

Lease the Beast

By Reg P. Wydeven
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A few weeks ago, I was driving my son to school and he was explaining to me how excited he was about the field trip he was going to that day. Suddenly our car lurched to the left, so I quickly pulled over into McDonalds' parking lot. While I'm definitely not a mechanical guy, I knew something was askew when my left front tire was resting at a 45 degree angle.

Again, not being very mechanical, I did what any other 38-year-old man would do: I called my mom. Like so many times before, my folks came to the rescue. My parents both drove to McDonalds and loaned us one of their cars so I could get my son to his field trip and myself to work.

Thankfully, my parents let us use their car until we were able to line up new wheels. Not only did this save us a lot of money and time compared to renting a car, it may have been potentially safer as well.

Last week, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration announced that it was investigating how quickly car rental companies were handling the repairs of cars with recalls.

The investigation is in response to a petition filed by The Center for Auto Safety and the Consumers for Auto Reliability and Safety, two car safety watchdog groups, with the Federal Trade Commission. The advocacy groups filed the petition to prevent Enterprise Rent-A-Car from knowingly renting out recalled cars that had not yet been repaired.

Earlier this year, Enterprise, which also owns the Alamo and National car rental agencies, settled a lawsuit stemming from a 2004 accident in which two women died. An officer of Enterprise rented out to the women a Chrysler PT Cruiser that had been recalled because of an under-hood fire risk. The car had yet to be repaired at the time of the accident.

Individual car owners have the option of electing when to make repairs to a recalled car. Surprisingly, there is no law requiring rental agencies to make repairs to recalled cars prior to renting them out. Like individual owners, rental agencies can decide when to make repairs.

In an article about the story, The Detroit News quoted a spokeswoman for Enterprise as saying that "in most cases, we place a 'hold' on recalled vehicles so they are not rented until the recall work is completed." In the article, Sharon Faulkner, the executive director of the American Car Rental Association, responded by saying that "you pull those cars and you park them. It's just foolish for anyone to risk a lawsuit, death, or injury. It's just stupid. You don't do it."

New York Senator Charles Schumer is hoping to establish such a law requiring all rental car firms to repair every recalled car before renting it out. He believes rental agencies should be treated like retailers rather than consumers, claiming, "If automotive dealers are not allowed to sell recalled vehicles without first fixing the safety issues, then rental car companies should be held to the same standard."

Until then, the NHTSA recommends that you check for any recalls prior to renting a car. The Administration website contains a database of all ongoing recalls, including both domestic and foreign vehicles. And if all else fails, call your mom.