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Local & Entertainment

“Car fire victim awarded \$5 million”

By William Outlaw

Richfield man wins suit contending Toyota’s fuel system poorly designed

A jury Friday handed down one of the largest civil awards ever in Summit County Common Pleas Court when it decided in favor of a Richfield man who was severely burned in a car fire he claimed was caused by the faulty design of his 1987 Toyota Camry.

After sitting through several weeks of testimony, jurors deliberated about five hours over two days before awarding Dale Magistrelli \$5 million for his injuries. “I’m glad the jury did what they did because it’s important to me that no one gets injured like I did,” Magistrelli, 43 said.

And while \$5 million is a substantial award, Magistrelli said it “would be impossible” to make up for his injuries.

Magistrelli was severely burned over 40 percent of his body after he drove off Alger Road in Broadview Heights in 1989, hit a tree and his station wagon caught fire.

Magistrelli’s face, ears, hand and legs were burned, leaving him visibly scarred.

His attorneys argued that Toyota’s design was faulty because the fuel pump continued to function after the accident, spewing gasoline under the hood and feeding a fire that worked its way into the passenger compartment.

But Toyota attorney Hugh Bode said that rather than being based upon facts, the jury’s verdict was the result of innuendo and parlor tricks by the defense.

“There was absolutely no evidence to support this verdict,” Bode said. Toyota plans to appeal.

The largest award ever in the court is believed to have been the \$7.8 million won last year by former bank vice president Ed Turner, who contended Bank One, his former employer, went to its way to destroy his reputation.

The bank appealed the award, and the case was settled for an undisclosed amount in December.