

Mayor Rhodes-Conway: City of Madison prepares to sue Kia and Hyundai for failure to prevent car thefts with standard anti-theft technology

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This week, the Madison Common Council will vote to authorize a federal lawsuit against car manufacturers Kia and Hyundai for their failure to install industry standard anti-theft technology in millions of their vehicles.

The City is taking action to force Hyundai and Kia to do what's right—fix their cars and put an end to the crime wave that could have been prevented had they simply followed industry-wide standards and installed anti-theft technology in the first place.

“Madison residents deserve better,” said Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway. “These corporations cut corners and put people at risk. In their search for profits, they pushed the costs of keeping people safe off to cities like Madison. That’s unacceptable.”

In the summer of 2022, thefts of Kia and Hyundai cars in Madison increased by 270% compared to the previous summer. Hyundai and Kia vehicles accounted for just under half of all vehicle theft in Madison between July and August 2022.

“These are not just numbers – they represent Madison residents who have had their vehicles stolen and lives disrupted; police officers taken away from their regular duties; and bystanders put in danger by the reckless driving that often accompanied these thefts,” said Mayor Rhodes-Conway.

For instance, on July 26th 2022, a resident called the Madison Police Department after her vehicle, a black 2017 Kia Soul, was stolen out of a parking garage on Gemini Drive. The next afternoon, officers were dispatched to a crash at the intersection of Marsh and Voges Roads, where they found a black Kia Soul resting against a tree, catching fire while officers were on scene.

“This real-world example is one of many that have taxed City resources, while putting City staff, residents and infrastructure in danger because of the manufacturer’s failure to install industry standard anti-theft technology in their vehicles,” added the Mayor.

The absence of engine immobilizers in certain Hyundai and Kia vehicles has made those vehicles incredibly susceptible to theft. Recently, this susceptibility led to a viral social media trend, in which young people posted videos joyriding in Kia and Hyundai cars they had stolen using only a USB cable.

“The issue was so public early on that there were videos readily accessible online showing people how to steal these vehicles using a USB, yet the manufacturers issued no recall and have only recently offered free upgrades to these vehicle owners,” said Mayor Rhodes-Conway.

Studies by the Highway Loss Data Institute regularly show that vehicle theft losses significantly decreased after the industry introduced immobilizer devices. Despite this, only 26 percent of the 2015 vehicle series for Hyundai and Kia models were equipped with standard immobilizers, compared to 96 percent of all other makes combined. Although Kia and Hyundai were aware of the public safety concerns arising from the huge spike in theft of their vehicles, they have not taken meaningful steps to address this problem.

The City of Madison has expended substantial resources investigating, responding

to, and prosecuting crimes related to these thefts.

“We saw an alarming spike in the number of Kia and Hyundai vehicles stolen this past summer,” said Madison Police Chief Shon Barnes. “We handed out wheel locks, held outreach events and went door-to-door hoping to prevent these thefts. Months later, we are still dealing with this problem. It’s too soon to say how the security upgrade announced this week may impact things, but we remain committed in doing our part to keep our community safe.”

The resolution, sponsored by Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway and Alder Erik Paulson, authorizes the City Attorney to retain outside counsel to file suit against the carmakers for their role in creating a public nuisance.

“With the assistance of the Seattle law firm Keller Rohrback L.L.P., the City of Madison seeks to protect consumers and is working with other municipalities to hold Kia and Hyundai accountable for the public safety hazard they created, decrease vehicle theft in Madison, and alleviate the rising costs and burdens on the City and its taxpayers” said City Attorney Mike Haas. “Fighting for our residents and ensuring public safety are two of our main responsibilities as stewards of this City and through this action we will continue working to achieve justice for our community.”

The resolution will be considered at the March 7th 2023 Common Council meeting.