



Airstream Tech Help Group

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This group, part of the WBCCI Technical Standing Committee, has been established to help the membership with any of their technical RV problems. Examples of questions that might be of interest to many members will be published in the Blue Beret. We will respond directly to you, in response to your email or letter describing a problem you are having. We hope you will find this new service of value in the care and feeding of your RV. You may contact us as follows: techhelp@wbcci.org or by mail: Howard Lefkowitz, 11508 Colt Terrace, Silver Spring, MD 20902

EXTENDED SERVICE PLAN

QUESTION: I doubt if you'll remember us, but we were neighbors in 2008 at Region 2 Rally outside of Ottawa. I then attended your workshop (very interesting) and have retained your manual. We own a 1999 Airstream Cutter (Diesel pusher) (new in 1998) MH with almost 90,000 miles. We have been invited to buy an extended service plan from Good Sam which appears to have reasonably good coverage. (Perhaps you are familiar with it?) The cost is \$1,368.00 with a \$500.00 deductible. The unit has been relatively trouble free. We have maintained it fairly well, oil and tranny fluid changes, tire replacements, etc. The only major costs we had was with a diesel generator breakdown.

I would value your opinion before I make this sizeable investment. Let me know if you need additional information.

Hank

ANSWER: I would not recommend a service plan for a trailer. There are just not enough high service cost items to justify a service policy. A motorhome, however, is an entirely different case. There are many areas which could represent significant potential service costs, i.e. engine overhaul, transmission rebuild, differential, axles, power jacks, air system, generator, refrigerator, etc. This is true for both gas and diesel RV's although much more so for the diesel.

My new 2006 motorhome came with a full warranty when I purchased it in 2008. After 1 1/2 years I thought I had a problem with the Aqua-Hot System, (coach furnace and hot water system) due to extended freezing temperatures. When I described the problem to the vendor they said I needed a new heat exchanger and they just happened to have a used unit for \$5,500. I asked the cost for the complete system and it was \$11,000. It turned out not to be defective and all I needed was some additional anti-freeze (the overflow bottle was empty after sitting for two months). Since I also have a washer/dryer, dishwasher, 12 KW generator, two Dometic A/C's, etc., I decided to get a seven year service plan. Also,

I am getting a little long in the tooth to climb under the rig or on the roof to do my own service work. This seven year policy cost \$3,000 with a \$50 deductible.

My 1989 Classic motorhome (traded in on the 2006) transmission failed in 2008 on a Caravan. The rebuild cost was \$980 although the tow was covered by my insurance coverage. Unfortunately the rebuild failed three weeks later and I had to be towed over 120 miles to the repair shop. The fix was free but this time I had to pay the tow cost which was over \$1,000. They use the 18 wheeler tow vehicles on motorhomes and the costs are unreal. Make sure you at least have a policy to cover towing, tire changing, low battery problems, etc.

The considerations for getting an extended service plan are:

1. Having major potential high service cost items.
2. Age of the machine and probability of a failure.
3. Ability to do some of the work yourself.
4. What items have already been replaced or repaired.
5. If the cost seems to be reasonable but the deductible is substantial, the deductible is probably too high. Check the rates for a deductible about \$100 to \$200.
6. Virtually all service contracts are sold through dealers so do not be afraid to bargain. If your dealer is a repair shop, and you might want to use them, they will usually reduce the deductible in half for any repairs they do.
7. At 90,000 miles I think it might not be a bad idea unless you can do some major repairs yourself.

By the way, I researched a number of the available service contracts for RV motorhomes and found quite a few horror stories on the Internet. Many of them are worthless and you can spend months trying to get paid. Two quality companies I found were Progressive (Xtra Ride) and Good Sam. I checked both of these with a few service shops I know and got good recommendations. You should only get a policy that pays the repair shop directly. You do not want one which requires you to pay directly and then "the check is in the mail."

Howard

BREAKAWAY SWITCH WIRES & CABLE LENGTH

Switch Wire Problem: I have had two reports of the insulation on the switch wires wearing through and the wires shorting together. In both cases this occurred where the wires go underneath the propane bottle cover. I checked a number of trailers at International and found a few with extra tape on the wires but most of them just had the plain wires. The cover can evidently bounce on the wires and over time, wear through the insulation. The cover then shorts the wires together which is the same as pulling the breakaway switch cable and actuating the brakes. When this occurs all of the brakes are immediately locked since it is assumed that the trailer has broken free from the tow vehicle and must be stopped.

In one case the trailer was getting ready to be parked and there was no damage since everything stopped when the brakes locked up. In the other case this occurred at highway speeds which resulted in all of the tires having flat spots and one broken axle (a very expensive failure).

Obtain a 4" piece of, 1/4 or 3/8 inch interior dimension, vinyl tubing and slit it down the side. Remove the propane cover and slip this over the wires with the slit facing sideways. Then wrap the tubing securely with electric tape so it can be installed under the propane cover. This will protect the wire insulation from excessive wear.

Question: I have heard several different opinions on how long my breakaway switch cable should be. What is the correct length?

Answer: The actual length depends on the distance from your tow vehicle mounting point to the switch mounted on your 'A' frame. The purpose of this switch is to turn on the brakes, using the trailer coach batteries, only if the trailer has completely broken away and is starting to roll down the road. You do not want the brakes to come on under any other circumstance. For example, even if the hitch platform or the coupling ball broke and the 'A' frame falls on the chains you can slowly come to a controlled stop even at highway speeds. You do not want the trailer brakes to come on in this situation.

The proper cable length should be as long as possible so it does not drag on the ground. It should, as a minimum, not actuate the breakaway switch unless the trailer has completely broken free from the tow vehicle. If you have made a nice neat looking loop with your cable it is probably too short. You can run it over the chains just make sure it cannot get tangled and will pull straight out if needed. To work effectively it must be properly attached to the towed vehicle.

Remember, you are liable for any damage or consequences that occur if your towed vehicle breaks free.

You should test your switch every year when you get ready for the camping season. While hooked to the tow vehicle, first remove your main electrical cable, and then pull the switch key. You should not be able to move the trailer with the wheels locked. The reason for removing the main cable is to prevent damage to the tow vehicle computer and/or circuit boards. With all of the brakes on there is a significant current draw and you do not want that current spike to come from the tow vehicle.

Howard

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