

Next phase of Highway 14 moves up Waseca-to-Owatonna now set for 2008

**By Dylan Thomas
The Free Press**

JANESVILLE —

Plans to expand Highway 14 to four lanes between Waseca and Owatonna have been pushed up at least three years with construction now scheduled to begin in 2008.

The early start date was announced Friday as state and local leaders gathered to mark the opening of a four-lane section between Janesville and Waseca.

Local Minnesota Department of Transportation officials welcomed the news, but acknowledged the \$130 million project would take resources from other local roadway improvements in coming years.

Before moving east with the expansion, they paused to admire the new roadway opened to traffic Thursday morning.

Those who crowded Friday beneath a new highway overpass outside Janesville heard a parade of politicians praise the benefits of the expansion, including Gov. Tim Pawlenty and Sen. Norm Coleman.

Pawlenty framed the expansion as a quality-of-life issue.

“Highway 14, over the years, has been one of the most neglected and dangerous roads in the state,” he said.

The governor and others said the project would not only make the highway safer, but boost the economic health of communities along the regional corridor.

His announcement that funding had been secured for the next phase of the project was greeted with cheers from the crowd.

“As far as I’m concerned, it’s on to Owatonna with Highway 14,” Pawlenty said.

Half of the funding, about \$65 million, will come from the federal Statewide Corridor Fund. The remaining \$65 million will come from the MnDOT’s Mankato district construction budget.

Lisa Bigham, Mankato district planning director, said moving forward with the Highway 14 expansion will drain funding for other area MnDOT projects.

“It’s going to wipe out our whole program” in fiscal year 2009, Bigham said.

When expansion work begins in July 2008, other roadway preservation and construction projects will be put off for at least a year. But with the federal funds available now, it was an opportunity the district could not pass up.

“We can’t not take this money,” Bigham said.

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