

WHO'S RIGHT: THE DEALER OR THE MECHANIC?



BY RAY MAGLIOZZI

Dear Car Talk:

I have a 2009 Toyota RAV4. The check engine light came on a year ago. I took it to the dealer, and they said it was an oxygen sensor. I had it repaired, which wasn't cheap. Everything was fine for a few months, and then the check engine light came on again intermittently until finally it stayed on all the time. I went back to the dealer and was told it's definitely the "bank one catalytic

converter." They want \$1,200 to fix it. They said if it's not fixed, it will eventually cause the car to stop. I checked with my local mechanic who says it won't make the car stop even if I never have it replaced. I can't afford to get it replaced. Who is right? — Gary

Your local mechanic is closer to being right than the dealer is, Gary. Your check engine light came on because your catalytic converter's efficiency has dropped below what it needs to be. It's not doing its job of cleaning up your emissions anymore, and it needs to be replaced. That could be because you've used up your catalyst, or because a piece of it broke off and ended up in your muffler. Or on the interstate.

If your converter ever got completely

plugged up and blocked, then it would prevent the car from running. That's what your dealer is saying. But I think he's being alarmist. An inefficient converter is not the same as a plugged-up converter. Although it's possible that if you wait long enough, someday you'll have both, Gary. The more pressing issue is that most states have vehicle emissions inspection laws. And your car won't pass inspection with a failing catalytic converter. So, if you expect to drive this car beyond your next inspection date, you have to get it fixed. But you don't have to get it fixed at the dealer.

You can ask your local mechanic to get you a price on an aftermarket converter. It may be half as expensive. And it'll probably last half as long as

the factory converter. But that may be good enough, given the age of your car and your repair budget.

The only caution is that, in our experience, some aftermarket converters don't work well enough to turn off the check engine light. So, ask your mechanic to use an aftermarket converter brand that he's had success with on other Toyotas. That may give you a way to keep driving, Gary.

Got a question about cars? Write to Ray in care of King Features, 628 Virginia Drive, Orlando, FL 32803, or email by visiting the Car Talk website at www.cartalk.com.

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