

## Body shops in rush hour

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### Local repair centers juggle an influx of winter customers

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THE GAZETTE

January 31, 2008 - 12:48AM

Slick roads from a regular cycle of wintry storms have caused pileups at local auto body shops.

Red Noland Collision Center is booked until mid-February to repair wrecked cars that are drivable, said Dale Francis, body shop manager. It's one of the city's largest dealership-owned collision centers, with a 25,000-squarefoot shop, 30 employees and \$6 million in revenues last year.

Vehicles that have to be towed to the shop are accepted immediately but can take a month to six weeks to get fixed, Francis said.

"It's unusual for us to be backed up this far, but we can only schedule so many cars — we can do 230 a month," Francis said. "You can just see customers' eyes twitch — it's already a negative situation — when we tell them we're looking at six weeks. They just can't believe it."

That's why motorists should have rental-car insurance to defray the cost, State Farm Insurance agent Mark Campbell said.

About 75 percent of customers at Wilson's Auto Collision Inc. have rental-car insurance, said Ray Wilson, owner of the shop founded 22 years ago Friday.

"We tell them to call their agent to see if they qualify, because out-of-pocket rental is expensive and rental-car coverage isn't," Wilson said.

Various roadblocks can delay restoring a vehicle to its pre-crash condition, whether it was involved in a minor fender bender or a rollover. For example, Campbell said the insurance claim process can stall if the insurance company has to order an accident report from the police to verify fault.

Securing an appointment at a local body shop and getting parts to make the repairs also can add time. Severely damaged vehicles sometimes need parts that can't be found in local parts stores, Francis said.

Wilson said his 14 employees are working as fast as they can, but they also are running several weeks deep in appointments. It's the same at Black & White Auto Body & Paint, said Rick Lujan, owner and general manager of one of the city's largest independents.

"You don't need a lot of snow — just a couple of inches on the ground make a huge difference for

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body shops," he said.

This winter has been more treacherous for local drivers than last winter, which brought several major blizzards, because motorists tend to stay off the roads during blizzards but feel more confident to venture out when snowfall is lighter, Lujan said.

To handle his shop's load, Lujan has added four technicians for a total of 20 employees. "People don't like to wait too long," he said.

But it's hard for auto body shops to gauge business volume, Wilson said.

"Everybody seems to get in a wreck that morning of a storm. Customers don't just trickle in — they come all at once, and all of a sudden you've got an overflow," he said.

Along with having to endure longer wait times, many motorists needing body work have high deductibles that must be paid out-of-pocket. Higher deductibles lower auto insurance premium costs, and Francis said he's seen deductibles as high as \$3,000.

It doesn't take much of an impact, said State Farm's Campbell, for the repair bill to top \$1,000.

Lujan said it's not unheard of for his body shop to fix a vehicle with \$12,000 to \$15,000 in damage.

And though winter brings a flurry of business, it's not necessarily the busiest season for collision

centers. About 11,000 cars in the area were damaged in a hailstorm last summer, Francis said.

As Wilson said: "It's the snow and ice now. It'll be the wind and sand damage in the spring, hail in the summer, then back to snow. Being weather-related is just the nature of our business."

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