

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Locking out the repair shops

By Harris Steinberg

Whenever I hear or read about the troubles of the American auto-manufacturing industry these days, I wish there could be some mention of another domestic, auto-related industry that is supporting millions of jobs in spite of its own unique challenges: the automotive aftermarket industry. In layman's terms, that's the auto parts and repair business.

This industry doesn't need a bailout, but it could use help from Congress in fending off a threat to fair competition in the marketplace.

I own and operate a parts store that has been doing business and employing people in Philadelphia since 1922, so I'm a bit of an expert on the industry, its accomplishments, and its struggles.

The aftermarket business is vital to Pennsylvania's economy. It employs almost 75,000 Pennsylvanians repairing and servicing the state's 10.4 million vehicles. That's about 1.3 percent of the state's workforce. Aftermarket sales in Pennsylvania are approximately \$11.5 billion.

The industry is also a major contributor to the broader U.S. economy, with annual sales of about \$267 billion, or 2.4 percent of the gross domestic product, and 4.5 million employees, or about 2.6 percent of the national workforce.

I'm proud of my industry and its contributions. But I'm also worried that, if Congress does not act quickly, it will be stifled by unfair competition from auto manufacturers who have put technological repair locks on the cars they make.

Have you ever gone to a local repair shop for some routine maintenance or a repair and had the mechanic tell you, "Sorry, you'll have to go to your dealership"? If you have, you know what I'm talking about. Manufacturers have basically put a lock on your car and kept the key, forcing you to go to the dealership for much of your maintenance and repairs.

If this has happened to you, you may have thought, "That's not fair. My dealer will charge me twice what the local garage would!" And you would have been right. You will pay more at the dealership, and it's not fair that you can't take your car wherever you want to have the work done - including, if you are handy with a wrench yourself, your own driveway. You own the car, after all.

Like most business owners, I welcome competition, but only if it's fair. Putting a technological lock on someone else's property isn't fair. Congress can end this practice by passing the "Right to Repair Act," which would force auto manufacturers to take the electronic locks off of cars.

With thousands of car dealerships closing all over the country, this issue has escalated to the point that it poses a real risk to consumers. A car owner whose local dealership has closed might have to drive quite a distance for maintenance or repairs. If the vehicle is not running properly, that is downright dangerous.

The Right to Repair Act can restore essential fairness to consumers and small businesses, as well as increased job security to millions of American workers. And wouldn't it be nice to hear some good news about cars in America?

For more information on the proposed legislation, see www.righttorepair.org.