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Thursday, July 10, 2003

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Editorial: Police deserve safer vehicles

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Police work can involve high speed chases as well as missions of mercy to help stranded motorists in disabled cars. In both cases, it's important to have a safe, well-built car to protect the police as they work. Unfortunately for police across the country, the cars they drive might be death traps.

Ford Motor Company's Crown Victoria Police Interceptor is a popular choice for police work because of its stability at high speeds and the protection it offers its occupants in front-end crashes. However, since its introduction in 1978, there have been 9 police officers burned and 16 -- including New York State Trooper Robert Ambrose -- killed by fires triggered from rear-end crashes. Police representatives say that is more than the deaths linked to the Ford Pinto fires in the mid-'70s.

The design of the Crown Victoria is such that the fuel tank is in "the crush zone of a rear impact," the Center for Auto Safety says. Combine that vulnerability with the crash safety the front provides, and in many cases, the driver survives the crash but can't escape and is burned to death by the subsequent fire.

Ford's response to the concerns has been to address the environment around the fuel tank rather than the placement itself. Its Technical Task Force and Blue Ribbon Panel suggested the creation of a plastic safety shield to cover the jagged edges of parts surrounding the fuel tank that could puncture it on impact. In October 2002, these \$17 upgrade kits were made available at no cost for all CVPIs in service. The success of this device is questionable, since two troopers were killed this May in fiery rear-end collisions and two unoccupied cars burst into flames on impact. All CVPIs involved had been fitted with the shields.

The auto manufacturer has offered alternative safety suggestions including a trunk pack for police to store their "sharp-edged, heavy equipment more safely, horizontally rather than longitudinally." The \$200 pack that was supposed to be provided by 2002 to all police agencies using CVPIs is just now becoming available. Police think Ford should pick up that cost.

A less-expensive option is a trunk template that shows where equipment should be stored.

In its Technical Service Bulletin of October 2001, Ford stated its position that part of the problem of higher incidence of problems with police cars is the high speed involved in crashes. According to Daniel M. De Federicis, president of the Police Benevolent Association of the New York State Troopers, Ford has never defined

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what it considers a high speed.

Last August, Trooper George Rought of the Olean barracks was pulled unconscious from his burning Crown Victoria after it was rear-ended by a pickup hauling a cattle trailer. De Federicis said tests at the scene show the pickup was going 50 mph.

Outside of Ford redesigning the placement of the gas tank, De Federicis says many police forces are pushing for other safety options. They want Ford to embrace high-technology solutions that include a Kevlar fuel tank bladder that resists puncturing and a fire suppression system filled with flame retardant powder released upon impact. De Federicis says the bladder technology is used by the military, NASCAR and in some Ford Mustangs, and has been installed in the entire fleet of CVPIs owned by the Phoenix Police Department.

Last December state Sen. Nick Spano, R-35th District, called for a moratorium on purchases of new CVPIs and urged Ford to "pursue all means possible to ensure that all Crown Victoria models are retrofitted with fuel barriers to prevent leakage and fire."

De Federicis said the state Legislature has appropriated money that could be used to pay for installing the bladders in the state's fleet. However, State Police Superintendent James W. McMahon and Gov. George E. Pataki (who would authorize the purchase) have been dragging their feet, De Federicis said. Their inaction could have deadly consequences, he said.

U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., wrote the NHTSA in May to request it open a comprehensive investigation into structural defects that cause the CVPI to explode on rear-end impact. What also concerns him is that the same fuel tank design is in the Mercury Grand Marquis and the four-door Lincoln Town Car used by civilians.

Ford, which controls 85 percent of the police cruiser market, should be more forthcoming and take immediate action to make its CVPIs safer for police who already put their lives on the line. As Sen. Schumer points out, this is especially important as a matter of Homeland Security, because these first responders are our first line of defense. In his letter to the NHTSA, Schumer notes correctly "it is essential that law enforcement personnel feel secure in the equipment they use."

Instead of expending energy on lawyers and duct-tape fixes that haven't solved the problem, Ford should change the design and move forward. And if another automobile manufacturer were producing safer vehicles of approximately the same dimensions, Ford would probably have corrected the problem already.

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Troopers union pushes for patrol car safety fixes

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Middletown – State troopers are scared.

They're scared their Ford Crown Victorias are going to blow up.

And they want the state to install two safety devices for the cars' gas tanks, according to three state police union officials. They met with the Times Herald-Record editorial board in Middletown yesterday.

Rear-end collisions in Crown Victorias have killed 16 police officers nationwide since 1983, including a New York trooper last year, said Daniel De Federicis, president of the New York State Troopers Police Benevolent Association.

"We need to put safety before the almighty traffic ticket," he said. "[State police administrators] care more about numbers than enforcement."

De Federicis demonstrated a puncture-proof bladder to go inside the fuel tank and a fire panel that covers the tank and releases a powder on impact. That chemical supposedly prevents fires from starting.

He estimated it would cost less than \$3 million to outfit the entire fleet. But the union has run into stiff opposition from state police leaders and Ford.

"They've got a really slick operation at Ford," De Federicis said of Ford's lobbying and public relations machine.

Crown Victorias make up about 80 percent of the more than 800 state police cars.

Gordon Warnock, legislative director for the union, said the design of the car's platform, from 1979, is outdated.

The state did install some safety devices following the December death of New York state Trooper Robert Ambrose. The union considers them cheap fixes and wants more done.

"We don't want another phone call in the middle of the night," Warnock said.

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