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AP

Ford announces new self-parking technology

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By Erin Conroy, AP Business Writer

Ford to debut vehicles that parallel park with the push of a button at Detroit auto show

NEW YORK (AP) -- Sit back, relax and let your car parallel park itself -- without a single scratch or ding to your bumper.

That's what Ford Motor Co. said Tuesday about its new self-parking technology, which it announced will debut as an option on the 2010 Lincoln MKS sedan and the new seven-passenger Lincoln MKT luxury crossover vehicle.

The technology uses ultrasonic sensors on the front and rear of the vehicle, combined with electric power steering to angle and guide it into a snug parking space -- all with the push of a button.

Ford isn't the first to introduce cars that practically park themselves. Toyota Motor Corp.'s Lexus luxury line has a video camera-based parking system that can calculate whether the vehicle has enough clearance for a particular spot.

But Ford's technology is easier to use and works in downhill parking situations, unlike competing systems, according to Ford's president of the Americas, Mark Fields.

"This one-touch function will be much safer to use and less intimidating," Fields said. "It's all part of our strategy to introduce smart technology to a vehicle that will make our lives easier."

The driver will still need to shift the transmission and operate the gas and brake pedals, as a visual or audible driver interface advises about the proximity of other cars, objects and people. Still, the driver never has to touch the steering wheel.

The sensor system also monitors blind spots, and can notify the driver with a warning indicator light in the side view mirror if something is detected or if traffic is approaching. Meanwhile, the electric power steering can improve fuel economy and reduce carbon emissions because it is powered by the vehicle's battery rather than hydraulic pump systems, Ford said.

The company plans to fit nearly 90 percent of its Ford, Lincoln and Mercury vehicles with electric power steering by 2012.

The parking assistance technology will be featured at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit in January, and will be available in its new models in mid-2009.

Among Detroit's automakers, Ford is considered the best positioned to weather the industry slump and has said it does not need federal loans to survive, but its sales have withered and its stock has plunged.

Fields said pricing on the new models wasn't available, but added he believes it's an affordable way to eliminate unease about parking.

"I don't know about you, but when I was taking my driving test, parallel parking was the most stressful part," he said.