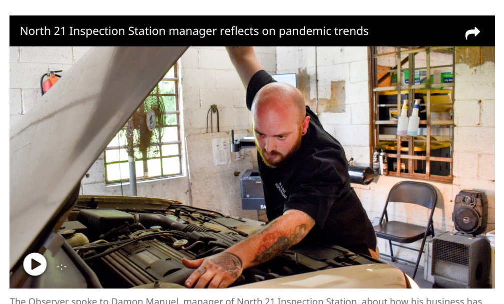
LOCAL

NC car inspection due? Go early due to labor shortage, Charlotte shops say

BY SUSIE WEBB
UPDATED JULY 12, 2021 11:03 AM

North 21 Inspection Station manager reflects on pandemic trends



The Observer spoke to Damon Manuel, manager of North 21 Inspection Station, about how his business has been over the course of the pandemic and his recommendation for people with upcoming inspections.
BY SUSIE WEBB | LOUMAY ALESALI

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It's often put off until the last minute. At the end of the month, you remember — your car state inspection is due.

Over the course of the pandemic, most drivers were able to temporarily skip inspections. Cars due for inspection between March and August 1, 2020 had a five-month extension period.

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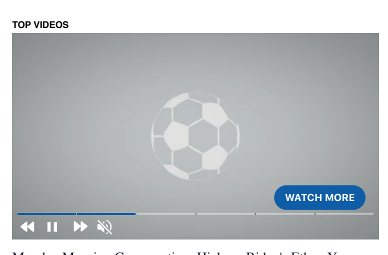

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That grace, though, has long expired. Some of the car inspection shops in Charlotte have noticed that demand is just now picking up for inspections due annually.

"Now that vaccines rolled out, we noticed that people are coming back out," said Terrance Harrington, manager of the Monroe Road Auto Inspector.

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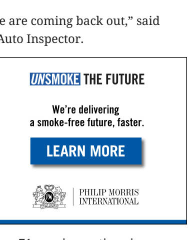

He said that just two weeks ago his shop hit a record — 71 cars inspections in one day. The average is 35 to 45 cars.

Inspections are up 30% in 2021, said Thomas Hand, regional car care manager for AAA Carolinas.

The Charlotte Observer recently visited eight car inspection shops around Charlotte to see what the most common car problems are. You can find nearby inspection stations via the NCDOT.gov website.

BATTERY DEEMED 'NOT READY'

From stay-home orders to remote work, people have been driving less. That lack of regular usage can lead to some problems, experts say.

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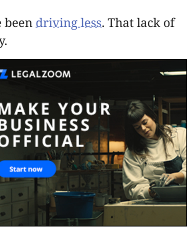


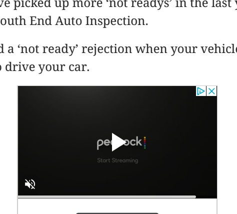
One issue is the "not ready rejection."

Not ready rejections may occur when the car battery has been disconnected or jumped. If a car sits for too long, it's battery slowly loses juice. When the car is running, it's recharging that battery.

Many of the shops said they've experienced an uptick in not ready rejections.

"It does seem like we've picked up more 'not readys' in the last year," said Shane Boswell, manager of South End Auto Inspection.

The main way to avoid a 'not ready' rejection when your vehicle is due for inspection is simply to drive your car.



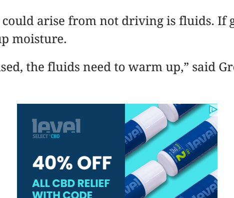
Driving for several days under normal conditions, and on the highway, can help get car monitors to a "ready" status. The exact time needed varies by car make and model.

"There were some definite times where we saw some cars that had some issues from sitting too long," said Kevin Davis, manager of CMD Automotive.

FUEL BAD IN TANK

Another problem that could arise from not driving is fluids. If gas sits in the tank for too long, it can build up moisture.

"The cars need to be used, the fluids need to warm up," said Greg Miller, owner of Fig Auto Repair.



Dry rot in tires, or visible cracking in the tire's tread, is another issue. This, though, usually takes years to set in.

Overall, the message was clear from the car inspection shops — drive your car.

"One of the worst things you can do to your car is let it sit," said Chris Bailey, manager of In and Out Inspections.

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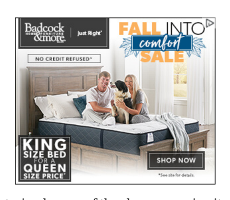
A TECH SHORTAGE

All eight shops that the Observer visited mentioned the shortage of available technician inspectors.

"Our main problem here is finding people that want to work," said Jess Montero, manager of the Freedom Drive Meineke Car Care Center.

According to Hand, the education of techs certified to do inspections has been delayed until recently. The classes are booked solid for the next couple months, he said.



The tech shortage has strained many of the shops, meaning it may take a little longer to get inspected.

"We're very short staffed," said Sarge Haskins, a tech at the Central Avenue Auto Inspector.

At South End Auto Inspection, it's only Boswell and one other inspector. They had to reduce hours because of the lack of staff.

"I work every day without a day off," Boswell said.

It's a similar story at the Monroe Road Auto Inspector.

"This is not a one-man job," Harrington said. "We have two bays, two machines for a reason."

Miller says it's difficult to find qualified technicians to hire.

"There's not a lot of encouragement in high school to go into trades," Miller said.

The job also involves working in the rain and snow, which Damon Manuel, manager of North 21 Inspection Station, theorized is less appealing than an office job.

Not every shop, though, has felt the strain of the tech shortage. CMD Automotive said they've managed to retain employees through good pay and compensation.

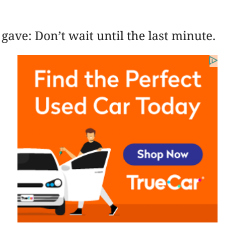
"Our team has been pretty solid throughout the entire pandemic," Davis said.

COMMON NC CAR INSPECTION ISSUES

Here are some of the common causes of inspection failures, according to the shops:

- Windshield wipers
- Tires
- Tail Lights
- Brake Lights

The other advice they gave: Don't wait until the last minute.



"If you come the last week of the month, it's going to be busy, and you're going to have a wait," Boswell said.

This story was originally published July 12, 2021 8:06 AM.

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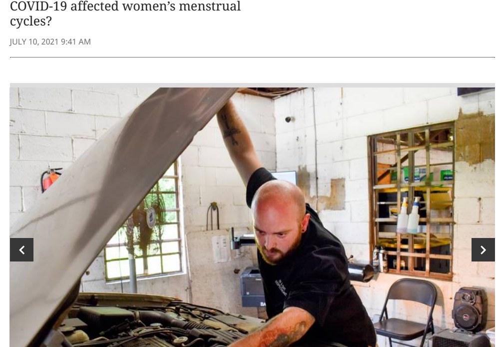

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Damon Manuel, the manager of North 21 Inspection Station, checks under the hood of a vehicle during a routine car inspection on July 9, 2021 in Charlotte. SUSIE WEBB

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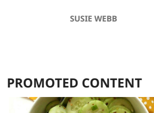
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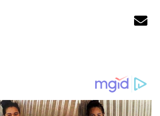
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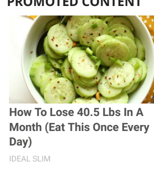
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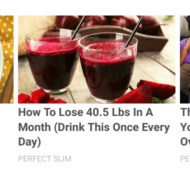
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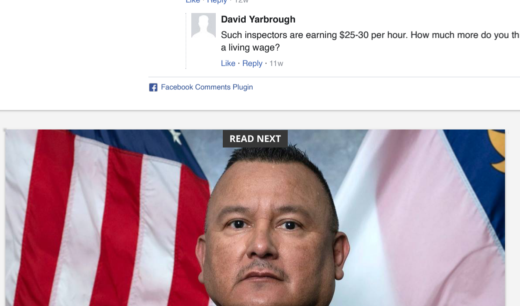

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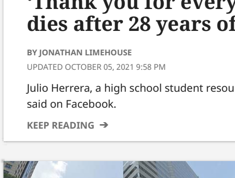
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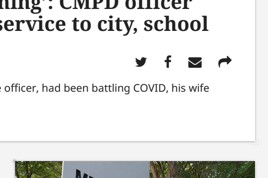
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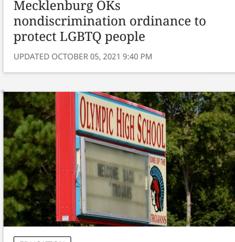
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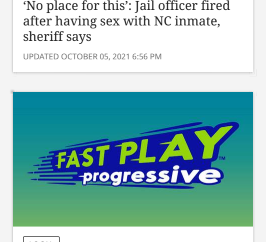
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