

Wheelin' around



by Charlie Moore

In this last column of the year, I am going to concentrate on the subject of where the automotive scene seems to be headed in general.

Things have changed a great deal in the car world over the past five years, and we can no doubt look forward to even more radical developments in the future. To many enthusiasts, the day seems dimly close when interesting automobiles will become a thing of the past, due to the ever increasing amount of governmental meddling into the field of automobile design and manufacture. While it is true that many, perhaps most of the new government inspired smog safety regulations are a relatively useless nuisance, they are nonetheless here to stay, and we are going to have to learn to live with them.

The problems are so many and so complex that it is only possible to touch on a few of them here. I feel that the automobile as we know it today has become obsolete and impractical as a means of transportation in urban areas. Cars just take up too much space for the number of people they move. The alternatives in this case are either a new type of car (i.e. small, non-polluting) for city driving, or a drastically improved system of public transit. The latter seems the most viable at this time and what is needed is more public pressure and support for better mass transit systems in our

cities. Air pollution from automobiles is fast becoming a dead issue as at 1972 levels exhaust emissions from new cars are 93 percent clean and by 1976 it will be 97-98 percent. Just what these new smog-controlled cars will be like to drive is another thing but it is to be hoped that there will be a breakthrough in that area soon.

One thing that we can be sure of is that clean air is going to cost us money... lots of it. Along with higher initial purchase price and maintenance costs, the 1976 cars will burn something over 30 percent more gas. Which leads us to another snag, the world's dwindling petroleum reserves. Some authorities suggest that there is enough oil left to last another twenty-five years but in view of the fact that shortages are already beginning to be felt even now, it is very possible that the crunch will come even sooner than we think.

Auto safety is something which is causing maybe even more changes in the type of automobiles which we are able to buy than emission controls. While the emission control laws are justifiable, at least for the most part, I feel that the American government has missed the boat by a large margin by concentrating their largest effort in reducing the death toll on the highway on automobile design. While some of the more basic safety equipment such as collapsible steering columns, seat and

shoulder harness, head restraints etc. are to some extent useful in saving lives, much of the required stuff is so much useless dead weight.

As at least fifty percent of all highway accidents are directly related to the abuse of alcohol, it would seem reasonable to expend more energy in keeping drunk drivers off the road. The Europeans have done especially well in this respect, and have the added advantage of building cars which will avoid accidents rather than merely padding the impact. Their safety technology differs from the American methods in that they engineer safety into the original design of the vehicle rather than adding hundreds of pounds of padding and armor plate as the Americans do.

Turning now to trends, I think that there will be a rationalization in the field of governmental controls on automotive design, if for no other reason than that people are not going to be happy with the type of car that the government has dictated. This is not to say that there should be no changes made, but that such changes should be made by qualified automotive engineers rather than by politicians.

The American manufacturers will continue to look more toward Europe for new designs and ideas, and conversely, the American smog safety laws will influence the world automobile markets to an even greater extent. In the future, we can look for cars to generally get

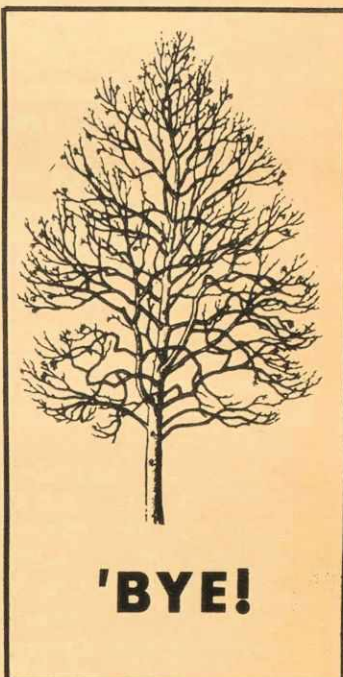
smaller and more functional.

It is also to be hoped that some of the larger cities will soon ban automobiles at least from downtown areas and rely on some means of mass transit. I doubt that there will be any radical new developments in the field of powerplants in the immediate future. There will be more widespread use of the Wankel engine, but look for many new developments of the piston engine such as Honda's new stratified charge CVCC engine.

Finally I feel strongly that there will continue to be interesting automobiles available to those who want them as long as the car as we know it remains a practical means of transportation. In time to come, the car will probably become more of a recreational device with public transit taking over the more workaday transportation jobs.

We, as enthusiasts, should put more effort into finding solutions to the problems of the automobile. Things are

changing and we must face that, but in the end it will be for the greater good of everyone in our overcrowded world. Have a good summer and keep wheelin'.



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