

# U.S. Auto Scene

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## Auto Affordability Flat

DALLAS - The purchase and financing of an average-priced new vehicle took 23.2 weeks of median family income in the first quarter of 2011, unchanged from its 4th quarter, 2010 level, according to one new study.

Comerica Bank said that consumers on average spent \$400 more on new cars in the first quarter. The average rates on car loans during the quarter increased to 4.7 per-

cent, the highest such average since the first quarter of 2009.

This report incorporates the latest data on consumer spending on light vehicles and on the terms available on auto loans. The full history of the index is available from Comerica Bank by request.

Formerly headquartered in Detroit, Comerica Bank is now headquartered in Dallas and issues monthly reports.

## 50 Years Later, Corvette and NASA had Right Stuff

by Gerald Scott  
Editor  
U.S. Auto Scene

At the dawn of the Space Race, Corvettes and NASA astronauts went together like peanut butter and jelly.

Not only did NASA's original astronauts have the proverbial right stuff — so, too, did the Chevrolet Corvettes from the early era of the space program.

May 5 marked the 50th anniversary of America's first man in space — Alan Shepard launched into space 50 years ago this month, May 5, 1961, inside a Mercury capsule and became a national hero.

On May 7, NASA and Cocoa Beach held a 50th anniversary parade in which Original Seven astronaut Scott Carpenter rode in a vintage Corvette, as did relatives of Shepard.

At that Cocoa Beach parade, approximately 30 of America's surviving astronauts gathered to commemorate five decades of manned space flight.

"Each astronaut will ride in a Corvette from the generation current at the time of their mission," parade coordinator John T.R. Dillon III said before the event.

Dillon, a Safety Engineer at the Kennedy Space Center, is also a Corvette owner and member of the Cape Kennedy Corvette Club, which counted four astronauts among its original membership when it was founded in 1967.

"All of the astronauts were test pilots back then; they flew performance aircraft and they moved into performance cars with a well-honed appreciation for handling, acceleration and so forth," Dillon added.

Meanwhile, the NASA astronauts became as famous for driving Corvettes in the 1960s as they were for space flight.

Shepard, for example, brought along his 1957 Corvette when he reported for Space Program training in April, 1959, and he would own at least 10 Corvettes in his life-

time.

His enthusiasm for sports cars was shared by several of the other adventurous and dedicated young men who would train with him to become America's first astronauts.

Shortly after Shepard's historic flight, then GM executive Edward N. Cole presented the astronaut with a new, white, 1962 Corvette in a ceremony outside the Design Dome at the GM Tech Center in Warren.

The Shepard car had been outfitted by GM designers with a customized "space-age" interior.

As GM did not routinely give away cars, the Corvette-astronaut connection might have become totally coincidental in the years that followed, had not Florida Chevrolet dealer Jim Rathmann intervened.

After winning the 1960 Indy 500 race as a professional driver, Rathmann opened a Chevrolet-Cadillac dealership in Melbourne, Fla., near the Space Center, in 1961.

Sensing that most of the astronauts were heart "Corvette types," Rathmann negotiated a special lease arrangement with Chevrolet to put them into the sports cars.

Six of the Mercury astronauts would take Rathmann up on the Corvette offer. Stalwart family man John Glenn opted for a new Chevrolet station wagon instead. Glenn's wagon proved to be just the thing for those occasions when the seven astronauts needed to travel together.

During an interview in 1998, Rathmann said, "Shepard was a racer... he was always wanting to be the fastest guy."

The NASA-Corvette connection might've been forgotten as a curiosity of the Space Race era, if not for the 1979 book and subsequent movie entitled "The Right Stuff," written by journalist Tom Wolfe.

Wrote Wolfe, "Eventually Gus (Grissom) and Gordo (Gordon Cooper) had Corvettes like

## Former GM Exec Replaces Bobb as DPS Manager

By COREY WILLIAMS  
Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — Gov. Rick Snyder appointed a former General Motors Corp. executive to take over the daunting job of emergency manager for Detroit Public Schools, tasking him with turning around a district that has battled financial problems and declining enrollment for more than a decade.

Roy Roberts, 72, will take over for Robert Bobb, who was named the school district's emergency financial manager by former Democratic Gov. Jennifer Granholm in 2009. Bobb's contract expired in March, but Snyder extended it through June.

"The number one priority is providing the children of the Detroit Public Schools with a quality education, and for that to happen the school district must be financially sound," Snyder said.

"Roy Roberts' problem solving skills, expertise and strong management and leadership skills will be of tremendous benefit to the students, teachers, administrators and families of the Detroit Public Schools."

Roberts will have broader powers granted through a recent state law, including the ability to toss out union contracts as part of cost-cutting efforts. His contract is for one

year and pays him \$250,000.

"This is a mission for me. This is something I want to do," Roberts said after being introduced at a news conference.

Bobb has closed dozens of schools, reworked vendor contracts and instituted other cost-cutting measures but has been unable to erase a massive budget deficit that now stands at more than \$300 million. Detroit has lost about 100,000 students since 1997, when enrollment stood at 175,168.

In a statement, Bobb said Roberts is a strong choice for the job.

"His position as an icon in the African American community and in the City of Detroit will be of huge benefit to DPS and also a role model for DPS students," Bobb said.

Roberts currently is managing director and co-founding member of the private equity investment firm Reliant Equity Investors. He retired from GM in 2000.

Earlier this month, the Detroit Institute of Arts announced that it is naming a gallery of contemporary African-American art after Roberts and his wife Maureen, who made a large donation to the museum. They are longtime philanthropists in the areas of the arts, culture and education.

Roberts' track record in the

city also factored into his selection, Snyder said.

Even following Roberts' retirement from GM, he was very active in the community and a recognizable figure around the greater auto industry. He's known as a man of action and integrity.

"Robert Bobb did a lot of good things," the governor said. "I wanted to find someone with strong Detroit connections."

Roberts said he would be calling on community members and leaders, including church pastors, "to get behind this."

"I think this community is tired of all the negative things going on," Roberts said. "They're tired of their kids failing."

Detroit students have scored poorly in recent years on standardized state and national tests.

The district's graduation rate is increasing but still is considered among the poorest in the country at 62 percent.

Working with people is one of Roberts' strengths, said Bill Pelfrey, a former GM executive who wrote speeches for Roberts.

"He certainly has the political skills in the sense he can get along with people," Pelfrey said recently.

Pelfrey said the two have

known each other since early in Roberts' career when he was promoted to plant manager.

"Management recognized this was a guy with very different skills, especially his people skills," Pelfrey said.

Roberts said his first official day on the new job will be May 15.

During the transition period, he will meet with Bobb but has no plans to halt the current wave of school closures and wants to look at the district's finances before seeking contract concessions from teachers and other employees.

Concern over layoffs "is always there until it's brought to closure," Detroit Federation of Teachers president Keith Johnson said following Snyder's announcement.

"As I have done for the past two years with Robert Bobb, we don't just say 'no' to something that we find to be unacceptable. We develop alternatives."

Roberts said he will seek out the best academic person and financial person to work with him.

"We're losing kids every day and we're losing money every day," he said. "Whatever we have to do, we're not going to do it slow."

Associated Press writer Tim Martin in Lansing, Mich., contributed to this report.



One of the Original Seven NASA astronauts, Scott Carpenter, participated in a big parade in downtown Cocoa Beach celebrating the 50th anniversary of America's first manned space launch.

Alan Shepard; Wally (Schirra) moved from an Austin-Healy to a Maserati; and Scott Carpenter got a Shelby-Cobra, a true racing vehicle.

"Shepard was continually coming by Rathmann's dealership to have his gear ratios changed. Gus wanted flared fenders and mag wheels.

"The fever gripped them all, but Gus and Gordo especially," Wolfe added.

Thus the defining book and movie from the early days of the Space Race helped reinforce the marketing notion that space cowboys drove Corvettes.

In their Florida training days, the two-lane blacktop duels between Shepard and Grissom

in their big block-powered Corvettes would truly become the stuff of legend. In his quest for a competitive edge, Grissom had his last Corvette, a 1967 convertible, specially geared and modified to accept extra-wide racing tires, too.

Photos of various astronauts and their Corvettes eventually found their way into LIFE magazine of that era.

"In the 1960s, astronauts were America's heroes that every child idolized and every adult respected," said Corvette historian and former *Corvette Quarterly* editor Jerry Burton.

"That so many of them drove Corvettes really helped establish Corvette as America's sports car."

## Mopar Develops New Line of Grilles for 300 Sedan

AUBURN HILLS — Standing out from the luxury crowd with a notable presence just got easier for owners of the all-new 2011 Chrysler 300. Mopar, Chrysler Group's service, parts and customer-care brand, will offer eight new custom grilles and six new wheel designs for Chrysler's flagship sedan.

"Mopar is offering a full menu of grilles and wheels for those looking to customize and personalize their all-new Chrysler 300," said Pietro Gorlier, President and CEO of Mopar, Chrysler Group LLC.

"By itself, the Chrysler 300 makes a statement. Our grilles and wheels provide exclamation points. And unlike other aftermarket offerings, our grilles are specifically tested for aero, cooling and thermal, and our wheels are specifically designed and tested for durability and impact."

Each grille is designed by Chrysler and provides an exact factory fit and finish. The selection includes a 13-bar grille and a diamond-pattern grille, both constructed of billet aluminum. Both grilles are chrome-plated and polished



The thrill of the grille. Pietro Gorlier, President and CEO of Mopar, Chrysler Group's service, parts and customer-care brand. Mopar will offer 8 customized grilles for the Chrysler 300.

to a high luster.

The 13-bar grille features narrow horizontal, 5mm blades patterned within the traditional Chrysler 300 grille shape that first defined the model more than 55 years ago. The diamond-pattern grille features 154 individual diamond shapes and has a high-chrome polish.

Harkening back to tradi-

tional sports cars, the new Mopar grille selection also includes three wire-mesh grilles constructed of 2mm steel wire set in a small-hatch diamond pattern. Mesh grilles will be available in Platinum Chrome, Gloss Black and Bright Chrome finishes.

For a bit more subtlety, two versions of the production grille will also be offered with

new finishes. Both bright chrome and black chrome grilles are available.

Mopar will also offer a traditional, heritage type egg-grate grille reminiscent of the grille of the 1955 Chrysler 300, the first in a Chrysler 300 letter-car series. All of Mopar's custom grilles are inserts and easily fit within the original grille-surround with no modifications required. Grilles may be ordered and installed on all new 2011 Chrysler 300 models and carry a 3-year, 36,000 mile warranty when purchased with the vehicle.

In addition to grilles, Mopar will also offer six new customized wheel packages for the Chrysler 300. Wheels are available in 18-inch, 19-inch and 20-inch diameters and include an array of finishes.

Included are two different wheels measuring 20-inch x 8-inch with a 10-spoke design that are constructed of forged aluminum. Finishes include Satin Carbon and painted Gloss Black.

A traditional five-spoke design, measuring 20-inch x 8-inch clad in Black Chrome will also be available.

On Chrysler 300 models that are equipped with all-wheel drive, a specific 19-inch, eight-spoke, cast-aluminum design is painted in a Satin Carbon finish.

Two five-spoke 18-inch Rallye Wheels will also be offered. Constructed of cast aluminum, the highly polished version includes black pockets and a polished lip and machined spokes. The 18-inch wheel also is offered in a Gloss Black finish. Both finishes are designed to offer durable, corrosion resistant protection.

Mopar has been busy on the aftermarket front supporting a variety of Chrysler endeavors of late — Mopar had a hand in Jeep redesigning a group of aftermarket Jeeps aimed at the off-road Moab, Utah, Easter Weekend Esc

Then Mopar teamed up with aftermarket providers to put a new series of oil change and related parts and lubricants into Chrysler dealerships.



Chrysler's Laura Soave seen at a Fiat marketing function related to the recent 2011 New York Auto Show.

## Museum Salutes FIAT's Laura Soave

AUBURN HILLS — The Italian American Museum in New York City has honored Laura Soave, Head of FIAT Brand North America, with its "La Bellissima America" award.

Each year, the award is presented to outstanding individuals who have distinguished themselves in their chosen field and in doing so have given great pride to the Italian-American community.

The award was presented as part of the Museum's "Unification Dinner," celebrating the 150th Anniversary of the Italian Republic. The event was held at the Jolly Hotel Madison Towers in New York City.

"The honorees exemplify the finest qualities of the Italian-American experience," said Dr. Joseph Scelsa, president of the Italian American Museum. "What they share in common is their commitment to their community and to dedication and

drive in their respective professions."

As Head of FIAT Brand North America, Soave has led the reintroduction of the FIAT Brand in North America, beginning with the Fiat 500 and now the Fiat 500 Cabrio, which was premiered to rave reviews at the New York International Auto Show on April 21.

"Reintroducing a classic Italian brand to the American market is a dream assignment," said Soave. "In bringing this car to North America, we want to ensure that people understand not only the technological aspects that make the Fiat 500 a great car, but also the passion that has inspired love for the Cinquecento over two generations."

Before joining Chrysler Group, Soave was the head of experiential marketing at Volkswagen of America. Prior to that, she held positions of in-

creasing importance at Ford Motor Company. Soave holds a Master of Business Administration degree in marketing from the University of Detroit and a Bachelor of Science degree in business administration from Walsh College in Michigan.

The Italian American Museum is located at 155 Mulberry St., at the corner of Grand St. in the heart of New York's Little Italy.

Founded in 2001, the Italian American Museum is dedicated to exploring the rich cultural heritage of Italy and Italian-Americans by presenting the individual and collective struggles and achievements of Italians and their heirs to the American way of life. The Museum received its provisional charter from the New York State Board of Regents on June 12, 2001, and is a 501 (c) 3 organization.