

WHEELS

Staying ahead of maintenance work is a big part in keeping an older car running trouble-free

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The message brought to you is a community service of the Economist/Tribune.

As the average age of a vehicle soon will exceed nine years, typically with over 160,000 miles on the odometer, the term preventive maintenance plays a greater role than ever in car ownership.

With proper care an aging vehicle should provide dependable transportation for another nine years and more.

A big part of keeping an older car running trouble-free is to stay ahead of maintenance needs.

The Car Care Council cites a recent example: The owner of a high mileage van called for advice about radiator hoses. "I have just one bad radiator hose," the caller said. "My mechanic recommended that I have all of them replaced while I'm at it. Isn't that pretty expensive, especially when the others appear OK?"

Many experts would agree with her mechanic, possibly going even further to suggest that drive belts (or single belt on a later model vehicle) should be replaced at that time.

This can be one of the best automotive investments one can make. It can save time and inconvenience, according to the council. Here's why.

When one hose is marginal in con-

dition, others may be too. Deterioration begins from within and is not visible until it is at an advanced stage.

A leaking or ruptured cooling system hose can cause an engine to self destruct in a matter of a few miles.

You save labour costs by getting the whole job done at one time versus several trips to the repair shop.

You can avoid having to have the work done later, at an inconvenient time.

As for belt replacement, consider that most vehicles now are equipped with the above mentioned single, serpentine belt, which does the work of three or four, so failure can be serious. If it's an older vehicle, labour costs are reduced by replacing all belts at the same time.

WHAT ABOUT OTHER PARTS?

After nine years, many components

already will have been replaced. If not, they should be inspected with an eye toward imminent retirement.

Marginal brake system parts or weak suspension parts also may be ready for replacement at this point, too.

The battery, with a normal life span of three to four years, should be load-tested and replaced if the test so indicates.

Some auto service professionals,

having the benefit of experience as well as available facilities, replace certain components on their personal vehicles as a preventive measure.

In addition to fuel, ignition and emission control parts, they may

replace the fuel pump and/or alternator.

What about inside the engine such as valves, piston rings or bearings. Should they still be okay at the 160,000 plus mileage?

The council said it depends on the vehicle and the care it has had. With regular maintenance it's not unusual for an engine to be healthy far beyond that 100,000 mile mark.

If the engine is burning oil and making ominous noises, however, it needs attention.

A vehicle that's basically sound, looks good and suits the owner's needs can get a new lease on life with a remanufactured or rebuilt engine.

This often is the most practical solution to refurbishing under the hood, with many of the above mentioned components included in the procedure. Every case should be appraised on its own merit, concludes the council, emphasizing that a good old car, one that's paid for and part of the family, can be the best investment one can make.



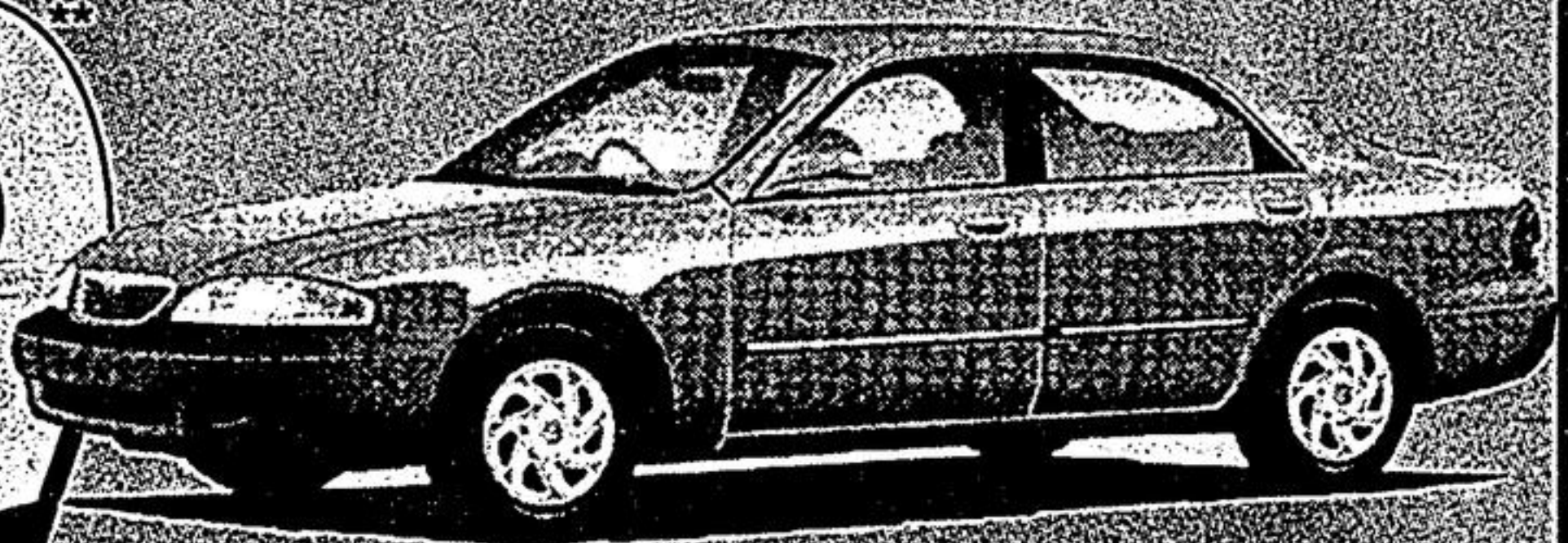
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The 1999 Saturn SL sedan earned 5-Star ratings for both driver and passenger protection in frontal collision tests

The 1999 Saturn SL sedan has earned 5-Star ratings for both driver and passenger protection in frontal collision tests conducted by the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

To date, the Saturn SL is the only model in the light passenger car category to earn double 5-Star ratings in NHTSA's New Car Assessment Program. A 5-Star rating indicates the best protection in the NCAP frontal test for vehicles within the same weight class.

The 1998 Saturn SL had earned a 5-Star rating for the driver's side and 4-Star for passenger side protection in NCAP frontal testing.

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