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By LARRY PHILLIPS

- Daily Leader

As the Big-3 auto makers sat before Congress Wednesday – again – pleading for loans to help the companies get through this downturn in the economy, one auto dealer in Liberal believes locals are not really affected by those shenanigans in Washington.

“It’s more about the publicity it brings,” said Stu Emmert’s Automotive Center’s Financial Manager Robert Hutton. “I think they’re using a term that many people are associating bail out with a grant or something – like they’re just giving out money.

“What the domestic automobile manufacturers are looking for is some short-term loans so they can have cash flow,” Hutton continued. “They intend to pay these back with interest, and at this point, unfortunately, the government is the only one with enough capital to provide that short-term loan.

“I think there’s a lot of people, myself included, that don’t really want the government doing these things,” he added. “But at this point, with the conditions that we have, they are the only ones that are left with big enough reserves to do these things.”

Stu Emmert’s deals in General

Motors and Toyota vehicles, and Hutton said GM has been retooling for nearly two years, but with the financial chaos that’s erupted in the banking industry in the last three months, GM’s plans were disrupted, and they need the short-term help.

Many legislators have complained the auto makers haven't switched over to as many fuel-efficient vehicles as legislators would like, but Hutton said GM has led that charge.

"General Motors is building the best cars they've ever built," he said. "They have got the largest amount of cars that get 30 miles per gallon on the highway than any manufacturer in the world."

Locally, Hutton said Stu Emmert's isn't seeing a huge outcry for fuel efficient vehicles.

"There's been some people that have looked to change the vehicle they're driving because of fuel efficiency," he said. "But we drive distances out here, and when you get a full-sized vehicle, whether it's a Toyota, GM or Ford or Chrysler, you put them on the highway and drive 65 to 70 miles per hour, you're going to get respectable fuel efficiency with those.

"Around town is not an issue for us, because we don't have people that drive 30,000 miles a year and stay in a metro area," he added.

And when it comes to trucks, they are still in demand locally.

"In our part of the world, we use trucks for trucks – to work – not like areas where a truck is just used for personal transportation,"

Hutton explained.

Hutton said the demand for hybrids has remained steady since they were introduced some years back – no peaks or valleys in demand.

"Most of the hybrids are sold either before they get here or shortly after," he said.

More people are interested in flex fuel vehicles in this area, Hutton added.

With the national economic news – seemingly pounded by the main stream media daily – Hutton does see some hesitancy with local buyers.

“We hear. We read. We’ve seen the television programs and so forth,”

Hutton said. “And I think that changes our mind sets, like, ‘I don’t know if I want to do anything just now.’ Many people are looking and saying, ‘Maybe I can wait a little while,’ particularly when you’re talking about a large-ticket purchase like a vehicle.”

If locals are concerned about what they hear and read about the credit crunch nationwide, they don’t have to worry about that here.

“No,” Hutton said. “We have still been able to get people financed when they want to come and purchase a car. There is money available to do that.

“That has not really been an issue,” he added.

Hutton feels his company is fortunate to have the variety of vehicles it offers, and he thinks everybody living in rural America is in good shape at this time.

“It’s going to be interesting, and it really has to do with consumer confidence,” he said. “And we’re pretty fortunate in our part of the world.”

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