

Why neighborhood mechanics rock

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Recently I used a coupon to get a \$17.95 oil change and tire rotation at a local auto-repair chain. Along with the bill came -- surprise! -- a warning that more work was needed. They suggested a tune-up plus a flush of both the coolant and brake fluids because the former was "dirty" and the latter was "dark and dirty." Horrors.

This may have sounded like a scam -- come in for cheap work, pay for additional work -- but I believed them. It's been a long time since those chores were done. I'm not sure how long. According to an MSN Money article, I should have been keeping a service log instead of (usually) tossing receipts into a folder. Oops.

Clearly it was time for some Chevy coddling, especially since my brakes had begun to squeal. Immediately I thought "\$500." That's the number that pops into my head whenever a mechanic pops the hood.

So long, economic-stimulus check -- once you get here, I thought. Originally I'd hoped to put that \$600 into my Roth IRA. Well, at least it would pay for a chunk of the repair. Maybe.

I wasn't truly anxious, though, because I trust my car-care professional. Everyone should have a mechanic he can trust.

The family doctor, for cars

A guy who goes to the same church I do recommended this mechanic. His place of business reminds me of the auto shop in the town where I grew up: small and cluttered, with car parts on some of the chairs in the tiny waiting area, and not a single naked-lady calendar. It's just him and another employee, a courteous man who encouraged my halting attempts to converse with him in Spanish.

On Wednesday afternoon, the mechanic listened to my description of the problems and suggested I drop the Chevy off the next morning. That's the best part about having a neighborhood place: I can walk back home in three minutes.

A voice-mail message was waiting when I got out of my first class just before lunchtime. "It's going to be almost \$500. Call me and let me know what you want me to do about the brakes."

My first reaction: *\$500? Ha! I was right.*

My second reaction: *Good grief. Almost \$500 for brakes?*

Deal with the squeal

As it turned out, he meant almost \$500 for everything: coolant and brake fluid flushes, new front brake pads, the turning of two rotors, cleaning and adjusting the rear brakes, a little TLC for the hand brake, and new air and gas filters, spark plugs and wires. (The factory-installed plugs and wires were still in use.) With labor and tax, it came to \$492.99.

Lest some of you write in to say how much less you paid for the same service, remember that this is a decent-sized city with higher overhead than your cousin's garage in Anytown, USA. Mechanic prices vary. So do car part prices.

The fact is, I trust the workmanship -- and \$492.99 every so often beats the heck out of 48 monthly car payments. My hope is to drive this seven-year-old vehicle for at least another seven years, preferably longer. My sister kept a car for 16 years; my dad ran a Volkswagen hard for more than two decades, putting two new engines into the valiant little bug. According to an MSN Money article, "Almost any car can be nursed to 200,000 miles without endangering your life, and even a new engine is cheaper than all but the cheapest used cars."

That is, if you can find a mechanic you trust. Another MSN Money article has some search tips, and suggests that you look for a mechanic *before* you need one. Picture yourself standing in the highway median next to your moribund vehicle -- when the tow truck arrives, where will you tell the driver to take you?

That may seem like fairly obvious advice. Then again, you probably know somebody who never got around to choosing a doctor or dentist -- but who, on the day he woke up with a fever or a toothache, sure wished he had.

I still wish I could put the whole rebate check into the Roth. But at least I'm stimulating the local economy.