

Officials lobby for Hwy. 14 funds

► Kennedy meets with politicians, business leaders to assess needs

By Tim Krohn
Free Press Staff Writer

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MANKATO — Representatives from a coalition of cities and counties along Highway 14 were hoping to get a commitment of support from Congressman Mark Kennedy for \$32 million in special federal funding for improving the highway.

Kennedy, who is on a key House highway funding committee, said he was dedicated to improving highways and getting more funding for Minnesota, but he said he must gather information about needs across the state before deciding which projects he'll

put at the top of his list.

Kennedy, R-Watertown, represents the Second District, which covers all of southwest Minnesota. He, and Rep. James Oberstar, DFL-Duluth, of the 8th District, are the only two Minnesota congressional members on the House Transportation Committee.

In 2003, that committee will be instrumental in crafting the huge five-year highway funding bill.

On Friday, in Mankato, about 40 elected officials from area counties, cities and townships as well as private business leaders, met with Kennedy pushing their case for extra funding in the 2003 bill.

The injection of funds would speed up construction of a four-lane highway by two

to three years, according to Mankato City Manager Pat Hentges. He, and other members of the Highway 14 Partnership, told Kennedy the highway is one of the most deadly and that it impedes economic development.

"The road has serious safety problems," said Hentges, noting that 65 people have been killed in the past 15 years on the stretch of Highway 14 from Kasson to New Ulm, about twice the average highway death rate in Minnesota.

Turning 14 into a four-lane highway from Mankato to Rochester has been a long-time goal, and segments have been completed or are in progress.

Over the next nine years, more than \$125 million in four-lane construction is

planned from east of Mankato to Owatonna. Partnership members said \$32 million in special "demonstration project" funding from the federal government would be used to accelerate construction around Janesville.

The coalition of Highway 14 supporters, aware that none of the current construction is within Kennedy's district, said that the sooner this part of the project gets done, the quicker plans can move ahead for a four-lane going west to New Ulm, which is in his district.

Rep. Gil Gutknecht, R-Rochester, who represents the 1st District of southeastern Minnesota, is supportive of additional funding for the project.

Besides safety issues, speakers told Kennedy that improv-

ing Highway 14, which cuts across the width of southern Minnesota, is a huge economic development project.

Dennis Miller, of Midwest Wireless in Mankato, said that if and when the highway is all four-lane, "The economic development will be nothing short of astounding."

Brian Fazio, who works for a development agency trying to attract new industry and commercial businesses to the area, said the current condition of Highway 14 hamstrings the area.

"I'm like a boxer with my arms tied behind my back when it comes to talking to prospective [businesses]," Fazio said. Once those industries see the highway system here, he said, "they don't call back."