



The Detroit News

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A B C D E F G

Metro Edition

Feds, Big 3 gird for roof fight

Automakers oppose stiffer NHTSA plan, say existing roof-crush rules are adequate.

By Jeff Plungis and Bill Vlasic
The Detroit News
Part 3 of 3

WASHINGTON — After years of debate and thousands of lives lost, a showdown is looming over the U.S. government's safety standard for vehicle roofs.

While Detroit's Big Three

automakers staunchly oppose new regulations — contending crushed roofs don't cause deaths and injuries — the nation's top auto-safety official says it's time to act.

"We have to tackle this problem," Dr. Jeffrey Runge, head of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, told The Detroit News. "That's not me

being hysterical. That's me looking at the data."

With an increasing number of drivers buying rollover-prone SUVs and pickups, an estimated 7,000 people are killed or seriously injured each year when the roofs of their vehicles collapse in rollover accidents, according to NHTSA.

For automakers, much is riding on the outcome. New regulations could mean substantial investments in stronger roof structures.

DANGER OVERHEAD: CRUSHED ROOFS

Unlikely activists

Quadriplegic, wife lead campaign to change standards. **Page 9A**

Simple solutions

What it would take to build stronger roofs. **Page 9A**

And any admission that roofs have been substandard could lead to more product-liability lawsuits.

Updating Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard 216 has been on the government's agenda since the regulation was adopted 33 years

ago as a "temporary" measure.

Yet NHTSA's critics say that rule 216 is a telling example of the agency's inability to stand up to the powerful auto industry.

Please see ROOFS, Page 8A

The Detroit News EXCLUSIVE REPORT

SUNDAY: A Detroit News examination found that automakers have fought to preserve a 33-year-old federal safety standard for roof strength despite critics who say the law is inadequate at saving lives.

MONDAY: Clyde "Ray" Noyes was killed when a split-second traffic maneuver led to a rollover accident. His death

is an example of how even seat-belted motorists can die when their vehicle roof crushes around them.

TODAY: Federal regulators plan to propose stiffer roof standards later this year, setting up a battle in Washington among automakers, safety advocates and political officials.

Detroit faces layoff of 377

Kilpatrick plan to fill \$333M budget gap hits bus system hardest.

By Natalie Y. Moore, Doug Guthrie and Ron French
The Detroit News

DETROIT — Facing \$333 million in red ink, Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick proposed a budget Monday in which city workers would shoulder the pain rather than Detroit residents.

His budget would slash 640 jobs, including laying off 377 workers, and take an ax to the city's out-of-control overtime pay. Hit the hardest would be the city's bus service, where one-third of the maintenance department would receive pink slips.

There would be no layoffs among the city's police and firefighters, and no city services would be cut. City finance officers called it a pain-free budget cut.

In his annual budget address to the Detroit City Council on Monday, the mayor said layoffs and hiring freezes are necessary to balance the 2004-05 budget. His proposal now goes to the City Council, which can make changes before it approves a budget by July 1.

"We have had to make some hard choices in the process. But we have done so with a goal of making government more efficient and more effective," Kilpatrick said.

The financial grimness stems from a \$69 million deficit from 2002-03 and a \$264 million shortfall for next year.

To balance the books, Kilpatrick wants to eliminate 263 vacant positions and lay off 377 employees. The elimination of those jobs, plus the movement of 357 jobs of the Housing Commission from the city budget, would decrease Detroit's 19,702 city employees by 5 percent.

Please see LAYOFFS, Page 2A

Kids line up for full-day kindergarten



Photos by David Coates / The Detroit News

Kindergarten pupils say the Pledge of Allegiance at Walsh Elementary in Sterling Heights, where full-day kindergarten will start in the fall.

Schools, parents latch on to longer day for learning

By Mike Wowk
The Detroit News

FARMINGTON — Working mom Melinda Little says both she and her 6-year-old daughter, Camille, are ready for full-day kindergarten, but their neighborhood public school doesn't offer it.

Instead, Little shells out about \$3,000 a year for child care after Camille's half-day kindergarten class at Wood Creek school in Farmington.

"It's a good program, and I like it," said Little, a kindergarten teacher. "But \$3,000 is still a lot of money. As a working parent, I need an all-day program. And Camille has been in day care since she was 6 or 8 months old, so she's ready for a full-day school."

Though not yet at Wood Creek, relief may be on the way. Farmington is among a number of Metro Detroit dis-



Amanda Sutton, with dad, Warren, attends kindergarten at William Grace in Farmington, one of the few Metro schools that offer a full-day program.

tricts that are testing all-day kindergarten in some schools as more parents seek alterna-

tives to fee-based, half-day child care.

The popularity has its

price: Schools that offer all-day programs find they fill up fast.

Districts are not required to provide all-day programs, and they receive no extra money from the state for doing so. Those that do, however, say full-day kindergarten has its benefits, such as boosting enrollment in under-used buildings and better preparing children academically.

Since 1970, the number of children nationwide who attend full-day kindergarten has jumped from one in 10 to six in 10, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

The trend is evident locally, with some districts, such as Warren's Van Dyke, Lakeview in St. Clair Shores and Farmington, offering it as pilot programs in some buildings.

Please see FULL DAY, Page 2A

Rebels kidnap 9 more from U.S.

2 soldiers, 7 civilians, attacked in convoy, join growing ranks of kidnapped foreigners.

Associated Press

BAGHDAD, Iraq — Two U.S. troops and seven American contractors remain missing today following an attack on a convoy west of Baghdad, a U.S. commander said.

Also today, a Russian energy company said eight of its employees who were kidnapped have been freed.

More than 40 foreigners from at least 12 countries — including a Mississippi man whose fate was unclear — have reportedly been kidnapped in recent days by insurgents.

■ Today, four Italians working as private guards for DTS Security, a U.S. company, were reported missing in Iraq, the ANSA news agency reported. An Arab satellite TV network said the four were kidnapped by insurgents near Fallujah and showed video of them in a room surrounded by gunmen wearing Arab headscarves.

■ There was no word on three Japanese civilians abducted last week. A deadline set by their captors for Japan to withdraw from Iraq passed with no word on their fate.

■ Seven Chinese abducted by gunmen in the northern city of Fallujah were released Monday after a day in captivity.

■ A member of the U.S.-appointed Governing Council, Mohsen Abdul-Hamid, said at least 12 foreign hostages have been released, but he did not identify their nationalities.



Associated Press

Chrissy Herring's husband, Stephen, arrives in Houston after quitting his job in Iraq. More than 40 foreigners have been kidnapped by insurgents.

Security problems

U.S. commanders seek help from Saddam's army. **Page 4A**

Popular cleric

Many in Iraq baffled by U.S. target on al-Sadr. **Page 4A**

Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez said the two American troops and seven employees of U.S. contractor Kellogg, Brown & Root were missing after the convoy ambush Friday.

Today, a 2,500-strong U.S. force, backed by tanks and artillery, pushed to the outskirts of the Shiite holy city of Najaf for a showdown with radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

WEDNESDAY'S WEATHER

High 55
Low 37
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As America ages, vision loss to surge

More than 28 million people over 40 have serious eye ailments that put them at risk.

By Lindsey Tanner
Associated Press

CHICAGO — More than 28 million Americans over age 40 have eye ailments that put them at risk for vision loss and blindness, researchers say, warning that the numbers will surge as

the population ages.

Cataracts are the leading cause of blindness worldwide and the No. 1 cause of poor vision in the United States, affecting an estimated 20.5 million American adults. That number is expected to climb to 30.1

million in the next 20 years, researchers say.

Other major causes of blindness and vision loss are macular degeneration, glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy. All are strongly linked with aging.

The figures published Monday in April's Archives of Ophthalmology present the most accurate estimates to date on the prevalence of major causes

of blindness and visual impairment in the United States, according to Dr. Frederick Ferris III of the National Eye Institute, which helped pay for the research.

One million Americans over 40 are blind. An additional 3.3 million suffer from some vision loss, a number projected to reach 5.5 million by 2020.

The numbers are of concern

not just because of their magnitude, but also "because of the substantial increases in health care costs they spell," said Dr. Nathan Congdon, a coordinator of the research and an associate professor of ophthalmology at Johns Hopkins.

More than \$3 billion yearly is spent on cataract treatment, which usually involves surgery, Congdon said.

Differing views

“We have to tackle this problem. That’s not me being hysterical. That’s me looking at the data.”

JEFFREY RUNGE
 NHTSA administrator

Research indicates occupant safety “is not likely to be enhanced as a result of additional roof crush requirements. The scientific research instead suggests that FMVSS 216 appears adequate and sufficient in scope and applicability as it is written.”

MATTHEW REYNOLDS
 DaimlerChrysler safety executive
 In the company’s official comments to NHTSA in 2001

“These are the most preventable injuries in auto crashes. The cardinal principle of occupant protection is the integrity of the passenger compartment.”

JOAN CLAYBROOK
 Former NHTSA administrator
 and now president of Washington watchdog group Public Citizen

“You may be better off with a strong roof. But they don’t know what a strong roof is, and they don’t know how to design the test. They don’t know how much better a strong roof will do in a rollover.”

REP. JOHN DINGELL
 U.S. House of Representatives
 D-DeARBORN

“We the undersigned believe that it is time for our government to step in and protect consumers from large corporations, namely the auto manufacturers, from producing, marketing and selling unsafe vehicles to unaware consumers.”

DENA AND PATRICK PARKER
 In a petition to federal regulators

“Automakers have cheap technology at their fingertips to do it. The amount of material that would need to be added to the roof pillars is really a small percentage of the vehicle’s overall costs. Rollover is really a simple fix.”

RAPHAEL GRZEBIETA
 President of the Australasian
 College of Road Safety



Michael Piuze, John Hess’ lawyer, next to the F-150 that crushed Hess in 1987 when the vehicle rolled and the roof caved in.

ROOFS

Continued from Page 1A

For years, NHTSA has struggled to push through new or updated safety regulations in the face of political opposition and the powerful auto-industry lobby.

It took the nationwide Firestone tire controversy before the agency finally moved to rewrite its three-decade old federal tire standard in 2000.

“The agency not only simmers for years, it simmers for decades, and nothing happens,” said Gerald Donaldson, senior research director of the Washington-based Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety.

Although an official public-comment period on rule 216 has dragged on for 28 months, NHTSA says it is firmly committed to proposing a new roof strength standard this year.

“When rollovers do occur, they’re very dangerous and very lethal,” Runge said. “Intuitively, you know if you have a stronger roof structure, you’re better protected.”

Congress will play a major role in shaping any new regulation. The Senate has already passed a bill that calls for tougher roof-crush rules. The House and the Bush administration, however, have signaled that they oppose the Senate’s plan.

Auto-safety advocates are also clamoring for their voice to be heard on rule 216.

In a key closed-door session on March 22, three of the most influential auto industry watchdogs met privately with Runge to discuss roof strength.

Ex-General Motors Corp. engineer Don Friedman — accompanied by Joan Claybrook, president of Public Citizen, and Clarence Ditlow, Center for Auto Safety executive director — showed Runge a dynamic rollover test that may evaluate a vehicle’s performance in real-life rollover conditions.

Friedman and Claybrook also briefed the staff of Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., as well as staffers for the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

“This has become a much bigger problem with the SUV,” Ditlow said. “By the time they became popular in the 1990s, every engineer in America knew we had a problem.”

Pressure builds

But with a long list of traffic-safety issues on NHTSA’s agenda, where does a new roof standard rate?

Safety advocates like Claybrook, who headed NHTSA from 1977 to 1980, say roof-crush is a critical problem that has to become a priority.

“These are the most preventable injuries in auto crashes,” said Claybrook. “The cardinal principle of occupant protection is the integrity of the passenger compartment.”

Victims of rollover accidents

in which the roof collapsed also want their say.

John Hess is one of them. On Dec. 25, 1987 — Christmas Day — Hess was riding in a Ford F-150 pickup on his way to find batteries for his 7-year-old daughter’s new toy.

When the pickup went through an intersection, the truck was hit by a car that ran a red light, according to court records.

Hess’s pickup rolled over. The roof collapsed, crumpling to just inches above his seat.

The roof hit Hess so hard that his lower body broke the seat springs. He was left a paraplegic, and in a subsequent trial a California jury awarded him \$12.5 million.

Hess, from his home in Castaic, Calif., follows the debate over roof crush in Washington. The government makes its point, Hess said, and the auto industry has its say.

But what about the victims? “It seems like people like me have nothing to say about all of this,” Hess said. “It seems like the people who have had to pay the consequences should have a lot more to say about it.”

Window of opportunity

The next stage of debate will begin later this year when NHTSA proposes a new test for roof strength.

The agency is in the midst of a major study to determine the relationship between crushed roofs and highway deaths and catastrophic injuries. In addition, the National Crash Analysis Center at George Washington University also is digging into years of rollover accident data, to determine the impact of collapsing roofs.

The existing 216 test was devised decades before rollover-prone SUVs ruled the road. The test consists of gradually applying a force of 1.5 times the vehicle’s weight to a steel plate on one side of the roof.

But the big question is, how much further a new test should go?

Safety advocates say the current test does not replicate the forces a car or truck experiences in a rollover. The test applies force to one side of the roof. But in the real world, the most damage usually occurs when the trailing side contacts the ground, after the roof structure has been weakened.

And through a loophole, the heaviest SUVs and pickups, those with gross vehicle weights of 6,000 pounds or more, don’t face any government regulation.

NHTSA officials say they most likely will adjust the angles and forces in the current regulation instead of devising a more technically dynamic test. Regulators also expect to require markedly better seat belts as part of a new rule 216.

“This is a critically important issue,” said Dr. Ricardo Martinez, who headed NHTSA from 1994-



Brandy Baker / The Detroit News

The government has its say, John Hess says, and the auto industry has its say. “It seems like people like me have nothing to say about all of this,” says Hess, who was paralyzed when the Ford F-150 he was riding in rolled.



Lisa Nipp / Gannett News Service

While a public comment period on roof strength has now dragged on for 28 months, NHTSA chief Dr. Jeffrey Runge has committed to proposing a new standard this year.

99. “We know the technology is there. We now have SUVs that have become the family station wagon. They are very rollover prone, but they provide very little protection in a rollover crash.”

But auto companies, facing huge potential liabilities in court cases, have pressed NHTSA to do more research before changing rule 216.

The Big Three are united in their opposition to a new roof-strength standard.

Occupant safety “is not likely to be enhanced as a result of additional roof crush requirements,” DaimlerChrysler AG said in a filing with NHTSA in 2001. “The scientific research instead suggests that FMVSS 216 appears adequate and sufficient in scope.”

Congressional showdown

The Senate voted in February to give NHTSA specific directions on roof crush. Its legislation calls for the agency to issue a set of new regulations, including a final “rollover crashworthiness standard.”

The provision calls for NHTSA to consider a roof-strength standard “based on dynamic tests that realistically duplicate the actual forces transmitted to a passenger motor vehicle during an on-roof rollover crash.”

But a new rule 216 could become mired in politics.

At a March 18 hearing, House Energy and Commerce Com-



Consumer advocates like Joan Claybrook, a former NHTSA administrator, are pushing hard to generate support for the Senate bill. A coalition of groups brought crash victims to lobby on Capitol Hill on March 23.

mittee questioned the need to update rule 216. Leading the charge was U.S. Rep. John Dingell, D-DeARBORN, the Big Three’s most influential defender in Congress.

Dingell said nobody has made a compelling case that a congressional mandate is necessary to improve the roof-strength standard.

“You may be better off with a strong roof,” Dingell told The News. “But they don’t know what a strong roof is, and they don’t know how to design the test. They don’t know how much

better a strong roof will do in a rollover.”

Dingell said he may support a new regulation if a public-safety need was demonstrated — and it would not add significant costs to vehicles.

The Bush administration also has weighed in against the Senate plan, primarily if it interferes with the rest of NHTSA’s current auto-safety agenda.

But long-time auto-safety advocates see this year as the prime opportunity to make a change in rule 216.

Claybrook’s Public Citizen

organization brought roof-crush victims to Washington last month to lobby for new legislation. Safety watchdogs see the 216 debate as their best chance in years to pressure NHTSA for tougher regulations.

“You have to light a bonfire under the agency,” said Donaldson of the Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety.

There is reason to be skeptical. Congress called for new standards for occupant protection in rollovers as far back as 1991.

Then, NHTSA studied the issue for three years, focusing on tests to measure vehicle stability in road maneuvers that might lead to rollover.

But, in 1994, U.S. Transportation Secretary Federico Pena brought the project to a halt.

Pena said that a rollover-avoidance test was too technically difficult. Instead, he said that NHTSA would concentrate on how vehicles could withstand rollovers better.

A stronger roof crush test would allow to wait.

“The slower they are,” said David Pittle, senior vice president for technical policy and advocacy at Consumers Union, “the more the risk, the longer the risks are in the marketplace, the more people are injured or killed until those standards are in place and those hazards are reduced.”

Limited NHTSA resources

Now, a decade later, it falls to Runge and his staff to address the strength of vehicle roofs.

NHTSA officials, feeling criticism from safety advocates, say the agency is ready to move.

“If you look at the things we promised, then you’re right, we didn’t put out,” said Stephen Kratzke, NHTSA’s associate administrator for safety performance standards. “It’s fair enough to hold us accountable for that.”

The agency’s small budget and staff have hamstrung its efforts, consumer groups say.

“There’s no doubt these are complicated issues, but it has been far too slow,” said David Pittle, senior vice president for technical policy and advocacy at Consumers Union. “The slower they are, the longer the risks are in the marketplace.”

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Conflicting data muddle debate

By Jeff Plungis and Bill Vlasic
 The Detroit News

WASHINGTON — As it prepares to seek tougher roof-strength standards, the federal government is searching for answers in a sea of divergent research.

Most of the data into the impact of crushing roofs has been generated in the course of high-stakes personal injury lawsuits.

Plaintiffs’ lawyers and safety advocates contend crushing roofs during rollover accidents are deadly. Automakers counter with studies that show no cause-and-effect relationship between collapsing roofs and deaths and injuries.

But little independent analysis is available.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, which plans to propose tougher roof-strength regulations later this year, is working to complete its latest study on the correlation between weak roofs and injuries.

Independent safety groups also are weighing in.

Leonard Santos, executive director of the Santos Foundation, a small nonprofit devoted to auto safety, recently awarded a \$400,000 grant for research on roof strength and rollover injuries to George Washington University’s National Crash Analysis Center in Ashburn, Va.

“We saw a serious problem that wasn’t getting a lot of attention,” Santos said.

Ken Digges, director of the George Washington University roof-crush project, said he is using the money in part to refine a computer model that shows what happens to vehicles and occupants in rollover crashes. The final report summarizing three years of research into roof-crush accidents will be completed this fall.

The research so far shows that roof strength is an important safety factor, but improved seat belts and interior padding are needed as well to mitigate injuries.

“That means you’ve got to do something about roof crush,”

Digges said.

The debate in the United States has international implications. The Australian government has looked at the U.S. roof-strength standard and concluded it was too weak to provide a significant benefit.

George Rechnitzer, an engineer who worked as a senior safety researcher at Australia’s Monash University, first looked at the standard 15 years ago. He said it is tragic that the U.S. debate has dragged on.

“There’s been an obfuscation of the real issue. It’s been a disgrace that these smoke screens have been put up and the real problems have not been seriously dealt with.”

About this series

This three-day series is the result of a three-month investigation by Detroit News reporters Bill Vlasic and Jeff Plungis working together with News photographer Brandy Baker.

Vlasic and Plungis reviewed thousands of pages of court records and government documents and interviewed crash victims, safety experts, attorneys and federal officials.

Series online

For previous installments of this series, animations of various rollover situations, additional data from NHTSA and comments on the Roof Crush Resistance standard, go to detnews.com/specialreports/.

Both Ford Motor Co. and DaimlerChrysler AG declined interview requests. General Motors Corp. agreed to an interview with one of its safety executives.

The News team reported the series in Detroit; Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles and Santa Barbara, Calif.; Lincoln, Neb.; and Corpus Christi and Childress, Texas.



“We need to stop this from happening. These are the standards people live and die by, and it’s just not acceptable.”

DENA PARKER, whose husband was paralyzed in a roof-crush accident

Couple wage Web fight for new roof test

Victim, his wife gather signatures to send to Bush

By Bill Vlasic and Jeff Plungis
The Detroit News

CHILDRESS, Texas — Their home is a speck on the landscape, a little house lost among the vast cattle ranches and cotton fields of the Texas panhandle.

But inside, armed with a personal computer, Dena and Patrick Parker are leading an Internet campaign to change one of the nation’s oldest auto-safety regulations.

They are unlikely activists, a country couple who lived a quiet life until Patrick’s spinal cord was crushed in a 2001 rollover accident that flattened the roof of a Ford F-250 SuperCab pickup.

Now, the Parkers are preparing to petition President Bush, Congress and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to overhaul Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard 216.

Their message is simple. If the government required stronger vehicle roofs, Patrick would not be a quadriplegic today.

“We need to stop this from happening,” Dena said in her soft, southern drawl. “These are the standards people live and die by, and it’s just not acceptable.”

Their online petition has drawn support from Alabama to Alaska, with e-mail responses coming in from as far away as Brazil and Great Britain.

It’s a grass-roots crusade, and a compelling addition to the chorus of auto-safety advocates pushing for a tougher roof-strength law.

With the aid of the Internet, the Parkers are determined to make a difference when NHTSA issues its proposed revisions to rule 216 later this year.

“I wasn’t mad at all at anybody for a long time,” said Patrick, 39. “Then I started reading all this stuff on the Internet.”

What they found were dozens of documents and articles critiquing rule 216 and criticizing Detroit’s Big Three automakers for defending it for decades.

“I typed in Ford and rollover and you could not believe the stuff that was coming on the screen,” Dena said. “I was getting very upset. How can this be allowed to go on?”

Her research led her to thetpetitionsite.com, a Web site billed as “dedicated to giving you a voice to the world.”

Dena added her voice to the site last summer. “We the undersigned,” her petition begins, “believe that it is time for our government to step in and protect consumers from large corporations, namely the auto manufacturers, from producing, marketing and selling unsafe vehicles to unaware consumers.”

At last count, Dena had collected 360 signatures online and 57 in person. When she finishes her cover letter, she plans to send the petition to Bush, NHTSA chief Dr. Jeffrey Runge, and all 535 members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives.

Can a 37-year-old Texas homemaker and her disabled husband make an impact on public policy in Washington, D.C.?

“I want to help get the changes we need,” Dena said. “NHTSA has let us down big-time, and we know it.”

Seat belts don’t help

Nearly 7,000 deaths and severe injuries occur each year in rollovers in which the roofs



Dena and Patrick Parker, on their 30-acre property in Childress, Texas, have drawn support from as far away as Alaska, Brazil and Great Britain in their crusade to change roof regulations. “I want to help get the changes we need,” Dena says. “NHTSA has let us down big-time, and we know it.”

were crushed, according to federal crash statistics.

More than half of the victims were wearing seat belts, just as Patrick Parker was on the morning of Aug. 29, 2001.

He left his home shortly after 5 a.m. and headed south on Highway 287 to a morning meeting in Wichita Falls. A systems technician for the local public utility, he was driving a company-owned, 2001 Ford F-250 SuperCab.

When Patrick crossed the county line about 15 miles down the road, a deer hopped out of the median, directly in front of his pickup.

He tried to avoid it, but a second deer surprised him. It hit the right front fender, and he lost control.

The truck tipped over, and rolled right several times. It came to rest upside down, with Patrick hanging from his lap-and-shoulder belt.

The engine quit, but the radio was still playing.

“I thought, if I’m fixing to die, I don’t want that stupid radio on,” he said. “I was trying to turn the key off but I couldn’t. I didn’t know why.”

His neck was broken, and his spinal cord crushed between two vertebrae. A passing motorist stopped and called police.

Dena Parker was walking out the door on her way to work when the police dispatcher called. As she drove to the hospital, she tried to stay calm.

“I was thinking everything is going to be OK,” she said. “But you don’t know. You’re never prepared for something like this.”

Patrick underwent eight hours of surgery, but the damage had been done. He was paralyzed from the chest down.

Months of rehabilitation haven’t improved his condition. “As hard as he has tried,” Dena said, “he still can’t wriggle a toe.”

Ford settles suit

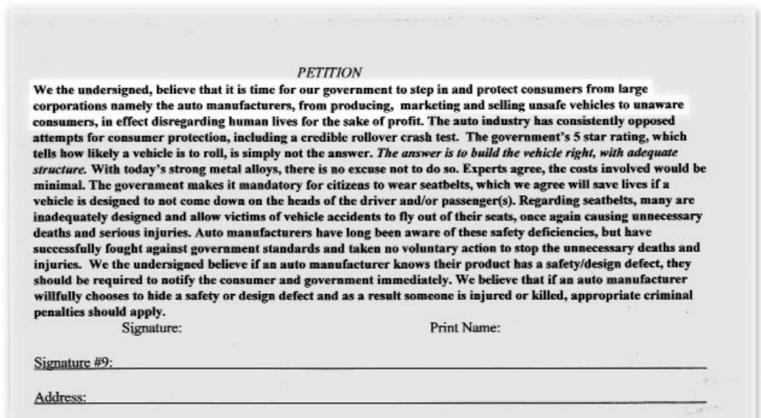
In August 2002, the Parkers sued Ford Motor Co. in U.S. District Court for “designing, manufacturing, distributing and promoting a vehicle that was known to be prone to roof crush in a rollover accident.”

Last Dec. 10, on the eve of their trial date, Ford made a settlement offer. The Parkers accepted, on Ford’s condition that they keep the monetary amount confidential.



Patrick Parker’s spinal cord was crushed in a 2001 rollover accident that flattened the roof of his company-owned Ford F-250 SuperCab pickup.

Photos by Brandy Baker / The Detroit News



Patrick and Dena Parker have collected signatures in person and online at petitionsite.com, which will go to President Bush, NHTSA and Congress.



Dena Parker helps her husband, Patrick, ride an electrical stimulation bike. Their lives revolve around exercise and trips to the doctor.

But settling the lawsuit hardly satisfied Dena and Patrick.

“They expect it to be over with, but it’s not over with,” Dena said. “In order to make it right, they have to quit making vehicles this way.”

Patrick, once an avid hunter and outdoorsman, now makes his way around their 30-acre spread in a motorized wheelchair with oversized tires.

He tries his best to keep a positive attitude, but sometimes the grief pours out.

“One day, my wife was out there doing things, getting ready for the storm,” he said as he looked out the back door. “I just started bawling. She’s doing stuff, and I can’t help her.”

On a blustery March morning, Dena set out to feed their two dogs, seven cats and the three horses kept in a metal corral that Patrick welded himself.

“Patrick put in a 3,000-foot-long water line,” Dena said. “He put in a gas line. He could do anything.”

Parked nearby was their Ford F-250 pickup, with a horse trailer attached. They’ve wanted to sell it since Patrick was injured in his company’s truck almost three years ago.

“We’d just as soon not have it,” Dena said. “But if we go out and get a Chevy or Dodge, who’s to say it’s going to be any better?”

Instead, they bought a thick, steel rollbar and had it installed in the pickup’s cab. Why, Patrick asks, can’t every, heavy-duty work truck have one?

“It’s a problem if they add 50 pounds more weight to the vehicle?” he said. “Good grief, it’s a three-quarter-ton pickup. That’s like adding a 5-gallon water can.”

Their lives revolve around Patrick’s paralysis — exercise in the mornings, 200-mile round trips to his doctor, longer trips to see a spinal-cord specialist in St. Louis, Mo.

But in the evenings, Dena is at the computer, with Patrick at her side, composing her letter to Washington.

She wants it to be perfect, for her voice to be heard.

“I don’t really care how they do it,” Dena said. “They can test these vehicles without the windshield and on both sides at three times their own weight, and the force is going to be applied at a 45-degree angle.”

Maybe, she said, that would have saved Patrick.

“That’ll give somebody a chance to walk away,” she said. “But when you’re building vehicles like this, you’re not giving them a chance.”

You can reach Bill Vlasic at (313) 222-2082 or bvlasic@detnews.com.

Engineers have options for making better roofs

Structural foam, high-strength steel would absorb impact, create ‘simple fix,’ some say.

By Jeff Plungis and Bill Vlasic
The Detroit News

WASHINGTON — Building stronger vehicle roofs is relatively simple by auto industry standards, and the technology to do it has been available for decades, engineers say.

“Strengthening roof pillars to sustain a rollover is a trivial structural engineering exercise,” said Raphael Grzebieta, president of the Australasian College of Road Safety, an organization of automotive researchers based in Australia.

Some examples are already on the road today.

Ford Motor Co.-owned Volvo of Sweden, for example, employs a high-strength, boron-steel alloy to reinforce the roof structure of its Volvo XC90 SUV.

The alloy is light and strong, but more expensive than conventional steel.

But there are also inexpensive options.

Engineers say the U.S. auto industry could greater utilize technologies such as structural foam, used extensively in the production of aircraft, and high-strength steel. Foam is cheap and easy to work with. The material stiffens and ensures that hollow steel beams don’t bend or lose their structural integrity. It also absorbs energy during a crash.

“Automakers have cheap technology at their fingertips to do it,” said Grzebieta, an engineer with Monash Uni-

versity in Australia. “The amount of material that would need to be added to the roof pillars is really a small percentage of the vehicle’s overall costs. Rollover is really a simple fix.”

In addition to high-strength steel and structural foam, engineers say, automakers have several other options, such as:

- Roll bars integrated into a vehicle’s roof structure. In a report released last year called “Building a Better SUV,” the Union of Concerned Scientists and the Center for Auto Safety estimated a roll cage could be incorporated into a passenger car roof structure for about \$50 and would add 15 pounds of weight.

- Stronger roof pillars. One way to strengthen the roof structure is to add steel tubes inside the A pillar, which frames the windshield. Automakers also can change the shape of roof pillars to add strength.

- Better roof design. The XC90 has rounded corners on its roof. That means it is less likely to hit the ground hard during a rollover. A vehicle with square corners, like the Hummer, is likely to catch the ground harder and absorb a greater impact.

“If you tell an automotive engineer to make a roof 10 times stronger, he will be able to do it,” said Carl Nash, a former NHTSA official now working on roof-crush lawsuits.

“But you just need something strong enough to keep its basic strength in a rollover. To do that, you need something more like 1/2 or two times the (current) strength.”

Other kinds of safety technology might emerge once the NHTSA develops a more

Automaker options

Here are some ways automakers could bolster vehicle roof strength:

- High-strength steel. Alloys can add strength without weight, but tend to be costlier.
- Structural foam. Cheap and well-known, keeps beams from bending.
- Reinforced pillars. Makes them stronger during a crash.
- Roll bars. Can be blended into a roof structure, keeping them invisible to passengers.

Sources: Center for Auto Safety, Union of Concerned Scientists, Monash University

sophisticated regime of testing — one that would measure how crash test dummies are injured in simulated rollovers.

That sort of crash test is known as a dynamic test. NHTSA does dynamic crash tests for other common types of crashes, like frontal and side-impact crashes.

Agency officials say that is a long-term project when it comes to rollovers. NHTSA administrator Dr. Jeffrey Runge told lawmakers on Capitol Hill that the agency did not know of any dynamic tests that could meet a basic legal requirement — repeatability.

But researchers are working on them. At least three devices have been developed that claim to be dynamic and repeatable:

- Ford’s Controlled Rollover Impact System. The CRIS device consists of a truck trailer equipped with a scaffolding that holds a car or truck. The scaffolding is able to rotate the test vehicle at a predetermined rate while the tractor-trailer moves forward. The suspended vehicle is then

- dropped on a test track.
- Don Friedman, a former GM engineer who now consults on safety issues for plaintiffs’ attorneys, advocates a system by A. Jordan & Co., a California testing firm. It uses a giant rotisserie-like device to rotate a vehicle cab, while on the surface below, a steel structure is moved to impact the roof like the ground would in a rollover crash.

- Australian researchers at Monash University, trying to address concerns about rollover deaths in the Australian army, proposed using a system that combined elements of a drop test and the CRIS truck. A vehicle is suspended from a crane on the back of a truck traveling at 30 mph.

While the NHTSA hopes to update rule 216, Runge cautions that improving roof strength alone will help in a fraction of rollover crashes.

That’s why the agency is looking at new kinds of seat belts, technologies like side air bags and electronic stability control, along with a new roof-strength test.

“One single countermeasure isn’t going to solve this problem,” Runge said. “We have to look at the vehicle as a system.”

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