



detnews
SITE INDEX

Homepage
Search
CyberSurveys
Horoscope
Lottery
Michigan's Best
Weather
Staff

FORUMS

News Talk
Autos Talk
Big 10 Talk
High Schools
Lions Talk
Pistons Talk
Wings Talk
Tech Talk
Tiger Talk
Casino Talk

NEWS

Autos
▶ Insider
▶ Auto Show
▶ Consumer
▶ Joyrides
Business
▶ Careers
▶ Money & Life
Census
Columnists
Commuting
Detroit History
Editorials
Metro / State
▶ Livingston
▶ Macomb
▶ Oakland
▶ Wayne
▶ On Detroit
Nation / World
Obituaries
▶ Death Notices
Politics / Govt.
Real Estate
Religion
Schools
Special Reports
Technology

SPORTS

Sports Insider
▶ Lions/NFL
▶ Red Wings/NHL
▶ Pistons/NBA
▶ Shock/WNBA
▶ Tigers/Baseball
▶ MSU

Friday, February 21, 2003



John Amis

Georgia computer programmer Geoff Gill says the buzz on his Crown Victoria Web site about the fuel tank problems was intense last summer.

Crown Vic safety fears expand to car buyers

Deadly police cruiser fires prompt Ford to quietly offer fuel tank repair kits to public

By Jeff Plungis / Detroit News Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON -- Ford Motor Co.'s attempt to address safety questions with its Crown Victoria police cruiser faces a new complication: It's not just police officers who are having doubts about the safety of the vehicle. Consumers also are growing wary.

Police departments and attorneys general across the country have been demanding a recall to fix the Crown Victoria's fuel tank in the wake of a string of deadly fires resulting from high-speed crashes involving the best-selling police cruiser.

As of last week, Ford had shipped 238,000 repair kits to police departments across the country.



John Amis

Geoff Gill says he was drawn to the Crown Victoria partly because of its safety record. He's not worried about the fuel tanks, but for peace of mind, he is buying a FIRE Panel for his wife's car.

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▶ Previous Story

▶ Next Story

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- Browse the Classifieds
- New & Used Cars
- Employment
- Homes or Apartments
- Shop Online

Home Delivery Center

- Start home delivery
- Renew subscription
- Customer service

Autos Insider

- Autos Insider index for Friday, February 21, 2003
- **Crown Vic safety fears expand to car buyers**
- DaimlerChrysler workers pay more of health costs
- Bridgestone reports surging profits as recall damage wanes
- Chrysler not out of woods
- Ford brings back merit raises
- \$4.25 billion GM-Turkey truck deal hits snag
- Collins & Aikman cuts losses
- New Toyota minivan draws strong first-month sales
- Kia doubles profit in 4th quarter
- Ford health co-pays jump
- Chrysler to give first bonuses since 2000
- Eaton, ex-directors back DaimlerChrysler deal
- GM to pay workplace safety fines
- Ford to develop cars based on vehicle size
- Kia Motors 4th-quarter profit more than doubles
- 4th-quarter VW net jumps as sales in Europe rise 12%
- A female Ford rises in the ranks
- GM: Fuel boost plan means unsafe trucks
- Ford to pay EPA \$244,000
- Parents of Dallas police officer file suit against Ford
- Arbitrator says Delphi

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More Colleges
Golf Guide
High Schools
Motor Sports
Outdoors
More Sports
Scoreboards

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►Casino Guide
►Movie Finder
►Restaurants
►TV Listings
Crossword

HOMESTYLE

Homestyle home
►Decorating
►Eats & Drinks
►Recipe Box
►Gardening
►Health
►Home Improvement
►Home Life
►Home Tech
►Wine Report

PHOTOS

Sports
Red Wings
Lions
Autos
Joyrides
News
History

At least a dozen police officers have died in Crown Vic crashes since 1996 -- and publicity from subsequent lawsuits has brought more attention to the vehicles.

Jim Sheeran of New Providence, N.J., and his wife were on the verge of buying a 2003 Grand Marquis, then changed their minds after researching the vehicle on the Internet.

"They should just reposition the gas tank," Sheeran said. "I know that's a giant cost factor to them at a time when it looks like they might be coming out of the red, but people's lives are at stake."

Now, in a little-publicized move, Ford is offering the police cruiser repair kit to the general public, although the automaker believes there is no safety problem for average drivers because they are not at risk in the same way as police officers.

Ford says police officers are at least 1,000 times more likely to be involved in a high-speed, rear-end collision. Average drivers are less likely to be parked on the side of the highway where they would be more vulnerable to such a crash.

Still, Ford customers like Vickie Merrill of Livonia have gone to their dealers to get the kits. The response has been inconsistent. Many dealers don't know about the kits. Some don't have technicians qualified to do the repair. Some refuse to do the fix because of legal concerns.

Merrill, 41, was not happy to learn she would have to shell out hundreds of dollars for something she thinks Ford ought to fix.

"They're willing to fix the police cars," Merrill said. "If there's a problem, they should pay for it. If people are dying, there should be a recall."

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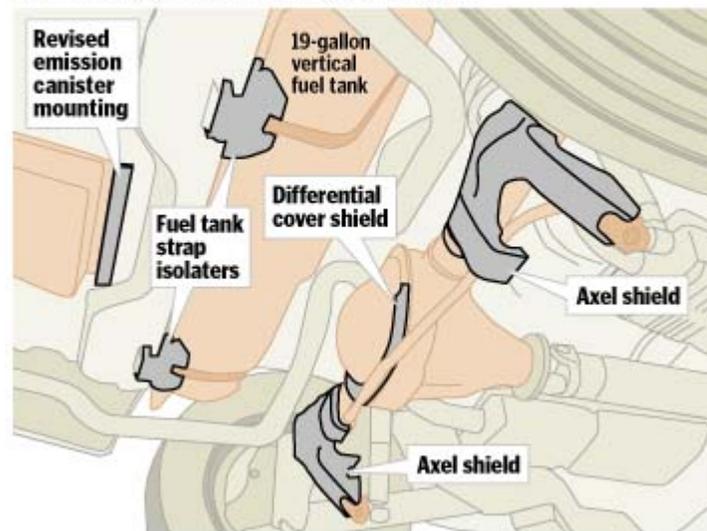
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Crown Vic repair kit

The Crown Victoria's vertical gas tank is vulnerable to punctures that could cause the car to burst into flames in rear collisions. Ford dealers sell an upgrade kit. It includes:



Source: Ford Motor Co.

Tim Summers / The Detroit News

Ford defends cars

In its own defense, Ford has said the Crown Victoria and its Lincoln and Mercury counterparts have passed rear-impact crash tests far more stringent than federal requirements. For example, Ford runs a rear-impact crash test at 50 mph to gauge fuel leakage. The current federal requirement is a 30 mph crash test.

Ford also points to the results of an investigation conducted by The

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. NHTSA began its probe into the fuel-tank safety of 1992-2001 model year Crown Victorias, Grand Marquis and Town Cars in November 2001.

The investigation was closed in October 2002, with NHTSA concluding the number of traffic fatalities for the makes was comparable to Chevrolet police cruisers.

To be sure, not all Crown Vic owners are worried. Many feel their vehicles have gotten a bad rap because of media overreaction to the police deaths.

Geoff Gill, publisher of the enthusiast Web site, crownvicmuscle.com, said he was drawn to the car because of its safety record and its full-bodied, rear-wheel drive power. Gill drives a 1993 model. He bought a 1998 for his wife and kids.

Gill said there had been a lot of traffic on his site about the fuel tank problems last summer, with many references to the Pinto recall of the 1970s. But the concern has receded.

"The paranoia has died down," Gill said. "The more I learn, the less concerned I am."

For peace of mind, however, Gill is buying a FIRE Panel for his wife's car. It is a shield with a fire-extinguishing chemical powder designed to fit snugly on the outside of the Crown Vic fuel tank.

The product is usually found on racing cars. Gill said it impressed him as being more effective than any of the fixes Ford has offered.

Other models affected

Crash statistics show that the safety problem present on the Crown Victoria police interceptor model is also present on models sold to the general public.

According to a study by the Center for Auto Safety using NHTSA's fatality database, there were 104 deaths in crashes with fires in Crown Victoria, Town Car and Grand Marquis cars between 1993 and 2001.

Thirty-seven were in police vehicles and 67 were in civilian vehicles. Of the crashes where fire was identified as the primary cause of death, 15 fatalities were in police vehicles, and 12 were in civilian vehicles.

"Ford has been trying to portray this as just a police problem," said Center for Auto Safety executive director Clarence Ditlow. "It isn't. There are more people being killed in civilian versions."

The fallout is reaching owners of other Ford cars, such as the Mustang, which has a similar gas tank design to the Crown Victoria.

Alex Hatcher, a Web programmer in Logan Township, N.J., found out about questions on the Mustang's fuel tank through Blue Oval News, a private Web site that tracks Ford issues. He crawled under his Mustang to confirm his fears about the fuel tank location.

"It's been on my mind, every time I come to a hard stop," Hatcher said. "The fear's always been there in the back of my mind. Now it's in the front of my mind."

Cover-up indicated

Ford's response to the Crown Vic controversy is as much a problem to some loyal customers as doubts about the engineering design. Many think the company still has not been up-front, telling its customers everything it knows about the problem.

Sheeran, the prospective Grand Marquis buyer, was disturbed that he found out about the gas tank issue after doing research on the Internet, not from his dealer.

"You shouldn't have to uncover' such a tragic safety hazard like this," Sheeran said. "Ford should come clean with the buyers of their cars. I was a large Ford fan, until now. I could be persuaded to come back into the fold, but Ford would have to be honest, and they would have to bite the bullet and spend some serious cash righting this wrong."

The Crown Victoria repair kit is available at Ford dealers nationwide, said Ford spokeswoman Kristen Kinley. It costs \$105, plus labor charges that vary from dealer to dealer.

The upgrade entails placing plastic shields over the differential cover and the rear axle. Two isolaters are placed over the fuel tank straps. And a new mounting is placed on a cylindrical emission canister between the tank and the rear bumper.

The police version also includes a template placed on the bottom of the trunk for optimal placement of equipment that could puncture the tank in a high-speed crash.

Ford said it is not tracking how many customers are asking for the repair kit. Since there is no official recall, there is no legal requirement to do so. Officials say the demand has been fairly limited so far.

"The announcement wasn't intended for customers," Kinley said. "We really don't believe customers need this package."

Dealers reluctant

And not every dealer is willing to install the kit. Peter Talarico, 64, a retired teacher in the Bronx, said he was willing to pay the installation charges on his 2000 Grand Marquis.

Talarico recently had a harrowing drive on the Southern State Parkway on Long Island where an aggressive driver tailgated him in a large SUV. As he stared at the approaching vehicle, Talarico was thinking about the police fires.

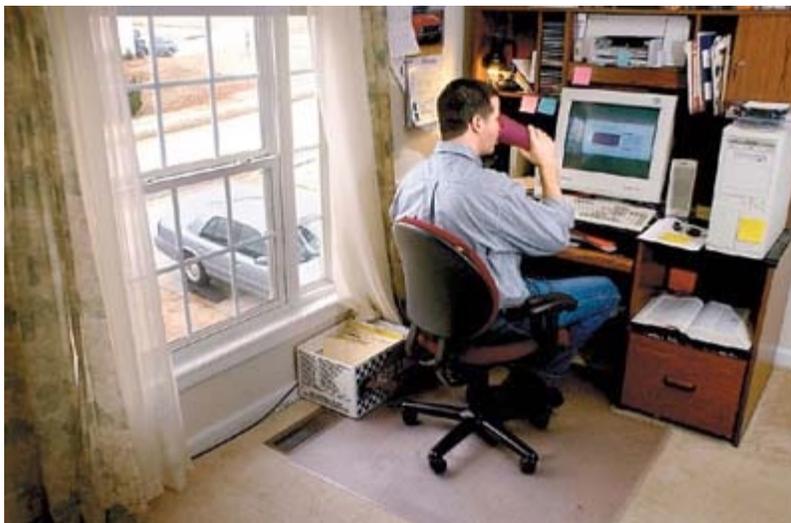
After several discussions about the possibility of doing the repair, his dealer called back to say it would not install the kit because of the possibility of lawsuits down the line.

Ford said it cannot force dealers to do the repair, since they are independent businesses and they are not conducting a recall.

Since he's having trouble getting the repair, Talarico might get rid of his Grand Marquis, even though it has only 34,000 miles on it.

"I'm wearing out my rear view mirror," Talarico said. "I think I'm going to get a Volvo."

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John Amis

"The more I learn, the less concerned I am," says Geoff Gill, publisher of a Crown Vic Web site, about the car's fuel tank safety.

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