

# New car sales at snail's pace

By BILL CASPER

It's no exaggeration that the future of the U.S. auto industry depends on how well the American public responds to the 1981 models of small, fuel-efficient cars now being introduced with great fanfare across the nation.

But while the majority of local new-car dealers are reporting a modest turnaround in new car sales early this year compared to a disastrous 1980, sales remain slow.

Sales have failed to get anywhere near previous sales levels during the annual introductory period.

As for the American car consumers interviewed in various showrooms, the few who can afford to are buying mid-size models, with few looking at full-size cars.

THOSE OF lesser financial means are complaining about the high cost of even the most inexpensive lines.

The interviews also indicated that nearly all the potential buyers are concerned about the mileage they will get in whatever car they are buying.

"I think the prices are scaring everyone away," said David Harb of Redford Township. "I'm laid off right now and I'm not in the market to buy, but I am doing some pricing of the economy cars. I'll stick with the American cars because I'm not convinced the quality

of foreign models is better, and servicing my car also is an important consideration."

Another potential customer perusing sticker prices was not happy with what he saw.

"I'm looking for a car that's within my price range, but I haven't found one yet," he said. "I think the new economy cars should be selling for \$3,500 to \$4,500, and I think they're all too high in price."

ON THE OTHER hand, Carolyn Miller of Dearborn said, "I don't think that prices are out of bounds. I want a fun car this time, and I'm looking for a car with a sporty style like a Mustang or Granada."

"I'm doing some pricing of the economy cars and I'm going to stick to the American models, if for no other reason than a sense of patriotism," said William Radloff of Detroit. "I think the foreign cars are more fuel-efficient at this stage because they've been building their cars that way for a longer time than the American auto makers."

"But I think the American auto makers have every bit as much know-how as their foreign counterparts, and given the time to turn the technology around, I think the American cars will be able to compete with the foreign models."

Oddly enough, the consumer concerns about the high prices of the 1981

cars are shared by Jerry Parrish, president of the Coon Brothers American Motors dealership on Plymouth just east of Telegraph in Redford.

"The prices of new cars are almost getting out of the range of the working man," Parrish said.

But he placed the blame on the working man, who demands more money through union representation and becomes locked in a vicious cycle of having to face higher prices for the goods he buys.

PARRISH SAID he is feeling the affects of the vicious cycle, noting that the sales of 1981 models are running about 15 percent behind sales figures at the same time last year for the 1980 cars.

In fact, he said he is selling more 1980 models now because of the high price of the new cars.

"Our sales have been spread over the least costly to the luxury cars," Parrish said. "There doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to the buying of new cars. If people have the money, they spend it."

Parrish noted, however, that the mid-size Concord and economy Spirit are his bread-and-butter cars.

He was the only auto dealer who reported a decline in sales among the four interviewed, each representing the four major U.S. auto makers.

LARRY ROSS, general sales manager for George Matick Chevrolet in Redford, said his sales are ahead of last year with the customers buying a variety of car makes — except the full-size autos.

He said the economical Chevette and mid-size Malibu are the early best sellers, but he added that there are not as many shoppers in the showrooms as there should be.

"I think the people are waiting for something like jobs or the presidential election," Parrish said. "I'm optimistic and I expect sales may pick up around March."

Lou Stanford, at Pat Milliken Ford in Redford, said sales are up about 50 percent above last year, which he called the worst introductory period in the last 11 years. He said the Escort, his best seller, is primarily responsible for this year's early sales increase.

Other Pat Milliken salesmen said there are not enough people buying the other car makes, and overall sales are not what they should be.

"IT'S GOING to be a long, cold winter," said one salesman.

However, Stanford said he too believes there will be a gradual upswing in sales as "companies begin hiring back laid-off employees."



Mary Acosta of Bloomfield Hills checks out the AMC Eagle at an area dealership. (Photo by Bill Bresler)

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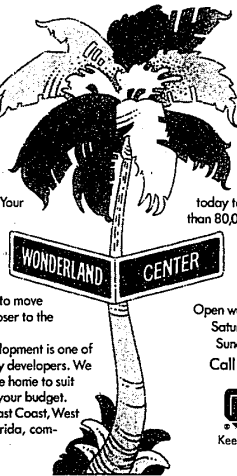
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