

This 2017 Ford Shelby GT350 shows off in Grabber Blue.



A bigger Countryman

The largest car in BMW's **Mini** lineup is about to get bigger, according to our sources. From what we have spied, the second-generation **Mini Countryman** will be longer, wider and boxier than the current division, but will employ the same turbocharged 1.5-liter engine four-cylinder (no three-cylinder turbo for this model) in regular 189- and 228-horsepower John Cooper Works strengths. The six-speed manual and six- and eight-speed automatic transmissions (the latter exclusive to all-wheel-drive models) will also return. It will likely arrive early next year as a 2018 model.



The next-gen Mini Countryman will be larger than this current model, but it will use the same engines.

Another hot Shelby

Ford's answer to the **Chevrolet Camaro ZL1** and **Dodge Challenger Hellcat** is production-bound for the 2018 model year. These peach-colored pages have received news that an **all-new Shelby GT500** will join the GT350 in the pursuit of unbridled performance. On the outside, the car will look leaner and meaner with a more distinctive open-mouth grille and wider fender flares. Beneath the hood, the hot rumor is that a twin-turbocharged version of the GT350's 5.2-liter V-8 will make somewhere in the neighborhood of 680 horsepower. But given the heated numbers competition with the Hellcat, it's also possible this engine will feature a supercharged cross-plane crank as opposed to the GT350's flat-plane. Couple that with a 2.6-liter Eaton blower, and the new Shelby could theoretically put out up to 750

hp. It will also likely have a 10-speed auto transmission. The

GT500 will likely be revealed in January at the 2017 Detroit Auto Show.



It has been a good time, but not a long time for the Chrysler 200 (shown here in its 2016 incarnation), which will soon be mothballed despite its nearly new status.

So long to the Chrysler 200

While we should have seen the writing on the wall, we're still gobsmacked by the impending demise of Chrysler's mid-size sedan. The second-generation **Chrysler 200** was introduced at the 2014 North America International Auto Show in Detroit, Mich. Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) spent vast sums installing the latest in robotic manufacturing equipment for the 200 at its plant in Sterling Heights, Mich.

It's a loss they'll have to eat. The automaker will end production of the 200 at the end of 2016. FCA will spend a further \$1.2 billion preparing the plant for assembly of the next generation Ram 1500 pickup.

In others FCA obits, we hear the company's compact **Dodge Dart** is also on the chopping block, although there's no official word on that. If this turns out to be true, the Dart and 200 will join the **Buick Verano** in retirement as Chrysler and General Motors focus more on tall-wagon models that are all the rage now.



Cheap gas has spoken...

And the U.S. government has listened. Or at least listened to autobuyers' car lot choices. It appears that the 54.5-mpg corporate average fuel economy goal — set by the government for the industry to meet by 2025 — is about to be altered. And not going upward.

Representatives from the alphabet soup of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and the California Air Resources Board (CARB) recently met to review the **Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE)** target.

Though a recent report from the government conceded that automakers have the wherewithal and technical knowhow to meet that magic 54.5 number, buyers' predilection for pickups and SUVs all but make it certain the industry will fall short of that fleet-wide average. Indeed, senior administration officials divulged that goal was arrived at based on an assumption that 67 percent of sales would be passenger cars and only 33 percent would be SUVs, crossovers and light trucks.

The monkey wrench in that equation? Cheaper gas, making fuel-hungry vehicles a more viable fiscal option for buyers. All three government agencies have concluded in their Mid-term Evaluation report, released this summer, that the current target is unrealistic and that the new, revised average goal should fall somewhere between 50.8 and 52.6 mpg.

Whatever final the number, a decision isn't expected until 2018. The lesson here is that in a free market the buyer is still in the proverbial driver's seat. Leaving the environment somewhere in the wayback.

TEST DRIVE

2017 Porsche 911 Carrera 4S

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it's hard to say how much a part this plays in the car's considerable, cornering grip.

Graybeards may recall the days, decades ago, when turbocharged 911s were a handful in the wrong hands. Tamed by years of technology, this generation of turbo powered cars is light years removed: it is corner-carving made easy. Drivers will notice that coarse pavement creates a noticeable amount of road noise in the cabin. But cowl shake — the bane of most convertibles — is barely detectable.

A sport exhaust system is also part of the Sport package and unlike the optional pipes on the Alfa we drove recently, I give the 911 system an unqualified thumbs-up. A dial on the sport steering wheel (also part of this package) allows the driver to rotate between Normal, Sport, Sport Plus and Individual modes. The modes can be programmed to include adjustments to many onboard systems.

In default mode, most noticeable is the effect on shift points and soundtrack. Switching to Sport or Sport+ widens the gaps between gear changes, and elevates the exhaust note from background to front row.

A mild turbo whistle joins in on acceleration; rev-matched downshifts are accompanied by pops and burbling backflow. But when you want to get in and out of the neighborhood in stealth mode, the Normal setting does the trick, baffling the pipes without need for short-shifting.

On PDK-equipped cars, the dial also has a center, Sport Response Button. Hitting this spot adjusts the drivetrain for a 20 second burst of maximum acceleration. This is effectively an afterburner, so unless you've got the Bonneville Salt Flats in your back yard, restraint is advisable.

The 911's interior is handsome and well finished. The dash layout shows the top-down design influence of the flagship Panamera. Switchgear is plentiful, but



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the layout is logical. On feature-laden cars, I'll take a button-busy dash over the alternative (drilling through layers in a touchscreen). Once you learn their location, button adjustments come quickly. Display screen drill downs are forever.

The 2017 year brings an updated version of Porsche's PCM infotainment system. A 7-inch touchscreen and standard Wi-Fi connectivity are new. So too is Apple CarPlay compatibility (though not Android Auto).

Wind flow is well managed. It's windows up and air blocker deployed for maximum protection, or drop the blocker and the windows and go with the flow. The cloth top raises/lowers with one button in 13 seconds, at speeds up to 31 mph. Rear visibility is limited by the convertible top's wide c-pillars. Lane

Change Assist (\$850) effectively monitors blind spots, and should be considered a must-have option. Lacking legroom, the rear +2 seats work best as shelf space, folded forward to supplement the small (5.1 cu. ft.) front trunk.

The 911 Carrera Cabrio belongs to a class I call super-sports cars. It has the balanced skills of a classic era sports car, with an overabundance of power that old school sportsters never dreamed of. Though very civilized, its attitude comes down decidedly on the sporty side of the sport/luxury continuum.

A regular contributor to the Times Union for more than 20 years, Dan Lyons is the award-winning author of six books, and photographer of 170 calendars. Read Dan's recent reviews online anytime at Timesunion.com/vehiclereviews.