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# Detroit Auto Scene

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## Big 3 Say March Best Sales Month in Years

By DEE-ANN DURBIN  
AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) - The recovery in the American auto industry has moved into the fast lane.

With gas prices at nearly \$4, smaller cars like the Ford Focus, Nissan Versa and Fiat 500 flew off dealer lots in March and gave U.S. car makers their best monthly sales in almost five years.

Larger vehicles sold well, too, offering more evidence of growing confidence in the economic recovery. Small businesses, farmers and others took advantage of big promotions to buy pickups.

In all, Americans bought 1.4

million cars and trucks in March, up 13 percent from the same month a year ago. Edmunds.com said was the most vehicles sold since August 2007.

General Motors, Chrysler and Toyota all reported double-digit gains over last March. Nissan and Hyundai set company records. Only Honda Motor Co. reported a decline.

If car sales stay at the same rate as March, they would end the year at 14.4 million, up from 12.8 million in 2011. While that's still below the 17 million of the booming mid-2000s, it's far higher than the industry's downturn in 2009, when 10.6 million vehicles were sold.

Jesse Toprak, vice president of industry analysis at car buying site TrueCar.com, expects continued strong sales this year, thanks to compelling new products, improvements in consumer confidence and the stock market and low interest rates.

"The good news is that the recovery has legs," he said. He expects total sales of 14.5 million in 2012.

That would be a faster pace than many were predicting at the start of the year, and it builds on a strong performance in January and February. As recently as October, J.D. Power and Associates lowered its 2012 forecast from 14.1 million vehicles to 13.8 million because of high gas prices and continuing economic uncertainty.

The auto sector's recovery is helping the entire economy.

"Auto is important because it creates so many other jobs," said Sung Won Sohn, an

economics professor at California State University. "Think about the things that go into an auto: glass, textiles, rubber. There's a lot of financing activity. We are talking about a very significant portion of job creation."

Sohn said a lot of pent-up demand remains in the U.S., from people who couldn't afford cars during the recession to those who waited for Japanese inventories to improve after last March's earthquake.

The average age of a vehicle on U.S. roads has reached 10.8 years, and many need to be replaced. GM's U.S. sales chief, Don Johnson, says pent-up demand will continue to fuel sales well into next year.

Sohn says high gas prices are actually helping persuade people to trade in older, less-efficient vehicles.

Alan J. Ward, a Chicago psychologist, felt forced to buy a new car because of the cost to repair his older BMW and fill it with gas.

Just last week, Ward was shopping for a Volkswagen Passat that uses regular unleaded, which is generally 10 cents to 15 cents cheaper per gallon than the higher-grade fuel he's been using. And he's thinking about retirement.

"For those who will be moving toward a fixed income, you don't want to get stuck," Ward said. "The price of gas keeps going up and your income is static."

High car prices don't seem to be holding buyers back. TrueCar said the average vehicle price reached a new record of \$30,748 in March, around \$2,000 more than the same month last year. Even

though drivers are switching to smaller cars, they're appointing them with expensive luxuries such as leather seats and navigation systems, Toprak said.

Smaller cars were the stars last week as the automakers reported their March sales totals.

GM said its total U.S. sales rose 12 percent, but car sales were up a combined 62 percent because of new models including the Chevrolet Sonic subcompact and Buick Verano compact. Sales of the Chevrolet Cruze were up 20 percent. Small SUVs like the Chevrolet Equinox also did well.

Chrysler Group's sales jumped 34 percent. One standout was the Fiat 500, with sales of 3,712 vehicles, compared with just 500 last March, when the subcompact was first on the market. Sales of Chrysler's 200 and 300 sedans each doubled over last March. Both cars have recently been revamped and have better fuel economy than previous models.

Ford Motor Co. reported its best March since 2007. Sales were up 5 percent as demand for the Focus small car rose 65 percent. But that came at a price. Sales of the Fiesta subcompact fell 34 percent as buyers flocked to the newer and bigger Focus.

Among larger vehicles, sales of Ford's F-Series pickup - the best-selling vehicle in the U.S. - were up 9 percent. Sales of Chrysler's Ram brand rose 18 percent, indicating home building might be up.

Further, small SUVs like the Jeep Grand Cherokee saw big gains too.

## '14 Impala Called 'A Design Leader'

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Perry, vice president, global Chevrolet marketing.

"With the striking new design and the right mix of comfort, technology and efficiency, we have recaptured the magic that attracted millions of consumers to the Impala nameplate for decades."

Designed on an award-winning global platform, the 2014 Impala introduces new levels of comfort, refinement and technology.

Highlights include:

- All-new exterior design that represents the next evolution of Chevrolet's design vocabulary. It features a sleek proportion, sculpted body sides, standard 18-inch wheels and projector-beam headlamps, with HID head-

lamps and LED daytime running lamps standard on LTZ models.

- A range of three direct-injected engines, including a 3.6L V6, new 2.5L four-cylinder and a 2.4L four-cylinder with eAssist, that deliver enhanced performance and efficiency.

- All-new interior with flowing design and integrated center stack that incorporates an available eight-inch touch screen display with available Chevrolet MyLink.

- Chevrolet MyLink, which includes Bluetooth audio streaming and available navigation among many other features, is controlled via a touch screen on the eight-inch display.

- Quieter environment with a greater emphasis on com-

fort - including active noise cancellation with four-cylinder powertrains.

- 360 degrees of active safety features with 10 standard air bags and OnStar, along with available features including full-speed-range adaptive cruise control, collision mitigation braking, forward collision alert, lane departure warning, side blind zone alert, rear cross traffic alert, rear camera and rear-park assist.

The 2014 Impala brings a new aesthetic to Impala that honors the cues that have helped distinguish the classic nameplate for decades.

"Our design team was challenged to create a new classic, but that didn't mean relying on nostalgia," said John Cafaro, director of North America passenger car exterior design.

"This is very much a contemporary car, with design elements, craftsmanship and attention to detail that complement its advanced technology and performance."

The Impala's long, low proportion has a wind-swept profile that suggests motion, while the range of 18-, 19- and 20-inch wheels is tailored to the body to provide that "just right" stance.

At the front, low-profile projector-beam headlamps - or HID headlamps and LED daytime running lamps on LTZ - sweep around the corners and frame a wide grille, while a power dome hood conveys performance.

The LTZ's LED daytime running lamps provide a contemporary visual statement, along with function.

The 2014 Impala will be offered in LS, LT and LTZ levels, and will be built at GM's Detroit-Hamtramck plant.

## Ex-GM Exec Speaks at U-M Event

ANN ARBOR - Former GM Vice President of R&D and current University of Michigan engineering professor Larry Burns will deliver the keynote address at U-M's Robotics Day activity April 9 on U-M's North Campus.

Burns' speech is entitled "Reinventing the Automobile" and begins at 3:30 p.m.

Other speakers include U.S. Sen. Carl Levin and TARDEC

chief scientist for Robotics, Dr. Jim Overholt.

Michigan Robotics Day is being celebrated in Ann Arbor on Monday. Automation Alley and the National Center for Manufacturing Sciences are co-hosting along with the University of Michigan.

The University of Michigan's North Campus Research Complex is located at 2800 Plymouth Rd., Bldg. 18.

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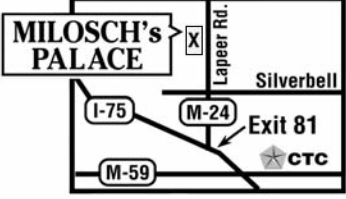
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