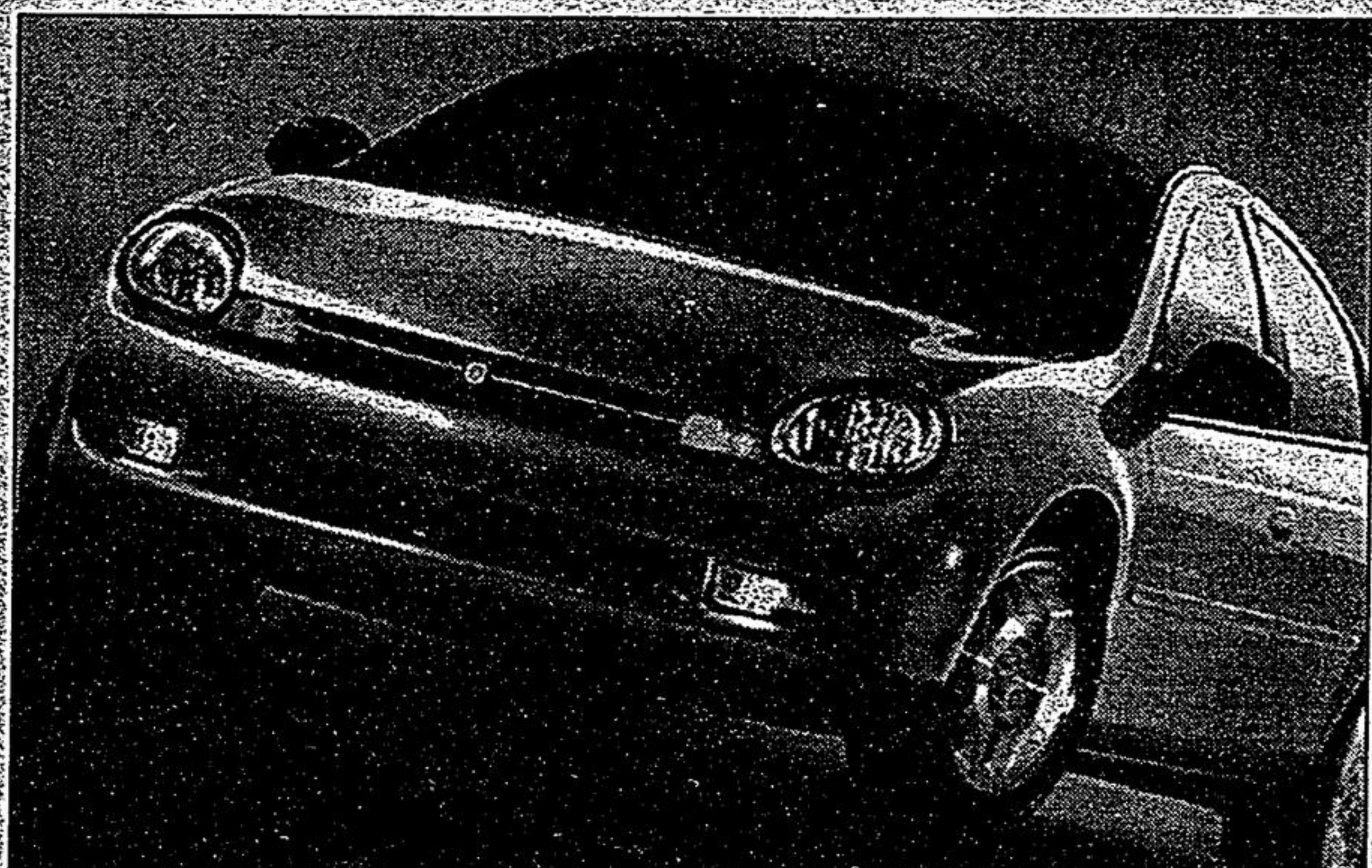


WHEELS



The second-generation Neon 2000 has been completely redesigned! The car no longer says Hi, but Hello.

The Neon 2000 offers refinement and a new level of sophistication

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METROLAND STAFF

The Chrysler Neon has grown up. The new Neon 2000 is probably the first Y2K model to actually put rubber to the road in Canada.

And it certainly is a much improved product, put together with a long list of long-needed structural, technical and ergonomic revisions.

But just one look tells you that this Chrysler Neon really isn't neon anymore.

I had a chance to check out some pre-production models recently. After a quick walkaround, I stood there, checking the spec sheets.

"Deep cranberry, forest green?" I read through the muted exterior colour list.

"Yes, this Neon doesn't say 'Hi' anymore," said Tom McPherson, regional public relations director for Chrysler. "It now says 'Hello!'"

Good-bye lime green. When the spunky Chrysler Neon broke the econo car mould five years ago, it debuted as a brash '95 upstart in a rather bland small-car market.

Its loud colour palette and sporty styling promise were backed up by spirited handling and a segment-leading 132-horsepower engine, a motor that blew away the competition with penny-wise pizzazz and performance.

But with that youthful image came growing pains and product quality problems that plagued the first generation vehicle.

Leaky windows. Suspension harshness. Engine noise. Neon owners love their cars, but they can grumble the list of complaints by heart.

Still, for all its faults, the Neon was roomy for its size, sporty and fun to drive. It was just a little rough around the edges.

What it really needed was refinement. And according to Chrysler, that's what they put in when they built the second-generation Neon 2000.

Refinement and a new level of

sophistication.

At first glance, the Neon's face may look familiar, but the design has definitely evolved and the LH-style profile is now more reminiscent of Chrysler's larger cars.

We're not just talking about a cosmetic make-over either. The familiar cab-forward design has been accentuated by moving the windshield forward three more inches. Almost 80 per cent of the Neon 2000 is brand new.

It's bigger. The wheelbase has been stretched an inch to 105 inches with a wider track for better stability. The car itself has also grown a little taller and wider, giving it more of a mid-size feel.

Overall length has increased by 2.6 inches and a dropped floor in the trunk boosts cargo capacity by 10 per cent.

There's a corresponding increase of interior space, most notably in hip and shoulder room and the bigger car theme carries on inside with slightly oversized vents and gauges that give you the impression you're driving something larger than a compact.

Soft touch coatings refine a rounded-off dashboard and instrument panel.

Okay, okay, you might say, that's all fine and dandy, but what did they do about some of those real problems mentioned earlier?

Well, let's look at a few. Noise, vibration and handling (NVH) covers a wide range of vehicle characteristics and almost every improvement listed below affects this broad category somehow.

Chrysler started by building a stronger body with 37 per cent more bending stiffness, while torsional stiffness improved by 26 per cent.

Expandable foam fills open cavities and more mastic (a sort of foam insulator) has been baked onto the body metal to separate you from both road and engine noise.

While Neons gained a reputation for

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