by almost \$800. In addition, most of the dealers

they called wanted to do more work than was recommended by the auto manufacturers. These clearly are not good spots to strand hapless seniors on fixed incomes. They need more choices.

Aging Americans, Aging Vehicles

According to the Automotive Aftermarket Industry Association's (AAIA) *2009 Aftermarket Factbook*, the U.S. motor vehicle population expanded 1.6 percent in 2007, reaching 249.5 million vehicles. Of these, "light vehicles" (cars and light trucks) totaled 240.9 million. The *Factbook* notes a declining vehicle scrappage rate, and an increasing vehicle average age, evidence of the lengthening lives of motor vehicles. According to the *Factbook* source (R. L. Polk & Co) the average age of our cars on July 1, 2007 was 10.4 years old, while our light trucks were on average 9 years old. Older vehicles, most "out of warranty," will continue to need increasing maintenance and repairs.

According to aftermarket experts, more than two-thirds of the vehicles on the road today have been driven more than 75,000 miles. With modern engines and the proper care and maintenance, almost every car is capable of being driven 200,000 miles.

If you use the *Factbook's* new figure of 1.17 motor vehicles (in 2007) per licensed driver, then use the U.S. Census 2004 estimate of 36.3 million Americans 65 years of age or older and then consider that in 1997, almost 92 percent of all men and 70 percent of all women over 60 years old were licensed to drive (according to *Mobility of the Elderly, Good News and Bad News*, a 2004 paper by Sandra Rosenbloom, *The Drachman Institute, University of Arizona, Tucson*), you begin to see the huge number of senior-owned vehicles. And as the population ages that number will only grow. In 2005, the American Automobile Association said there were about 19 million licensed drivers aged 64 and older in the U.S., a 32-percent increase from a decade before. By 2020, there will be more than 50 million Americans over 65, almost all of them licensed to drive.

As is also noted in *Mobility of the Elderly*, "driver licensing among the elderly is very high and still growing, although there is not much more room to grow." Again, from Rosenbloom's insightful paper, it is estimated that "Licensing is close to universal among those who will become 65 years old in the next 15 years. By 2012 almost every U.S. man and more than 9 out of 10 U.S. women will enter their retirement years as drivers."

Of course, as has been noted many times in many places, that 2004 figure of 36.3 million Americans over 65 years of age is expected to double to 71.5 million by 2030, when the last of the baby boom generation hits the official retirement age. Based on a conservative use of the licensing (90 percent) and ownership (1.17 vehicles per licensed U.S. driver in 2007) numbers above, Americans 65 years old or older could easily own an estimated 75.2895 million vehicles by 2030, with an average age per vehicle somewhere in excess of 9.7 years old (the 2007 light vehicle average). That's a lot of senior vehicle repair and maintenance! And just who will service and repair those cars and trucks for retirees? The answer to that question depends on the ability of the independent shops to share the technology necessary to perform vehicle maintenance and make repairs.

Independent Repair Shops Provide the Bulk of Auto Care – at Much Lower Prices!

Today, automobile dealers only provide an average of about 27 percent (actual percentage share for 2006 and 2007 according to AAIA and the National Automobile Dealers Association (NADA) data of automotive aftermarket sales. This figure reflects dealer non-warranty service as a percentage of the total U.S. light vehicle aftermarket, and is down from an average of about 31 percent in the early 2000s. Of course, that means that some 73 percent of the non-warranty vehicle maintenance and repair work is now performed by service facilities other than a car dealer. That's a huge differential that indicates a sizable consumer preference for independent shops. Price, convenience, and better customer service all play large roles in building this clearly overwhelming customer support base for the independents. Let's consider price.

The AAIA *2009 Vehicle Repair Cost Analysis: New Car Dealerships vs. Independent Repair Shops* found, "Vehicle repairs for parts and labor averaged 34.3 percent more at new car dealerships than at independent repair shops." AAIA found foreign nameplate repairs to average 36.8 percent higher at car dealers, and domestic repairs to average 31.5 percent higher at the dealerships. Total 2008 cost difference for consumers having repair work performed at new car dealerships rather than independent repair shops (for the 10 repair jobs used in the AAIA analysis) projected to the total market for these jobs, equaled \$11.7 billion!

Let's look at the price differences on some basic services (according to a 2003 market survey by Ducker Research, conducted in the Metro Detroit area), comparing car dealers and the independent shops. No fewer than three of each was used to determine the averages. The average car dealer cost to replace four spark plugs in a 1999 Chevy Cavalier was \$36.88 just for the parts, while the independent average was \$16.25. The parts savings was \$20.63, or 56 percent! The average labor cost to install the plugs was \$92.18 at the dealers, and \$50.99 at the independents. That put the combined "parts and installation" savings at \$67.83 or 48 percent! That's a big reason why people choose independent shops over dealers.

On a muffler and tailpipe replacement for a 1996 Chrysler Town and Country mini-van, the reported net part and installation savings were an average \$147.59 or 42 percent, with the independent repair shop again beating the dealer. Replacing a battery for a 1997 Ford Explorer was reported to cost an average \$125.84 at the dealers, but only \$98.49 on average at the independents. These are the kinds of real savings that could disappear if the car dealers become the only maintenance and repair option.

Car Dealer Monopoly Threatens Seniors' Independence

Consider the 20 percent to 48 percent savings motorists will forego in the future as a "car dealer monopoly tax," one that every driver will soon pay, but that seniors will least be able to afford. And yet, that very situation is happening today, according to an American Automobile Association (AAA) press release, supporting the "Right to Repair" one's car where one chooses; "As technology has become more advanced, service data in today's vehicles are increasingly governed by sophisticated computer systems. Some American and import automobile manufacturers are currently impeding independent repair facilities' access to and use of data generated by automobiles sold to the public, leaving consumers with no choice but to take their vehicle to a dealer." AAA, of course, opposes that car dealer monopoly on car repairs and maintenance.

What would the car dealer repair monopoly do to America's seniors, both today and in the future? It would devastate them, perhaps to a greater degree than any other group.

As noted before, Sandra Rosenbloom's paper, *Mobility of the Elderly* put it well, "Over the last 10 years, older people have become more dependent on the private car and this dependency has had an increasing impact on their lives. The car appears to have given older people more choices, a wider range of possible activities, flexibility, and independence. Certainly some argue that by supporting suburbanization and the decentralization of U.S. communities, the car has made necessary for everyone to drive and removed walking, biking, and mass transit as options." "But whether cause or effect, reliance on the private car is the backbone of the lifestyle enjoyed by the majority of older people today," she goes on to note. "Older Americans are now more dependent on the private car than at any time in U.S. history."

Another important paper on the subject, *Transportation Policy for an Aging Society, Keeping Older Americans on the Move*, by Roger W. Cobb, *Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island*, and Joseph F. Coughlin, *Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge*, reflects on the importance of the personal car much more poignantly, "Research and anecdotal evidence have shown that people routinely view the ability to travel as synonymous with personal freedom and independence. For example, many older people see mobility as inextricably linked to personal image, dignity, and well-being. Other research has suggested that the ability to stay connected to friends and community is an important element to physical and mental health. Most adults equate mobility with the ability to drive; the loss of driving is seen as a handicap, which results in, at best, a change in lifestyle and, at worst, the end of life as they know it. One survey of older people in Southern California identified losing the ability to drive as more frightening than even the loss of a spouse or the poor health of a child."

Another important 2004 study, *Focus Group Participants Reflect on Transportation* by Helen Kerschner and Rhonda Aizenberg, of the *Beverly Foundation, Pasadena, California*, found the following priorities from their "transportation rich" group of 84 seniors who either drive their cars or live within a mile of transportation, "Being able to drive is very important to us and for us. The automobile is our most "user-friendly" mode of transportation. We lament the fact that driving can be so difficult. However, when we limit our driving our lives become limited because we cannot do the things we want to do, when we want to do them. While life can be difficult if we have to limit driving, stopping will have a terrible impact on our ability to get around and perhaps on our lives in general. We are concerned that even when public transportation is good, we may not be able to use it."

That same group was asked, "Is Limiting or Stopping Driving an Alternative?" Their response, "We know when it is necessary to stop driving at night or in heavy traffic, even though we also know we might experience difficulties because of that decision. Why? We realize that limiting or stopping driving altogether might interfere with our ability to get to the places we want to go. It can make it difficult for us to maintain the fullness of life, to do fun things, to have an independent lifestyle. The greatest tragedy of all is that it may force us to be dependent on others. These things put fear in our hearts and may be part of the reason we do so little planning for the time we will have to stop driving." Many of these older Americans may be forced to stop driving altogether, if the fast approaching car-dealer monopoly on car and truck maintenance and

repair comes to fruition. It will strand millions who cannot afford the car dealer mark-up in price, or it will force them to drive poorly maintained, unsafe motor vehicles.

Unfounded Fear of “Cheap Parts”

Unfortunately, the carmakers and car dealers have been trending towards higher costs at the same time they are withholding critical technical information from the independent repair shops. A *Wall Street Journal* article (7-7-05) titled, *Car Makers Cut Free Maintenance, Move by Wide Range of Brands Could Add Thousands of Dollars to Cost of Ownership* reflects the overwhelming trend. And, the “secret warranty” items, items that many car owners never find out about, have become the regular fare of the nightly news shows. Senior car owners must have the “right to repair” their cars and trucks at independent shops.

Ironically, when the carmakers and dealers are asked to share the repair and maintenance data with the independent shops, they almost always express the fear that aftermarket repair and supply companies will be able to use the withheld data to make cheap parts overseas, and then import those parts into the U.S. The fact is, none of the aftermarket companies makes the internal or “hard” parts used in repair, and the American automakers have been importing parts for many years from places like Mexico, South Korea, and Canada, and now from India and China. General Motors previously announced (*Wall Street Journal* 8-8-05) that they would be buying an estimated \$1 billion in auto parts from India by 2008. In the words of P. Baldran, Vice President, General Motors India, “We are planning to increase auto-parts sourcing from India substantially over the next few years.” The article noted then that GM was among various automakers, including Ford Motor Co., Daimler-Chrysler AG, Volkswagen AG, Volvo AB, and Mitsubishi Motors Corp. that were currently buying auto parts from low-cost countries such as India.

According to a recent (5-8-09) *Washington Post* story on GM’s restructuring plan, “the number of cars that GM sells in the United States and builds in Mexico, China and South Korea will roughly double.” That same *Post* story continues to note:

The proportion of GM cars sold domestically and manufactured in those low-wage countries will rise from 15 percent to 23 percent over the next five years, according to the figures contained in a 12-page presentation offered to lawmakers in response to their questions about overseas production.

Another article by Joseph B. White titled: *What Is an American Car?* (*Wall Street Journal* 1-26-09), points up the car company hypocrisy. Could there be a more American vehicle than a “Jeep Patriot?” White asks to open the article. He goes on to explain that the “Jeep Patriot” has only 66 percent “domestic” content, while the Toyota Sequoia has 80 percent, making it a far more “made-American” vehicle.

The article also notes the remarks of Thomas Klier, an economist with the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago who has studied extensively the realignment of the American auto industry, wrote in an October 2007 paper that as of 2006 about 25 percent of the parts used in vehicles assembled in the U.S. came from overseas and another 25 percent were manufactured here by foreign-owned parts makers. The Detroit companies wave the Stars and Stripes when they advertise their wares or look for loans in Washington, but when they talk to investors or the business press, they

stress their aggressive efforts to promote "global sourcing," a code for, "Buy More Parts from China and Mexico."

Affordable "Like-Kind and Quality" Collision Repair Parts and the Second Monopoly

A second car company monopoly that is building to harm consumers comes under the misuse of "design patents" used to eliminate competition related to common exterior or "crash" parts like grilles, hoods, fenders, and side mirrors. Ford Motor Company, for example, designed its popular 2004 F-150 pickup truck as a whole (which does qualify for the design patent awarded for an innovative look or appearance of a product), but then proceeded to patent the common crash parts to avoid competition. Ford alleged design patent infringement on 14 parts and the International Trade Commission (ITC) upheld that claim on seven of those parts. As a result, for a period of time, Ford F-150 owners were forced to go to the dealership to fix their vehicles. If this trend continues, consumers will ultimately pay the price. Advocates for Highway Safety, the Center for Auto Safety, the Consumer Federation of America, and Public Citizen have all voiced their opposition to the car companies' efforts to misuse patents, saying in excerpts from a letter to Congressional Leaders:

Already, the auto industry's near monopoly on these parts results in excessive and outrageous repair bills for even minor traffic incidents such as parking lot bumps and fender benders. If the auto industry is allowed to continue their efforts to patent the design of these parts, crash repair bills will significantly increase, quality will suffer in the absence of real competition, and safety will be compromised as families are forced to forego necessary repairs because of the high costs of replacement parts.

Congress created the design patent statute to grant 14-year patent protection on automobile design to prevent one car manufacturer from taking designs from another. Congress did not intend to prohibit competition for the parts used to repair automobiles. Auto industry patents on all component parts will eliminate the independent repair parts industry and result in a complete, unfettered monopoly.

Calling for a repair parts exclusion from infringement, the groups went on to say that without such a waiver, "American families will pay the price with their wallets and their safety." The groups also note in the letter:

In the 1990's Congress said "no" to the auto industry's attempt to enact legislation providing copyright protection for replacement parts because of the enormous cost a monopoly would impose on consumers.

Those costs are very real. For example, one of the patented parts in dispute before the ITC was a Ford F-150 fender. A typical car company fender may cost \$165 if made by Ford and \$131 if made by a replacement part firm. A grille for the F-150 may cost \$246 if made by Ford or one of its licenses, and may cost just \$150 if made by a replacement-parts firm. In fact, quality replacement parts cost anywhere from 26 percent to 50 percent less than the car companies' parts. According to automotive experts, the quality of the parts is equal.

A March 2009 *Smart Money* magazine article noted original equipment fenders cost \$250, while the aftermarket price is just \$125 – half the OEM cost. It also notes, “Your body shop may try to steer you to an original equipment fender, but aftermarket fenders work just fine.” The same article prices OEM windshields at \$350, with the just-as-good aftermarket windshield priced at \$150. As the article essentially says, price is the only difference. (In addition, that article reminded readers that “More than 600 automotive recalls occur each year, and every major carmaker has issued one.” That’s hardly an endorsement of OEM quality.) (Also note, that article was written a full year before millions of vehicles were involved in the Toyota recall fiasco, and the numerous other car company recalls that have occurred in the first quarter of 2010.)

Today the automakers control about 72 percent of the market for replacement parts, with aftermarket companies getting some 11 percent and recycled and remanufactured parts the rest. One spokesman for the Consumer Federation of America estimates alternative parts to be, on average, anywhere from 34 to 83 percent less costly than the branded parts. According to one aftermarket industry study, their replacement parts save consumers an estimated \$1.5 billion each year. A repair parts patent waiver would allow these savings to continue. Legislation has been introduced in both the U.S. House and the U.S. Senate, the “Access to Repair Parts Act” (H.R. 3059 and S. 1368, respectively) which would guarantee that consumers can continue to choose high-quality, low-cost alternative collision replacement parts when repairing their vehicles.

The Repair Parts Monopoly Impact on Older Americans

Armed with their new-found parts monopoly power, the auto companies can increase the price of replacement parts at will. Without competition, prices always increase and consumers always lose – none more than seniors on fixed incomes. With no competition in the marketplace, the increase in the price of repair costs will make it harder for consumers to have their cars repaired instead of totaled. This will force many consumers to replace what would have been a repairable older vehicle with an expensive new car. An increase in totaled vehicles will have a disproportionate impact on older and low-income Americans who tend to drive older cars and are the least able to purchase new vehicles. Seniors will also face higher insurance premiums resulting from the higher repair costs. Thanks to competition, older Americans have long enjoyed the affordable alternative of quality aftermarket replacement parts – which often have better warranties than car company parts – for their repairs. That affordable choice may soon be ending, with the car companies’ repair parts monopoly costing all consumers an added \$1.5 billion each year, or an estimated \$15 billion in additional costs over 10 years.

Public Support for “Right to Repair”

It is clear that the general public strongly supports the individual owners’ “right to repair.” A 2009 Tarrance Group and Lake Research Partners poll of 800 randomly chosen consumers found 82 percent favoring “Right to Repair” legislation. Seniors favored the legislation by 72 percent. When an earlier survey (2006) asked about who should own the information contained in a car’s computer, 76 percent agreed that the information should be available to the owner and the owner’s mechanic. The agreement was “tri-partisan” with 79 percent of self-identified Democrats, 78 percent of Republicans, and 74 percent of Independents agreeing that auto owners and their mechanics should have access to the same information as auto makers and dealers.

That poll, conducted by The Polling Company Inc. and Lake Research Partners, also found that over half (56 percent) of all voters said they preferred to have their automobiles serviced or repaired at an “independent repair shop or private mechanic.” Only 36 percent said they take their vehicles to a dealership for service.

This strong level of support for “Right to Repair” is reflected in the consumer groups who have recognized the obvious problem of an effective car-dealer monopoly on motor vehicle maintenance and repair. Along with numerous others, senior-citizen advocate groups RetireSafe and 60 Plus have been speaking out about how this monopoly negatively impacts seniors.

When our neighbors to the north celebrated the Canadian “Car Care Month” in 2008, they did so by focusing on mature drivers. According to a recent survey conducted by Car Care Canada, drivers over 50 are more knowledgeable about their vehicle’s maintenance requirements and more likely to follow a regular maintenance schedule than any other age group. Fueled by numerous articles appearing in senior magazines there, many Car Care Clinics took place in adult recreation centers. Older drivers learned even more about vehicle maintenance and were encouraged to share their knowledge with younger generations.

As part of a National “Car Care Month” in the U.S., AAA, the nation’s leading consumer organization for car owners and drivers, offered to “Assist America’s Aging Population in Finding a Reputable Car Repair Shop That They Can Depend On.” To do that, AAA offered their approximately 7,800 AAA Approved Auto Repair shops across the continent. Those AAA Approved shops meet the association’s stringent criteria for customer satisfaction, equipment training, warranties and cleanliness. Importantly, according to AAA, more than 50 percent of those “Approved” repair shops are independent shops. Should the car company/car dealer monopolies succeed, those independent shops will disappear, as will affordable aftermarket collision repair parts. Nothing could be a stronger, more persuasive argument as to why the motor vehicle owner’s “right to repair” their vehicles and the companion right to access affordable collision repair parts must be maintained against the advancing monopolies.

Unlike the car companies and the car dealers, older American consumers aren’t looking for a government bailout, but just to have the ability to have their vehicles repaired with high-quality affordable parts, at the reasonably-priced local independent repair shops which are so important to them and their independence. Competition and freedom of choice should be encouraged, not denied by a government that appears to be far too deep in the pocket of the car companies and their dealers.

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