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Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515-2308

March 14, 2000

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Ms. Rosalyn Millman

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Dear Roz:

Enclosed is a letter - on second thought, more appropriately, a dissertation - from a constituent and a very good friend, Rich Brenne, concerning something he describes as the "broken headlight switch" problem.

The central thesis of this tome is that the "running lights" on late model vehicles are locked into a high beam position which can be cancelled out only if the driver turns on all the automobile's lighting system and then switches to low beams. His concern is that high beams during the daytime hours are unexpected by oncoming drivers and are, therefore, a dangerous distraction.

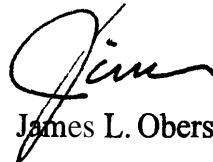
His second point is that having to eliminate all the vehicle's exterior lighting in order to switch to low beams is wasteful and unnecessary.

I would appreciate it if you would have appropriate technical staff review this matter and advise whether it is possible to modify the manufacturers' practice on this matter.

Although the letter is dated October 1999, it somehow went astray in the mail and I was presented with a copy of the letter this past weekend while home in my district.

Warmest personal regards.

Sincerely,



James L. Oberstar, M.C.

JLO/mb

ES 2000030698

October 14, 1999

Hon. James Oberstar  
2365 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Oberstar,

If I was happy you wouldn't be getting this letter.

The reason for this letter is an argument that I recently had with Sarah Lewerenz ("DNC" member from Minnesota). It was a rather heated discussion.

Sarah recently leased a late model Saturn automobile. The car came from the factory and was delivered by the dealer with the "broken headlight switch" feature. When the engine is started the high beam headlights are illuminated and the driver is not able to turn them off. The best that the driver can do is to turn on the headlights which will extinguish the high beams and illuminate the low beams, parking lamps, tail lights and all marker lamps on the vehicle.

There is no way to turn the headlights off.

I repaired the "broken headlight switch" in Sarah's new Saturn as I have done to other new cars. After the repair her headlight switch worked normally. The lights could be turned on and, most importantly, off, the way cars have worked since electric lights replaced oil lamps.

I told her I had fixed her car as we had discussed but she had changed her mind. She wanted to keep the "broken headlight switch" feature.

I undid the repair and informed her that I thought she was a rude and discourteous driver. She took offense.

When I took my drivers license test, the drivers manual said it was illegal to have a car equipped with any light that would "dazzle" another driver. The problem with high beams is not just the intensity of the bulb but the arrangement of the reflectors. The high beam is designed to project the "beam" directly out front for a great distance, not to aim it down on the road.

There has been a problem for the last few years. Since the Republicans took over the House and Senate, a few auto makers

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began offering a broken headlight switch as an option on all new cars and trucks. Now this objectionable feature is obligatory standard equipment.

The reason is the auto makers make and sell headlight bulbs and anything that will make them burn out faster will sell more lamps.

When you were first elected to the House, a high and low sealed beam headlamp could be purchased at your local J. C. Penney Auto Center for 99 cents. Today a replacement bulb for your headlight (not a sealed beam) costs anywhere from \$ 11.99 to \$ 23.99. In all cases that was the cost of the bulb not including installation.

In order for these companies to make and enjoy substantially greater profits, they have created a very dangerous situation on our roads and highways. Most states have laws that require motorcycles to have their headlights on while being ridden on the public roads. This is so the almost invisible motorcycle can be seen in traffic which consists of automobiles, trucks and eighteen wheel semi-trailers. With all these new cars and trucks driving around on sunny days with 2 headlights illuminated, who is going to notice or pay attention to a little motorcycle with only one headlight.

How many motorcyclists are going to be killed and maimed before these "broken headlight switches" are recalled and repaired.

The average 1999 police car "juke box" has a light show which will put the original Broadway production of "Cats" to shame. Recently, on a bright sunny day, there was a police car behind me with the full blown light show and I didn't notice him until he passed me. "Whoa there, where the hell did he come from?" I had my "day/night" rear view mirror in the in the night position and my drivers side outside mirror tilted in with the joy stick so the only thing visible was the side of my car. This was because some "Bozo" in a new "SW" or pickup had been following me with his high beams on. (I know, he couldn't turn them off, but he could go to his dealer and demand the dealer fix the headlight switch under warranty.)

What about the *other* emergency vehicles? What about the volunteer fireman/paramedic driving his own car with the headlights on in transit to the firehall/fire/accident? Who is going to pay any attention to him when so many vehicles have their headlights on?

How about School Busses driving with their headlights on?

Who is going to pay any attention to them when so many vehicles have their headlights on?

State and County maintenance vehicles, RFD postal delivery cars, heavy equipment and wide loads all with their lights on. Who is going to pay attention to any of those when so many vehicles have their headlights on?

I'm sure there are other vehicles with a legitimate reason to have their headlights on. My point is that nobody is going to pay the least bit of attention to them amongst all this light pollution.

You are a Congressman and as a result you don't have to drive anywhere. I expect you guys don't even have licenses. At least you don't need them. I don't think any Congressmen have driven anywhere since the Rostenkowski/Kenosha incident. When you go anywhere in a car you are driven by an aid or a political volunteer. You have not had the personal experience of one of these B..... (expletive) in their "SUVs" with their high beams on tailgating the car you're driving for 50 miles or so.

I start out driving on bright sunny days with my mirror in the day position. I don't get more than a few blocks before I've had to flip to the night position. Those headlights in my rear view mirror are robbing me of the view of traffic behind me. After the offending vehicle has left the perspective of my rear view mirror, I don't immediately notice and as a result I continue driving with my mirror in the night position.

When I am driving around during the daytime with my rear view mirror in the night position because of headlights reflected in my eyes, it is not just other vehicles that I can't easily see, it's pedestrians, bicyclists, dogs and anything else that may be approaching me from the sides or rear.

When are we going to require pedestrians to carry extremely bright lights so they will have parity with motor vehicle headlights? What about dogs?

I almost hit a motorist with a handicapped license plate the other day. Once again it was a bright sunny day. Mr. Handicapped decided to merge in front of my car at 70 MPH and while I should have been paying attention to him, I was distracted by some Jerk a half a block away in the oncoming traffic lane with his headlights on.

I made a left hand turn through a gap in traffic the other day. This turn was accompanied by a crescendo of auto horns.

Even though the turn was executed in a thoroughly safe manner, it seems that I had turned through the middle of an oncoming funeral procession. Tell me how I'm supposed to know what is a funeral procession when so many cars have their headlights on.

It is not just the lights in the rear view *mirror* that are a problem, it's the lights that shine in your eyes head on. When I'm negotiating traffic in an intersection, I should be watching the cars in my immediate vicinity. I shouldn't be distracted by some clown with his headlights on because the manufacturer of his car makes it impossible to turn them off.

This proliferation of daylight headlights is definitely making driving a far more dangerous undertaking.

While negotiating the curves and grades of Skyline Parkway in Duluth, the last thing I want to encounter is a motorist with his headlights in my eyes.

There is no such thing anymore as a pleasant drive. Thanks to the "**broken headlight switch**" feature any drive over 50 miles produces a splitting headache. A friend of mine required laser eye surgery. As I drove him home from Miller Dwan Hospital he complained how painful the laser zapping on his retain was. I knew exactly how he felt just from driving in traffic. *RETINA*

My annual drive up highway 61 on the north shore of dear old Lake Superior to see the brilliant fall colors was ruined. The brightest things were the other cars headlights, not the many colored leaves.

A friend of mine bought a new Oldsmobile "88" a year ago. He didn't even know that his car came with a "**broken headlight switch**." When he turned the ignition switch on his headlights came on. When he "**cranked**" his engine to start it the headlights were on. Just picture him on a 20 below morning with a year old battery. I'll give a "**jump**" to just about any stranded motorist. My new rules, I will not render any assistance to any stranded motorist whose vehicle has a "**broken headlight switch**." I fixed my friend's Oldsmobile's headlight switch. It works properly now. He is very happy.

I have yelled at lighting directors that think it is cute to place the "**Kleig Lights**" at the back of the stage and aim them directly in the upturned faces of the paying audience in the first 20 rows. Now we have the same effect on our city streets with these late model cars.

Headlights are designed so the driver can see where he is

going after dark. There is no legitimate reason to have the headlights on all the time.

When I lived in Maine, during certain weather conditions, we would be visited by "pea soup fog." Maine fog is far worse than anything we experience in Duluth. It is very difficult to see the road and any beings or objects in the thick fog. Any headlights that are turned on will reflect off the fog and make it impossible to **see** anything. A similar effect is what happens when those "high beams" are trained on a heavy snowfall.

When I am driving at night and a car or truck is approaching over the brow of a hill or around a curve, I can see a glow in the darkness that warns me to expect the oncoming vehicle and also allows me to dim my own headlights in deference to the other driver. When the oncoming vehicle has its "high beams" on during the daytime there is no "Glow to alert me and when that vehicle comes over the top of the hill, pow, I get the full force of those headlights right in my eyes.

A few new vehicles have lighted "parking lights" instead of lighted headlights. This is preferable to lighted headlights, however it has been my understanding that since the middle "60s" several states have laws against driving a motor vehicle with only parking lights lighted. Those several states want "all or nothing" when it comes to lights. I'm sure when those laws were passed ~~on one~~ was thinking that anyone would be so rude to drive during the daylight hours with their headlights on.

NOBODY

One of the big problems on our highways these days is "Road Rage." I can tolerate damn near any rudeness on the highway. The one exception is some "Boob" with their headlights on during a bright sunny day. I have the urge to give them the same in return. I am currently wearing out my headlight switch flashing my "high beams" in response. I am also considering adding a Ford Taurus style joy stick to my steering column so I can ignite both "high" and "low beams" simultaneously.

I understand that this hair-brained idea may have originated in Canada. I have been told that there may be a law requiring all new cars in Canada to be manufactured with a "broken headlight switch."

If we are not smart enough to adopt Canada's really good ideas for health care, why are we adopting their totally stupid idea on headlights?

You should be the chairman of the Transportation Committee.

Owing to a horrible aberration you are just the ranking member. If November 1994 had turned out properly I'm sure you as chairman would have prevented this problem.

Even though you have never been a supporter of a woman's "freedom of choice," this is "freedom of choice" for all people that you can enthusiastically support. This is the principle that this country is built upon. Every motorist has to have the choice to turn their headlights on or off as the situation demands. Big brother auto maker shouldn't be allowed to take this freedom away from any driver.

All the cars already manufactured with a "broken headlight switch" must be recalled and repaired. All future cars must have a properly operating headlight switch that turns off.

This screwball headlight idea has all the "earmarks" of originating at General Motors. Their Saturns, Celebratys "SUVs" and "pickups" are among the most obnoxious.

This broken headlight switch idea ranks right up there with their exploding "pickup" gas tanks and the heater/air conditioner blower that comes on when you turn on the ignition switch. That blower was introduced on the 1970 Chevrolet full size cars. At 20 below that outside air blowing around before you have even started the engine is a real treat. GM even included a little blue light on the dashboard that said "COLD."

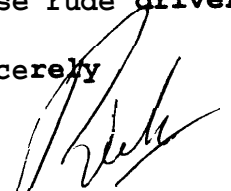
As a final thought, how is a motorist supposed to flash a courtesy warning to his fellow motorists when his headlights won't flash?

You are my Congressman and you are uniquely positioned to do something about this situation. Make me proud of you, get this problem fixed.

Fix this problem now. I'm not the only one irritated by this deliberate headlight rudeness.

I'm not sure how we irritated drivers will retaliate against those rude drivers, but I'm sure we will.

Sincerely



Richard C. Brenne  
P. O. Box 16655  
Duluth, Minnesota  
55816-0655

**P. S.** I would be most appreciative it if you could pass a copy of this letter along to Secretary **Slater**, the "**NTSB**" the National Safety Council, **AAA**, and any one else that you feel would be in a position to do something to correct this travesty.

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