

Liters become the measurement at the pump

The day when motorists moan or boast about how many kilometers they get to the liter may not be too far away.

Kilometers have not replaced miles on the nation's highway markers, but they share a place with miles (1.6 kilometers equals a mile) on the speedometers of new cars.

Gasoline is being sold by the liter (3.78 liters to the gallon) at service stations throughout the country.

Metrics are inching — or, more appropriately, centimetering — their way into the American lifestyle.

The metric movement is spurred more by economics than by government pressures.

The U.S. Metric Board, created to promote and coordinate the nation's conversion to metrics, is one of the few federal agencies without regulatory powers. Congress decided in 1975 that the metric conversion

should be voluntary.

But marketplace pressures are having an effect, and gasoline is a prime example.

When the price of gasoline went over \$1 a gallon, service station owners had to alter their pumps, explained Malcolm O'Hagan, the metric board's executive director.

Adding a fourth digit (reflecting dollars, cents and tenths of a cent) to the price-per-gallon indicator costs

about \$200 per pump for the nation's 1.5 million pumps, O'Hagan said.

Switching the measure indicator from gallons to liters means only installing a gear at a cost of about \$50 a pump, he said.

O'Hagan said the gasoline industry generally supports the switch to liters — where state regulations make it possible. But they do not have enough mechanisms or installers to do it on an overnight basis, he said.

Many stations have used a half-gallon price as an interim step in the conversion to metric.

O'Hagan believes gasoline will be sold by the liter nationally by January, 1983, the goal set by the national association which represents state weights and measures

officials.

The board's focus is on trying to generate public awareness and acceptance of metrics. Public attitude is still the biggest obstacle to the conversion.

"Some people go as far as to claim it is a Communist plot," O'Hagan said.

KEEP IT UP, AMERICA.

Get fuel costs? Start carpooling. All across the country, folks are finding that carpooling pays.

First-time buyers need to use tips

Choosing a first car can be an intoxicating experience. That heady, new-car smell as you slide behind the wheel can overwhelm you ... or even the veteran car buyer. So, before your head starts to spin with possibilities, experts advise that you brace yourself with a few basic guidelines.

Pierre Gazarian, executive vice president of Renault USA, Inc., the American arm of the seventh largest auto company in the world, has these words of advice.

According to Gazarian, the best car on the market is the one that fits your driving needs. So the first step is to determine how you will use your car.

Will most of your driving be cross-country or cross-town? A big car may be sensible for long-distance driving, but many Americans are finding that a small car fulfills their driving needs admirably. Also, the need now is for efficiency and economy, and most of today's cars have six-cylinder or gas-saving four-cylinder engines.

"Soaring gas prices have created a growing demand for small, gas-stingy cars," says Gazarian. "Europeans have been driving fuel-efficient cars forever and Americans are now doing the same."

If most of your driving is in stop-and-go city traffic, an automatic transmission frees you from constantly shifting gears. But remember that an automatic transmission uses more gas than a manual, and you lose that jaunty, sports car feeling.

Next, think about your passenger seats. Will you be carrying riders often? If so, do them a favor by actually sitting in the rear seats of the cars you test drive. Are they comfortable with sufficient leg room? Is it a problem getting in and out? A car with front seats that move forward for easy rear seat access would be right for you. On the other hand, if you're a solitary soul, that's less of a concern.

Cargo space is another important consideration.

Golf clubs or grocery bags? An automobile with a hatchback can fill the bill. In the Renault Le Car, for example, with the rear seats folded back, you can triple your storage space.

There's a lot of talk today about front-wheel, rear-wheel, or four-wheel drive. In the past, most American cars used conventional rear-wheel drive, meaning the back wheels pushed the car.

Now the trend is toward front-wheel drive (FWD), and with good reason.

"In FWD cars, the weight is in the front of the vehicle which means better traction and handling," says Gazarian. "Also, FWD eliminates the hump down the center of the car's floor that houses the drive shaft of rear-wheel-drive cars. This creates more interior room which is yet another reason why FWD is ideal for the small cars of the '80s."

Safety on the road is, of course, a paramount factor. First, take into consideration a car's active and passive safety factors. The most important element of safety is a vehicle's ability to stay out of trouble — how well a car handles, its ability to accelerate away from trouble, its brakes, and most important, how well you, the driver, fit the interior to enjoy a comfortable attentive driving position.

By now you should be focusing on the type of car that fits your driving needs. The next step is to list all the cars that fulfill your requirements. Then weed out the cars that don't fall into your price range. By eliminating those cars now, you'll save time and remove the temptation to buy a car you can't afford.

Finally, it is time to test the cars on your list. At most dealerships, the salesperson will familiarize you with how the car operates, and then ride with you on the test drive.

Don't let his or her presence intimidate you. Drive the car on the type of road and in traffic that you'll experience every day. Stop the car, start it, back it up, park it.

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