

# How you can avoid auto rip off schemes

By Diane Cole  
staff writer

Auto repair complaints are the number one consumer grievance in the nation, but a state department offers consumers tips to avoid being taken for a ride by auto shops.

"Our opinion is if there's a rip-off

artist out there we want them out of the business," explained Dennis Liphart, executive director of the Automotive Trade Association, which represents approximately 400 independent repair shops in Michigan.

More than 7,000 in-state auto repair customers filed complaints with the

Michigan Department of State Bureau of Automotive Regulations last year, according to Lorraine Hodges, administrator.

The bureau mediates consumer complaints against auto repair operations. The bureau's Detroit area phone number is 337-4106, and the toll-free

number is 1-800-292-4204. The recording equipment operates 24 hours a day.

Before calling the bureau, Hodges advises trying to resolve the problem with the owner of the facility.

"Sometimes just telling a business that you're going to file a complaint is successful," she said.

The consumer should have an idea of

the problems before going to the shop, and if he/she is concerned about the costs "shopping around" is helpful, Hodges continued.

The following are other tips the state gives to avoid unnecessary auto repairs:

- Seek advice from friends who

know about cars, before having the work done.

- Make sure the mechanics at the repair facility are organized.
- Look for an certified and clean business place.
- Fairprice shops that are referred by a friend.

# Dealers say state regulations aren't always fair

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Facilities also are mandated to provide an estimate of the bill before repairs costing \$20 or more are made, or upon request on repairs under \$20. The shop also must have additional authorization for work that exceeds the estimate by 10 percent or \$10 before the extra work is done.

The law requires owners to supply a detailed invoice after repairs are completed, and to return all the old parts they replaced. There are certain exceptions where returning a used part, like

a gasoline tank, is dangerous.

A customer's complaint that work done at American Transmissions violated the repair act resulted in a probation period from October 1981 to October 1983. The specific citations were failing to give a written estimate, charging for a repair that wasn't performed, representing repairs were necessary when they weren't and failing to provide a complete and final invoice.

AMERICAN TRANSMISSIONS owner John Polino said at the time the complaint was made, he and his previous partner were out of work due to

illnesses, and a manager was left in charge. Since that time the manager was fired, said Polino who paid a \$500 to the state.

"It's our responsibility if the employee doesn't follow the rules," Polino said. "The complaint we had was in a situation I didn't have control over, and my only choice was to terminate the employee involved, which we did."

Polino explained most auto repair facilities are constantly trying to overcome a "credibility problem," because of the growing distrust by the consumer. The public act, and state bureau have helped the consumer in many

ways, and the situation has improved, he said.

Customer complaints citing Transmission Rebuilders Inc. for violation of the repair act resulted in owner Ed Hubbard paying a \$1,350 fine, according to Hodges.

The grievances filed against Hubbard include failing to provide a written estimate and written invoice, performing unauthorized repairs, or exceeding the estimate without the customer's approval, performing major repairs without a mechanic who is certified in that area and hindering an investigation by the state.

"There was a lot of innuendo and various things that didn't amount to a hill of beans," Hubbard said. "So the state could save face they put us on probation."

"The state people aren't mechanics and they don't know what they're talking about, so they become police, juror and prosecutor," Hubbard continued. "We fought it, but we agreed to let them put us on probation rather than go through the courts."

"We asked out of it, because we had to go on with our business, and we didn't have the time to play their game," he said.

Transmissions Rebuilders is on probation from November 1981 to November 1983.

Motorists in Michigan pay \$13 more an hour for auto repairs than motorists in other states, because the bureau requires facilities to write up "big forms" and prove that they are "honorably," Hubbard said.

Hubbard said that at times there's a need for state intervention, as in cases when the customer doesn't understand the repair, and state officials help "sort

out the problem."

HE FAVORS state intervention when the company requests their assistance. But the state doesn't get involved on the business' request.

"The bureau's function is to administer the motor vehicle and service repair act, as well as to regulate the business and mechanics," Hodges said. "We mediate consumer complaints."

As in the cases with both local transmission repair shops, after the complaint is filed the state reviews the allegations, and if they are of a serious nature the disciplinary process begins, Hodges said.

The owner of the business and sometimes the mechanic involved in the complaint are brought in for a conference with bureau workers, and they are given an opportunity to explain their actions.

If the case isn't dismissed, state attorneys decide whether the allegations are valid. At this point, the owner may opt for probation or license suspension. The state has revoked less than five licenses since the bureau began operation in March 1976.

# Sympathy grows for tax revolt

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Many of the taxpayers interested in fighting tax increases contacted each other through WXYZ radio, and TOT formed shortly after the March 1, 1983 protest in Lansing at the State Capitol.

The TOT is one of 15 groups seeking changes in the way taxes are determined in Michigan.

They hoped to impress their legislators to turn thumbs down on raising the state income tax from 4.8 percent to 6.35 percent. But the partisan vote was forestalled by the Democrats and was passed by state legislators.

The increase, which is retroactive to January 1, 1983, will drop annually for four years until it reaches 3.9 percent. If the unemployment rate falls to 9 percent or below the tax will expire altogether.

The petition is entitled, "Voter's Choice for '84." The supporter's goal is to get the provisions on the 1984 ballot. It promotes voter approval for new

taxes, tax increases or tax shifts. The petition also opposes a non-resident income tax over 4 1/2 percent. License fees, permits and user fees will require a 4% affirmative vote of the legisla-

tors or voter approval, according to the petition.

The petition was written by Jim DeMar, a Romeo barber, who is a member of the Voter's Choice Committee.

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