

Auto repair agreement good news for drivers

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Victoria's independent automotive repair industry was applauding an agreement yesterday that will see vehicle manufacturers share tools, technology and training programs with aftermarket shops.

Until now, independent repair garages have had difficulty repairing some models because many manufacturers only provide the onboard diagnostic software and codes to dealership shops.

"It's absolutely great news," said Doug Buchanan, who runs Dunsmuir Super Service on Pembroke Street. "We can do most repairs, but occasionally we run into things that only a dealership can do because they're the only ones with the equipment."

The agreement, announced yesterday by industry representatives and Industry Minister Tony Clement, is seen as a victory for consumers, who will have more options -- and what local mechanics say are better prices -- when it comes to getting their vehicles fixed.

The National Automotive Trades Association, representing about 5,000 auto repair and service shops across the country, said yesterday it has signed an agreement with the two biggest automaker- industry associations in the country.

Under the deal, carmakers will provide service and repair information to aftermarket repair shops, which will also be able to access information on tooling and training. All the information is expected to be available by May 2010.

"This is a step in the right direction. It shows that the industry is working together with the aftermarket," said Clement.

The agreement is voluntary and the changes will not require legislation, and that's where critics say it doesn't go far enough.

"What we want to do is ensure that consumers continue having choices. And we feel that this agreement falls way short of doing that," said Marc Brazeau, president of the Automotive Industries Association of Canada, which represents 8,000 repair shops across the country.

The organization supports a private-member's bill by New Democrat MP Brian Masse that would have compelled automakers to disclose data to independent repair shops. The bill passed second reading in the House of Commons in May.

The Retail Council of Canada and Canadian Automobile Association also support the bill.

Brazeau noted the U.S. has passed similar legislation. "In this agreement in Canada, there is no legislative backstop," he said. "If a car company decides tomorrow that they don't want to be part of the agreement, they have the ability to opt out."

Chris Wylie, service manager at Searle's Auto Repair -- Victoria's largest independent repair shop with 22 bays -- said the new agreement will probably help his business, but it's the consumer who will benefit the most.

"Dealers are ruthless," Wylie said when it comes to repair work pricing. "They have no problem handing you a \$500 bill for a service that we will charge \$100. For some reason they get it into people's heads that if they don't get their oil changed [where you bought the car] it's going to explode."

Buchanan said repair shops already share plenty of work with other independents, and dealerships often source out "specialty" work on everything from radiators to transmissions to independent shops.

Most new vehicles are equipped with special modules that control power or body functions. And while aftermarket garages eventually acquire the diagnostics and know-how to read them, it's often lagging, in some cases by several years.

Wylie said some repairs have to be turned away at local garages because the technology is too new or some manufacturers -- particularly European ones -- intensely protect the information.

The announcement comes at a time when auto dealers are expanding service to offset revenue declines in new vehicle sales. Last month, during a tour of Victoria, **Blair Qualey**, president of the New Car Dealers Association of B.C., said dealerships were enhancing service departments as a way to maintain customers and staff.

Qualey said yesterday from Vancouver that the national association has been working closely on the deal. He called it "a good solution" that will give choice to customers.

But Qualey said there is still a strong case for customers taking their vehicles to dealership technicians "who live and breathe their particular brands ... elsewhere they may not have the same standards."

"Ultimately our members aren't afraid of competition. They've been competing against themselves for years and work hard to win and keep customers."

Dave Wheaton of Dave Wheaton Pontiac Buick GMC said yesterday he welcomed the deal, saying what is good for consumers is ultimately good for dealerships. He added his dealership is "very competitive" in servicing costs.