

Car Shops: Truth in Repairs



The Office of the
Minnesota Attorney General
helping people afford their lives and live with dignity, safety, and respect

Every car, whether new or used, requires maintenance and repairs from time to time. The Minnesota Attorney General's Office offers the following tips on how to select a mechanic, get a good deal on repairs, and resolve potential disputes.

Warranties or Service Contracts

If a car is covered by the manufacturer's warranty, a used car warranty, or a motor vehicle service contract, the owner may need to take the vehicle to a **specific** repair shop designated in the contract. The warranty, contract, or insurance policy may also require you to get prior approval before the repair is performed. If you do not get prior approval, the company may not pay, or may not pay the costs of diagnosing an issue if no problem is found or the problem is not covered. Owners who obtain repair work at a shop not covered in the contract risk having to pay the full price for repairs.

If the warranty or service contract has expired, or if the owner purchased a used car "as is," he or she will need to select a repair shop that suits the owner's needs and budget. An "as is" car is a vehicle sold by a dealer which exceeds the car mileage or age requirements covered by Minnesota's used car warranty law. For more information on the used car warranty law or the Minnesota lemon law protecting new car purchasers, see our brochure entitled *Minnesota's Car Laws*.

Information on what to consider before purchasing a motor vehicle service contract, sometimes incorrectly referred to as an "extended warranty," is available in our *Motor Vehicle Service Contract Offers* brochure.

Finding a Mechanic

Contact friends, relatives, or co-workers to obtain recommendations for quality repair shops. Some websites also offer helpful evaluations of car repair shops. Make sure, however, that the site is an unbiased source before relying on its recommendations. Talk with several repair shops to get an idea of the shops' pricing policies, turnaround time, and customer service before committing to one particular shop. Some shops may specialize in repairing certain makes or models. Others may specialize in body work or specific vehicle parts. Make sure that the repair shop you choose can accommodate your repair needs.

Getting the Best Price

Under the Truth in Repairs Act, which applies to repairs that cost more than \$100 but less than \$7,500, Minnesotans have the right to receive a written estimate from a repair shop before it begins any actual repair work. Obtain several estimates and compare costs before deciding upon a given shop. The shop is not supposed to perform unnecessary or unauthorized repairs. When you take a car in for an estimate, you should clearly explain to the shop that you do not want the shop to make any repairs until you have received and examined the written estimate. You may wish to document this request in writing at the shop to protect against potential disputes. A shop may impose an additional charge for making the estimate, including a charge for disassembly, diagnosis, and reassembly needed to make the estimate, if it tells you about the charge before the estimate is issued.

Once an estimate has been obtained, the Truth in Repairs Act generally prohibits the shop from charging you more than ten percent above the estimated cost. If a shop determines that additional work needs to be done after the repairs have begun, the shop may exceed the price of the written estimate, but only after it provides you with an updated estimate and you authorize the extra cost. If you authorize the additional work, the shop may not charge more than ten percent above the revised estimate.

In some cases, unscrupulous repair shops may recommend unnecessary or marginal repairs to make additional money. Mechanics may operate on commission and therefore have an incentive to make more repairs than necessary. Car owners who are unsure whether a repair is necessary may wish to take their vehicle to another repair shop for a second opinion.

Keep the Invoice

Repair shops are required to provide customers with an invoice if the repairs cost more than \$50 or the work is done under a manufacturer's warranty, service contract, or insurance policy. If the repair work is covered by a contract, warranty, or insurance policy, owners may need to submit a copy of the invoice to the warranty company or insurance company to receive coverage or reimbursement. The invoice should include a list of all the parts that were replaced, the cost of the parts, and labor charges. You also have the right to obtain any replaced part upon request if you make the request before the work begins (unless the warranty or service contract dictates that the part must be sent to the company providing coverage).

Keep a Log

Owners should document all communications with the repair shop. Keep a dated journal of the staff members with whom you speak, price estimates, potential problems, billing procedures, and other relevant information. In the event that a dispute develops, this information may be extremely important in resolving the problem.

Steps for Resolving Disputes

1. If a car owner disputes a repair or pricing practice, they should first attempt to settle the problem with the shop manager or owner. Some businesses have special programs or practices for handling disputes.
2. If car owner is unable to resolve the dispute with the repair shop directly, they may want to file a complaint with the Minnesota Attorney General's Office.
3. Finally, car owners who are unable to resolve a dispute satisfactorily may wish to file a claim in conciliation or "small claims" court. Conciliation court may award up to \$15,000 to the winning party. Owners who wish to proceed in conciliation court do not need an attorney. For more information about conciliation court, see our brochure entitled *Conciliation Court: A User's Guide to Small Claims Court*.

To file a complaint against a company or obtain more information about cars or other consumer issues, contact the Attorney General's Office as follows:

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445 Minnesota Street, Suite 600

St. Paul, MN 55101

(651) 296-3353 (Twin Cities Calling Area)

(800) 657-3787 (Outside the Twin Cities)

(800) 627-3529 (Minnesota Relay)

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