

Highway 14 is just southern Minnesota's killer joke

Scene: A stretch of Highway 14 between Mankato and Waseca.

Time: An autumn night in 1999.

Circumstance: The usual, only this time in spades. Our car is part of a quarter-mile-long convoy of peeved drivers putting along at 45 mph. Also as usual, no one can pass on the congested two-lane, so the line keeps getting longer.

The lollygagging motorist in the lead is screwing things up for everyone, and a recipe for tragedy unfolds. Impatience breeds risk, and you wonder:

How long before someone makes the fatal decision of trying to pass, and ends up as yet another cannibalization of this Hannibal Lector of a highway?

For the past two years, visitors to the Minnesota Highway Construction Industry Council's booth at the state fair have been asked to vote for their choice as the state's worst highway. Each year, Highway 14, particularly

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Free Press



the stretch between Mankato and Rochester, has won easily.

This comes as no surprise to anyone even casually familiar with this winding, treacherous, donkey trail of a roadway that in the past five years has hosted 27 accident deaths. That's double the state fatality average for all roads, but who's counting, right?

Actually, the Highway 14 Partners is. The group of public and private-sector stakeholders along the road's New Ulm-to-Rochester corridor is on a mission.

Their quest: to upgrade the

Eagle Lake-to-Owatonna stretch to a four-lane as swiftly as possible. In turn, this would spur completion several years earlier than the projected 2013 for four-lane installation along the entire 287 miles of Highway 14.

The group is lobbying for a \$32 million federal grant to speed up the project and thereby allay what the group's grant proposal calls "danger at every turn."

The phrase isn't mere hype. Booby-trappings abound on one of the state's most-traveled highways. Heavy truck traffic mingles with slow-moving cars, blind intersections pop up like arcade ducks, and if the unexpected curves don't get you, the narrow lanes and crummy shoulders will.

The highway jukes here, jogs there, traverses hill, dale and cloverleaf and, at some points, goes schizo, changing abruptly from four lanes to two, and

sometimes to three. Then there are the side roads and driveways that spill onto it — about 150 in the Mankato-to-Owatonna stretch alone.

Stopgap repairs and improvements have eased, but not erased, the highway's scary charms, one of which is the road's surface. A few years ago my car began vibrating so severely I thought I had a flat. Turned out it was just a stretch of frost-heaved washboard roadbed. Lucky me.

The hairiest facet of Highway 14 might be in Waseca, where the highway is routed directly through a grade-school street crossing. Each day, crossing guards face the lovely task of trying not to get kids killed by 18-wheelers hauling hogs and what-not.

Fortunately, the kids have so far been spared, although a 75-year-old crossing guard was

badly hurt two years ago when struck by a sun-blinded driver.

The high-commerce, traffic-intensive St. Cloud/Twin Cities/Rochester axis is informally referred to as the "golden triangle." Mankato's growing emergence as a regional center has positioned it to join that group, thereby forming the "golden rectangle," if you will.

But that scenario is being hamstrung by a highway whose upgrade to 100 percent four-lane cannot come too soon.

Meanwhile, the accident mayhem continues — and the irony of Highway 14's route screams like an ambulance siren: At least this bloody road leads straight to Mayo Clinic.

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Mankato Free Press

January - 2001