

New way of the highway Highway 14 expansion opens

**By Dylan Thomas
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JANESVILLE —

After more than two years of construction, the four-lane expansion of Highway 14 from just west of Janesville to the edge of Waseca opened Thursday morning.

Abruptly, quiet returned to little Smith's Mill.

"Thank God," exclaimed Vicky McNeely, who lives with her husband, Joe, on Waseca County Road 37.

Thousands of cars passed the McNeely home every day during the four months or so Highway 14 traffic was detoured through Smith's Mill.

"Sometimes you'd sit there five minutes to get out," Joe McNeely said, pointing to the end of his driveway.

As the McNeelys spoke, their voices were nearly drowned out by the rumble of a train passing a block away. Almost shouting, they explained that a train is the kind of noise one grows accustomed to, but the semi-trailers jake-braking in front of their house were unbearable.

"If you had the windows open in the living room, you couldn't even hear the TV," Vicky McNeely said.

It was a rough summer. But Joe McNeely said the inconvenience was worth it if the construction will make his work commute to Waseca safer and less congested.

Begun in 2004, the \$34.4 million project is one phase in a larger Minnesota Department of Transportation plan to expand Highway 14 to four lanes from two. The next phase takes the expansion east, from Waseca to Owatonna.

The road work between Janesville and Waseca was originally scheduled for 2005 to 2009. But the project was fast-tracked when it was included in the \$900 million Pawlenty-Molnau Transportation Finance Bill in 2003.

Both Gov. Tim Pawlenty and Lt. Gov. Carol Molnau reportedly will attend today's grand opening celebration in Janesville. And they are expected to make an announcement regarding the next phase of the expansion.

Rebecca Arndt, MnDOT's Mankato district spokeswoman, could not reveal details, but hinted the announcement may change the timeline for road construction between Waseca and Owatonna. Arndt said Thursday MnDOT had not pulled together all the funding it needs for the project, yet.

Whatever happens east of Janesville, the Highway 14 expansion has already changed that city

remarkably. Where dozens of vehicles normally would be idling at the city's single stop light, a trickle of traffic flowed on clear, calm streets Thursday afternoon.

Monte Larson, owner of Hwy 14 Auto and Motor Sports, said he had his head buried under a car hood at about 9 a.m. when the bypass opened. When Larson finally looked up, things were suddenly "a lot quieter."

Larson said he had heard murmurs of concern in the Janesville business community about the lack of traffic now passing their storefronts. With most of his business coming from in town, Larson said he was not particularly concerned.

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