

Denver Union Man Travels to Detroit to Pick Up Sonic

by Dave Felice
Special Writer

Buying an automobile in Michigan isn't much different from Colorado, but purchasing Chevrolet's newest model where the cars are built adds an interesting and intriguing dimension to the process. (Eliminate repetition of the words "new car")

I left my home in Denver and headed for Detroit to pickup my new car.

I read of GM's plans for Sonic earlier in the year and was waiting for production to begin. Since I would have ordered the car for delivery in Denver anyway, I decided to go to Michigan.

I had ordered a crystal-red Sonic LT hatchback with automatic transmission. I picked up the car at the Wally Edgar Chevrolet dealership, less than a mile from the production facility, then drove 1,550 miles back to Denver.

While in Michigan, I found that the people who make Chevrolet Sonic are as pleased to be producing the car as I am to own one.

Using advanced techniques and some of the world's largest robotics, members of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 5960 produce the Sonic subcompact hatchback and sedans, along with a new Buick compact car, at the General Motors Orion Assembly Center. The huge production plant is set amid rolling hills and lakes between Detroit and Flint, in Orion Township.

Chevrolet's Sonic is the only subcompact built in the United States. Ford's entry in the market segment, Fiesta, is made in Mexico. All the other cars in this class are produced overseas.

GM and the UAW have a relatively new two-tier pay structure designed to make it profitable to produce the cars domestically.

As a steward for Communications Workers of America (CWA) Local 7777 and Delegate of the Denver Area Labor Federation (DALF), it was important for me to purchase a car from an American company, made in the United States



PHOTO COURTESY DAVE FELICE

Denver resident Dave Felice traveled to metro Detroit to pick up his 2012 Chevrolet Sonic LT hatchback from the assembly line at the GM Orion plant and then later at Wally Edgar Chevrolet.



TONY HUFFORD/UAW

From left, car customer Dave Felice of Denver, with Jeff "Weebie" Webb of the UAW and Carter Sperry, plant quality manager, together at the GM Orion plant as Felice gets set to go get his car at a local dealer.

by union workers.

Orion Assembly Center has "the latest and greatest production techniques," according to Local 5960's Communications Director Tony Hufford. He explains that the plant was idle for the past year while undergoing complete renovation to take advantage of the newest methods of auto making.

Instead of producing just one model at a time, Orion workers can build a Sonic sedan, followed by a Buick Verano and a Sonic hatchback in the same assembly run.

Hufford says there are 1,750 hourly and salaried employees at Orion Assembly, on two 10-hour shifts four days a week. Another 300 contractors work in the plant on processes that formerly were performed at outside locations.

The facility produces about 40 cars per hour, and, with

more workers, could have a maximum capacity of 70 cars per hour.

According to Hufford, about 90 percent of the cars are built on outstanding orders from customers and dealers, with the rest being made for dealer inventory. All Sonic and Verano vehicles made for North America are produced at Orion.

Hufford says members of UAW 5960 are proud to be making the cars.

"It's what we do; we build quality cars," he remarks. "The workers love the car (Sonic). It is a significant improvement over small cars of the past. We are pleased to be building this car in the U.S."

He says Orion Assembly workers are also gratified to be part of GM's recovery. "The company is really on the mend and the cars we are building are truly state-of-the-art."

Referring to the innovative two-tier wage scale agreement, he says, "We brought production here (to Orion) and we think it's a new beginning (for the company)."

About 60 percent of the Orion workers are Tier One veterans, while the others are in Tier Two with a lower starting wage scale.

Hufford says the Sonic has wide appeal because of its smaller size, higher fuel efficiency, attractive styling and features, and smooth handling.

"Dealers nationwide are expressing demand," he says. "Driving the Sonic doesn't feel like driving a small car."

Plant workers built my car on Nov. 15. Jeff "Weebie"

Webb of UAW 5960 and Orion Quality Operations Manager Carter Sperry did the final inspection before arranging delivery of the car to the nearby Wally Edgar dealership.

General Motors opened Orion Assembly in 1983. The sprawling facility is nestled in the countryside of Oakland County, on land considered unsuitable for agriculture.

Originally, trains provided transportation to and from the facility. Now, almost everything is moved by truck. Located on 5,000 acres of property, Orion Assembly is 80 acres under one roof.

After General Motors decided to produce the Sonic, engineers and members of the UAW Skilled Trades started rebuilding Orion Assembly itself in late 2010.

The company spent about \$545 million upgrading and retooling, putting about 1,000 employees back to work in the Detroit metropolitan area.

Production of the 2012 Sonic started in third quarter of last year. Chevrolet sold about 300 cars nationwide

GM Foundation Donates \$400K for Cancer Research at Karmanos Institute

DETROIT - The General Motors Foundation is donating \$400,000 to the Barbara Ann Karmanos Cancer Institute, bringing to nearly \$6 million the foundation's support over the last 15 years.

Separately, GM Senior Vice President of Global Product Development Mary Barra and her husband, Tony, president of Filament Consulting, will chair the Institute's 30th Annual Dinner on April 28.

The Barras follow GM Chairman and CEO Dan Aker and his wife, Karin, who chaired the event in 2011, when more than \$868,000 was raised for cancer research.

A 33-year veteran of GM, Barra is responsible for leading the design, engineering and quality of new vehicles for GM across the globe. She was recently named one of the "World's 100 Most Powerful Women" by Forbes magazine.

"We're very happy to have



PHOTO: DAVE FELICE

This new 2012 Chevrolet Sonic LT belongs to Dave Felice of Denver, who traveled to the Detroit area to pick up the vehicle, then made the 1,550-mile return trip to Colorado.

during the first month of sales in August. Through mid-January, about 17,000 Sonic cars had been sold around the country.

Some suppliers are located right in the assembly plant. Parts and subassemblies are delivered to the point they are needed by a system using large bins guided by electric tracks in the floor.

The cars are assembled like a kit. Each car has a set of assembly specifications and the correct pieces are delivered and installed when required.

Orion Assembly is the first U.S. facility to use the economical "three wet" paint process, eliminating the need for a primer baking oven. Three coats of paint can be applied before a single trip through the oven.

While producing a high-quality product, the process reduces assembly space and time, as well as lessening solvent emissions by more than 100,000 pounds each year.

In addition, the rust-proofing film is thinner than other vehicles while retaining the same or higher quality, GM says.

New fluorescent lighting at Orion Assembly saves nearly half-a-million dollars. According to GM, the plant produces 80 percent less solid waste, uses 20 percent less water, and powers some operations by methane gas from nearby landfills.

Sonic itself uses high-strength but lighter-weight steel to be less costly and more fuel-efficient.

Sonic is a worldwide Chevrolet product. Even though Sonic is a different car from the company's previous Aveo subcompact, the Aveo name continues to be used in some overseas markets.

Because of production advancements, GM expects to have a profitable entry in the U.S. subcompact market. Sonic has a base price of about \$14,500.

the support of Mary and Tony Barra as chairs of this year's dinner to support cancer research," said Gerold Bepler, M.D., Ph.D., president and chief executive officer, Karmanos Cancer Institute.

"We're incredibly grateful for the unprecedented commitment from GM and the GM Foundation. Thanks to all of our supporters, we are developing the next standard of cancer care that will be used around the world."

Health and human services is one of four key focus areas for the foundation.

"The GM Foundation's grant will help Karmanos continue the important fight against cancer," said foundation President Vivian Pickard.

"We are fortunate to have this leading organization serving our Michigan communities and we are committed to making this year's annual dinner a success."

General Motors is the top sponsor of this year's dinner, which will be held at the GM Technical Center in Warren. The presenting sponsor is Compuware Corporation; and the executive sponsors are Johnson Controls and Lil and Alex Erdeljan.

"Tony and I are honored to be able to build upon the success of last year's event by chairing the 2012 Annual Din-

ner," said Barra. "The opportunity to serve an organization that is dedicated to eradicating cancer is a special privilege for us."

Companies interested in sponsorship opportunities for the dinner should contact Maureen Bender at 313-576-8111 or benderm@karmanos.org. To reserve tickets, contact Lisa Koltunichik at 313-576-8106 or koltunicl@karmanos.org.

Located in mid-town Detroit, the Barbara Ann Karmanos Cancer Institute is one of 40 National Cancer Institute-designated comprehensive cancer centers in the United States.

Caring for nearly 6,000 new patients annually on a budget of \$216 million, conducting more than 700 cancer-specific scientific investigation programs and clinical trials, Karmanos is among the nation's top cancer centers.

Through the commitment of 1,000 staff, including nearly 300 physicians and researchers on faculty at the Wayne State University School of Medicine, and supported by thousands of volunteer and financial donors, Karmanos strives to prevent, detect and eradicate all forms of cancer.

Its long-term partnership with the WSU School of Medicine enhances the collaboration of critical research and academics related to cancer care. Karmanos is Southeastern Michigan's most preferred hospital for cancer care, according to annual surveys.

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