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AAA (pronounced "triple A"), formerly the American Automobile Association, is a federation of motor clubs throughout North America. AAA is a not-for-profit member service organization; as of 2010, it had 51 million members.[1] AAA provides services to its members, including roadside assistance and others. Its national headquarters are in Heathrow, Florida.[2]

The American Automobile Association (the "AAA" or "Triple-A") was founded on March 4, 1902, in Chicago, Illinois when, in response to a lack of roads and highways suitable for automobiles,[3] nine motor clubs with a total of 1,500 members banded together to form the Triple-A. Those individual motor clubs included the Chicago Automobile Club, Automobile Club of America, Automobile Club of New Jersey, and others.[4]

The first AAA road maps were published in 1905; AAA began printing hotel guides in 1917. Triple-A began its School Safety Patrol Program in 1920, the first of the association's driver safety programs, providing local schools with materials (including badges and ID cards[6]) to train and organize students into a patrol force. The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, which conducts studies on motorist safety, was established as a separate entity in 1947.[citation needed]

AAA created an organization called the Racing Board, and later known as the Contest Board, in 1902 to officiate the Vanderbilt Cup international automobile race in Long Island, New York. The Racing Board sanctioned the Indianapolis 500 and awarded national racing championships in 1905, 1916, 1920â€"1941, and 1946â€"1955.[7] After the 1955 Le Mans disaster, AAA decided that auto racing distracted from its primary goals, and the United States Automobile Club was formed to take over the race sanctioning/officiating. In 2005, AAA re-entered racing as a sponsor of ISC-owned tracks. In 2006, AAA's foray into racing expanded when it made a three-year commitment to sponsor Roush Racing's number 6 car on the NASCAR Nextel Circuit.[citation needed]

In 1935, AAA published Sportsmanlike Driving, the first course outline for high school teachers. In 1936, AAA published the first driver education curriculum for use in high schools (also titled Sportsmanlike Driving, now known as Responsible Driving).[8] AAA has updated its driver training courses throughout the years and many clubs currently offer their own driving schools, or work with other companies to provide AAAâ€™s driving curriculum.[9]

Knowing that vehicles pose a hazard to pedestrians, in 1936 AAA began a pedestrian safety program with a grant from the Automotive Safety Foundation. AAA went on to commission and publish (1938) an extensive study of pedestrian safety for the purpose of reducing pedestrian

fatalities and injuries. AAA's Pedestrian Protection Program began in 1937 and focuses national attention on pedestrian safety needs by recognizing cities, counties and states that have demonstrated successful pedestrian safety programs.[10]

AAA has also provided services to the U.S. government in times of war. During the 1940s, AAA offered its services to the Advisory Commission of the Council of National Defense[11] in anticipation of becoming involved in World War II. AAA President Thomas P. Henry was appointed consultant in the transportation unit of the Defense Council, and AAA pledged resources, including highway information, to national defense planning efforts as it had during World War I.[12]

The end of the war brought new needs for motorists and AAA assisted by releasing the film "Traffic Jam Ahead", which outlined a practical program for postwar traffic safety, and publishing Post-war Travel Trends as a public service. In 1946, AAA launched a campaign called "Take It Easy", which was designed to reduce traffic fatalities. Subsequently, fatalities dropped 20 percent below the pre-war figure.[15]

In the 1960s, AAA helped draft the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966, setting safety standards for automobiles, tires, and equipment. AAA also helped draft the Highway Safety Act, specifying standards for motor vehicle inspection and registration, motorcycle safety, driver education, driver licensing, traffic courts, highway design, construction, maintenance, and traffic control devices.[16]

During the oil crisis of the 1970s, the AAA Fuel Gauge Report was created to assist motorists in finding gas stations that had fuel and were open. AAA also began its Gas Watchers program with the endorsement of President Gerald Ford. The Gas Watchers Guide continues to be published to provide simple steps motorists can take to conserve gasoline in their daily driving.[17]

In 1979, President Jimmy Carter appointed AAA President James B. Creal to the National Alcohol Fuels Commission. Creal also chaired a task force on gas rationing and was appointed to President Carter's National Council on Energy Efficiency. AAA representatives serving on President Carter's Alcohol Fuels Commission were requested to sign the Energy Securities Act of 1980. In addition, Creal served on the Industries Advisory Board of Congressional Travel and Tourism Caucus in the early 1980s.[18]

In the 1980s, AAA's mapping services received significant recognition when scenic highways were identified on AAA's sheet maps for the first time. AAA maps were used in the 1984 Louisiana World Exposition where more than 13,000 full-color AAA map images were provided on an optical laser disc for demonstration of an in-car navigation device in the Chrysler Pavilion. And in 1985 the AAA North American Road Atlas was sold at retail for the first time and made the New York Times best-seller paperback list within six weeks. AAA experimented in the 1980s with the On-line Touring Information System (OTIS), which eventually was combined with other automated services under the name AAA Travel Match. The self-service terminal worked like an ATM, with rotating menus and touch-control screens that allowed users to obtain local travel information.[19]

The AAA School Safety Patrol Program and Lifesaving Medal Award won the Presidential Citation Award for Private Sector Initiatives which honors outstanding volunteer projects in 1985.[20] A year later, on February 4, 1986, President Ronald Reagan honored a recipient of AAA's School Safety Patrol Lifesaving Medal in his State of the Union Address.[citation needed]

AAA joined government and private-sector companies—the Federal Highway Administration, Avis, General Motors and the Florida Department of Transportation—in 1990 for the Smart Car experiment, also known as the TravTek Project. This test of a computerized in-car navigation and travel information system demonstrated consumer acceptance of telematics technology that would make driving easier and reduce traffic congestion.[21][22]

A new driver's education program, "Teaching Teens to Drive", was introduced by AAA in 1996 to focus on parent involvement in teen driving education. A year later, in 1997, AAA launched Licensed

to Learn, a campaign to increase awareness of the need for Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) laws in every state. At the outset of the campaign only eight states had enacted GDL laws. Today, all 50 states and the District of Columbia have enacted some form of GDL legislation.[23]

Research in the 1990s led AAA to pursue another issue of importance to US motorists: a transportation crisis resulting from infrastructure that had been under-funded for many years. The Crisis Ahead: America's Aging Highways and Airways research led to AAA helping to shape two pieces of landmark legislation: the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) in 1998 and the Aviation Investment and Reform Act for the 21st Century (AIR-21) in 2000.[24] Both laws embrace the principle that user fees charged to motorists and air travelers should be fully invested in improving and modernizing the nation's surface and air transportation infrastructures.[25][26][27]

Because of its work in traffic safety AAA was cited in 1998 as the Clinton administration's number one traffic safety partner by U.S. Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater. And in 2000, NHTSA presented AAA with a public service award in appreciation of AAA's leadership in the Child Passenger Safety Certification Program, which teaches how to properly install infant/child safety seats, and for its continuing efforts in Graduated Driver Licensing.[28]

Skyrocketing gas prices led AAA to testify before three Congressional committees regarding increased gasoline prices in 2000, and to lobby to prevent Congress from repealing parts of the federal gasoline tax, which would have reduced Highway Trust Fund revenue without guaranteeing consumers any relief from high gas prices.[29][30][31] Participating in the U.S. Department of Transportation secretary's Aviation Summit, AAA President and CEO Robert L. Darbelnet communicated AAA's stand on the aviation crisis saying that consistent underfunding of the nation's air transportation infrastructure had led to the crisis and offering a four-point plan to help turn it around.[32] Also that year, AAA testified before Congress and the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, on proposed hours-of-service regulations for commercial truck drivers and launched Share With Care, a public education campaign on safely sharing the road with trucks.[33]

In the early 2000s (decade), AAA's focus on helping seniors stay mobile longer and more safely led to an appointment to the White House Conference on Aging.[34] AAA promoted solutions such as senior-friendly road design, screening tools, education for seniors and their families, and supplemental transportation. Reader's Digest highlighted AAA's transportation safety agenda by focusing on the importance of road safety improvements, particularly for seniors.[35] To help seniors become safer drivers or to recognize signs that it's time to stop driving, AAA developed Roadwise Review, a computer-based screening tool enabling older drivers to identify and address physiological changes that could affect driving.[36]

Members belong to one of 69 individual clubs (see List of AAA regional clubs), and the clubs in turn own AAA. The number of local clubs has decreased over time through consolidation; as late as the 1970s the membership roster included dozens of clubs that each served a single county, particularly in New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania. The member clubs have arranged a reciprocal service system so that members of any participating club are able to receive member services from any other affiliate club. Member dues finance all club services as well as the operations of the national organization.

From the standpoint of the consumer, AAA clubs primarily provide emergency road services to members. These services, which include towing, lockouts, winching, tire changes, automotive first aid, and others, are handled by private local towing companies contracted by a state AAA club. AAA sells roadside assistance for a variety of motor vehicles, including motorcycles. In some areas, AAA also offers bicycle roadside assistance. Many AAA clubs have an automotive fleet division serving large metro areas, while private towing companies cover the surplus call volume by area. Recently, certain clubs have implemented an "on the go" diagnostic/installation automotive battery program.[39]

Clubs also distribute road maps (including customized map guides for specific journeys, branded as "TripTik") and travel publications (TourBooks), and rate restaurants and hotels according to a

"diamond" scale (one to five). The best hotels and restaurants according to AAA's criteria receive the Five Diamond Award. Many offices sell automobile liability insurance, provide travel agency, auto-registration and notary services. Maps, TourBooks, and travel agent services are generally free to members. AAA also offers member discounts through its "Show Your Card & Save" program.[40]

The AAA has reciprocal arrangements with a range of international affiliates. In general, members of affiliates are offered the same benefits as members of the AAA while traveling in the United States, while AAA members are offered equivalent benefits while traveling in the territory of the affiliate.

The AAA is known for occasional high profile motorist advisories of traffic enforcement, such as when it rented a billboard to warn motorists of the speed trap town of Lawtey, Florida.[41] It also is a supporter of the Motor Vehicle Owners' Right to Repair Act, first introduced in 2001 but which has not become law.

In 2001, AAA launched its Great Battery Roundup to encourage motorists to recycle old automobile batteries, tires and various types of automotive fluids. Since then more than 4 million batteries have been recycled through that program and the mobile battery service. Typically held around Earth Day, AAA clubs often team up with other environmental organization such as the EPA and the Nature Conservancy to expand these recycling efforts.[51]

In 2006, AAA worked with the EPA to improve the fuel economy information provided to new car buyers by vehicle manufacturers. Using several different types of tests AAA recreated real-world driving conditions to illustrate the difference in fuel economy, and the EPA incorporated AAA's testing into their new procedures. The more accurate testing resulted in a reduction of miles per gallon claims from 5 to 25 percent, beginning with 2008 model year vehicles.[52]

As fuel prices rise, consumers often see increased marketing of fuel additives as a way to boost fuel economy. AAA has tested many of these products and has never found one that provides significant savings for consumers. AAA has warned consumers repeatedly against products that make such claims and encourages motorists to instead develop fuel-conserving driving habits such as reducing the weight of the vehicle by removing unnecessary objects from the trunk, smooth stops and starts, and reducing their speed.[53]

It is generally understood that the benefits of fuel conservation for consumers include financial savings, improved road safety and a healthier environment. To assist motorists in becoming more conscious about saving fuel, AAA published its first Gas Watcher's Guide in the 1970s during the oil crisis. The annual guide provides information on a variety of factors that affect fuel economy such as driving behaviors, keeping a vehicle well maintained, choosing the proper fuel, and choosing the most fuel-efficient vehicle for a family's needs.[54]

Over the years, AAA has encouraged consumers to use public transportation by including these transportation options in its travel guidebooks. AAA has also called on government to invest adequately in a multi-modal transportation system that is widely accessible and affordable. In comments to the National Journal AAA President and CEO Robert L. Darbelnet said that funding for high-speed rail from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is a "drop in the bucket" of what is needed, and that those funds would be well spent if, going forward, additional sources of investment could be identified.[55]

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