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Aftermarket Structural Parts Raising More Red Flags

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Serious concerns about consumer safety and compromised crashworthiness surround the emerging use of aftermarket structural parts.

Concerned about the potential safety problems associated with the use of some aftermarket structural replacement parts such as bumper reinforcements and core supports, the Society of Collision Repair Specialists (SCRS) is adding itself to the list of groups raising red flags about their use.

The association is now enlisting the help of its affiliate associations and the car manufacturers to gauge the seriousness of the issue.

In a recent letter to the OEM Collision Repair Roundtable, a panel of manufacturer representatives that gathers quarterly to addresses issues of mutual concern in the collision industry, SCRS Executive Director Aaron Schulenburg cited the "tremendous safety concerns for today's unknowing motorists" when asking the carmakers for their assistance in immediately identifying "the scope and severity of the problem."

In its letter to the OEMs, SCRS specifically pointed to these aftermarket structural parts being listed on estimates as "Quality Replacement Parts," a term that SCRS describes as "almost endearing to a consumer who does not understand the variance in quality."

The association is also hoping to grasp the scope of the problem by calling on its affiliates to provide specific details about repair jobs where insurance companies may have specified the use of inferior aftermarket structural parts.

Quality and safety concerns about certain aftermarket structural

parts have been graphically demonstrated over the past year through testing done by independent parts manufacturers as well as live demonstrations at the Collision Industry Conference (CIC).

Parts manufacturers Reflexion Automotive and Production Bumper Stampings have invested in excess of \$2 million dollars in dynamically and destructively testing aftermarket structural parts through their Diamond Standard division. The results of those tests clearly show the quality differences between the original parts and some of the cheaper aftermarket replacements produced offshore.

Of primary concern, according to Diamond Standard, is that distinctly inferior materials are used in some of the aftermarket versions of these parts. "As OEM moved to high strength steel, ultra high strength steel, even advanced strength steel, in parts such as bumper reinforcements, some offshore aftermarket manufactures have elected to substitute low cost carbon steel," said Geoff Crane, Business Development Manager, Diamond Standard, to explain why similar looking aftermarket parts fail to perform like their OEM counterpart under destructive testing.

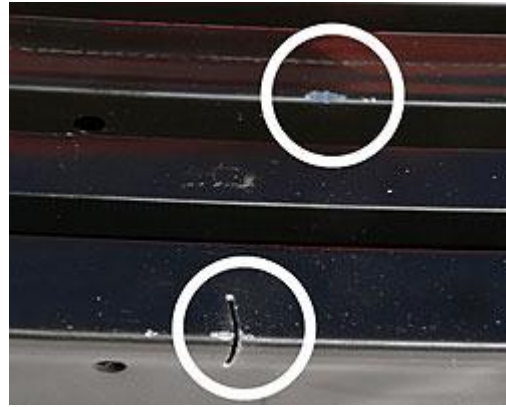
According to Diamond Standard, who manufacturers a line of aftermarket structural parts designed to perform like the OEM equivalents, nowhere is the need for equivalency or like kind quality of performance and function greater than in safety parts which go to restore the vehicle's collision management system.

More recently, Toby Chess, an SCRS board member, demonstrated similar inferior performance of aftermarket structural parts at the November Collision Industry Conference (CIC) meeting held in Las Vegas.



The Diamond Standard Brand Web site offers some pretty convincing video showing how inferior materials used by some aftermarket parts manufacturers could call in to question the ability of those parts to protect the vehicle and its occupants in subsequent collisions.

In his demonstration, Chess showed the dramatic difference in the material strength between OEM and aftermarket parts by attempting to cut through both parts with a metal cutting reciprocating saw. The original Toyota bumper reinforcement, made of modern ultra high strength steel, was nearly impossible to cut while the aftermarket version was easily compromised.



As demonstrated by Chess, the aftermarket part (bottom) was cut by the saw while the original part (top) could only be scratched.

Since that presentation, Chess has done additional comparative studies on more parts and found very similar results. The topic should receive plenty of attention at the upcoming CIC meeting this month in Palm Springs, California where Chess will be conducting more demonstrations on his recent findings with additional parts.

"The greatest concern is that these components are structural in nature and directly impact the integrity of the vehicle safety post-repair, and are parts designed for energy transfer, which could have a significant impact on the operation of the SRS system (airbags)," Schulenburg noted in a letter to SCRS affiliates.

"The information we have seen so far, as it relates to these structural replacement parts, has certainly shown cause for concern," stated Schulenburg. "It seems as if there is a growing trend for some [insurance companies] to specify these parts in the claims settlement practice, but that there is seemingly little responsibility to ensure that the parts do not have significant safety differences."

"This issue is concerning to consumers who have to get back behind the wheel and put their families in the car, and it is equally concerning to repairers who assume the liability for the repair. It is our hope that we can work collaboratively with the industry to find solutions to ensure that the information is readily available to make well educated decisions about the most proper and safe way to repair the vehicle, and that moving forward there is greater emphasis from all, to ensure the safety and quality of the repair," Schulenburg concluded.