

Kennedy backs Highway 14 upgrades

By **RON LARSEN**
Journal Staff Writer

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MANKATO—U.S. Rep. Mark Kennedy was happy to see large and broad-based support for improving the U.S. Highway 14 corridor from Rochester to New Ulm by U.S. Highway 14 Partnership members meeting here Friday because “we are significantly under-investing in our roads in Minnesota.”

Specifically, the partnership, which includes 25 local governments and 65 businesses and organizations along the corridor, wanted Kennedy’s support for including \$32 million for the project in the next five-year highway funding bill. The funds will help start work on widening the highway to four lanes on the “Janesville” segment which runs from State Highway 60 just east of Eagle Lake to Interstate 35 at Owatonna. The project would need to be included in the 2003 congressional funding bill.

The Second District Republican said there is hope for improving upon that under-investing because Minnesota now has two congressmen on the House Transportation Committee, himself and Eighth District Congressman James Oberstar, a Democrat.

“We like to say there’s only one party—it’s the roads party,” Kennedy said. “I also tell people that my name is Mark R. Kennedy, and the ‘R’ stands for roads.”

“My project for next year is to prioritize the state’s projects,” said Kennedy. “I’m going to fight as hard as I can to bring more money into the state for important (road) projects.”

Asked by State Rep. Ruth Johnson of St. Peter what the group could do to help, Kennedy said “writing letters to us is im-

portant, working with MNDOT (Minnesota Department of Transportation) because they have a say in this is important, and furnishing us with figures on what this means in economic development along the corridor is vitally important.”

In his opening comments, Kennedy explained there are two transportation funds, transit and highway, and there is considerable competition from urban areas for money from both funds.

“And I happen to represent one of the most, if not the most rural district in the nation, so it will be a challenge,” Kennedy said.

Mankato’s city manager, Pat Hentges, presented an overview of the proposed project schedule for U.S. Highway 14 construction through 2010.

Under the proposed schedule, construction of the fourth segment between Owatonna and State Highway 60 near Eagle Lake, proposed to start 2007-2010, would bring the four-lane highway into North Mankato.

“The \$32 million will allow us to expedite the corridor expansion by two years, and with some minor changes in design, three years,” Hentges said.

The North Mankato-New Ulm segment is only in the initial “scoping” stage which includes environmental documentation and preliminary design, Hentges said, so it does not appear yet on the proposed project schedule.

Hentges told Kennedy the overall corridor expansion is needed because it provides access for economic development, as well as to agricultural markets, and increased traffic safety.

“There have been 68 traffic deaths between Kasson and New Ulm in the past 15 years, and most occurred on the undeveloped areas of the highway,” Hentges said. “That’s why the highway is con-

sidered the worst highway in Minnesota by the public.”

Another Mankato city official added, “There have been 29 deaths in the last five years alone so for every year we expedite this project, we save six lives.”

Mankato-based Midwest Wireless CEO Dennis Miller said his company’s operation is a testimony to the need for an improved highway.

“We have over 300 employees and to obtain them we need to draw from farther west than New Ulm and farther east than Waseca, and we are concerned about those who have to travel Highway 14 every day.”

Another Mankato businessman told Kennedy, “It’s not only about creating new economic development but also in maintaining the economic development we now have.”

Kennedy who was chief financial officer for Shopco before running for Congress replied, “You don’t have to tell a retailer how important roads are.”

New Ulm City Councilor Joel Albrecht, accompanied to the meeting by City Manager Brian Gramentz and Economic Development Coordinator Brian Tohal, told Kennedy, “We’re the only community of our size in Minnesota that is not served by a four-lane highway. We know that the work on the Janesville segment speeds it up for us, and we ask your support.”

“Those who know New Ulm understand why it’s important to get people from Rochester and Mankato to New Ulm to enjoy the fine cuisine and other attractions it has to offer,” Kennedy replied, smiling.

“It’s true that we also have to think of not only bringing it to New Ulm, but to continue it on west,” he said.