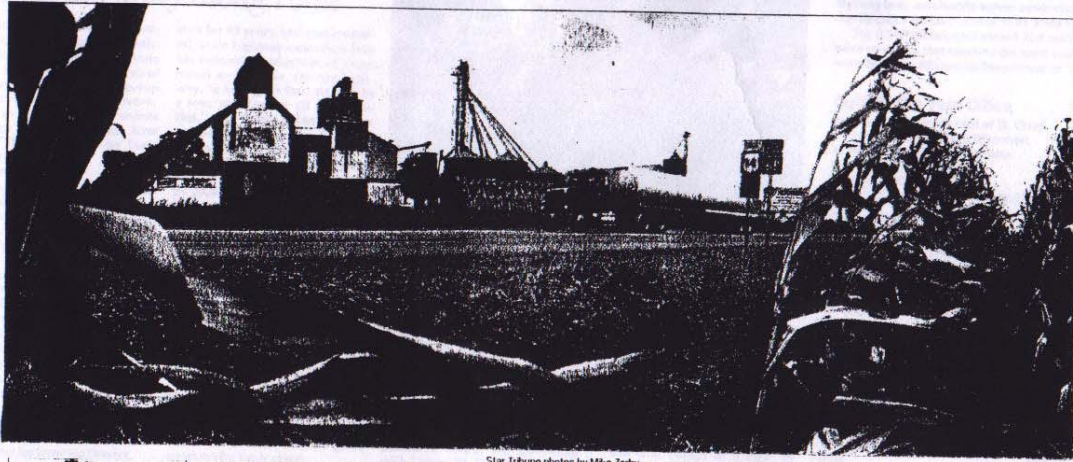


# History paved with problems



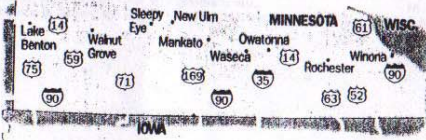
Star Tribune photos by Mike Zerby

**ESSIG:** Hwy. 14 and its accompanying semitrailer trucks snake through southern Minnesota's agricultural heartland, where corn and soybeans are starting to fill bins like those at Brown County Feed Service, above.



**FLOWVILLE:** Debris and prose mark the site of historic pledges of crop price supports in the 1952 presidential race.

Highway 14's rolling lanes and colorful past are clouded by complaints about a crowded, treacherous road and its seemingly eternal state of flux and disrepair.



Star Tribune map



**WASECA:** The busy route can be a challenge for crossing guards at Central Intermediate School. A bypass south of town is planned for sometime in the next decade. Les Wells (guiding bicyclists Ben Roycraft, left, and Hector Rios above) says it's needed now.

By Robert Franklin  
Star Tribune Staff Writer

**ALONG HWY. 14 IN MINNESOTA** — Classes are out for the day, and crossing guard Les Wells has helped the fourth-, fifth- and sixth-graders across the city street that carries busy Hwy. 14 past Waseca Central

Intermediate School.

With 18-wheel semitrailer trucks rolling through, there are times when he ponders, "How do I get my kids across there?"

A 75-year-old guard was hit and hurt badly at the same crossing a year ago by a driver who said he was blinded by the morning sun. But, on one re-

cent day, a big truck stopped before Wells even had a chance to drop his flag so a couple of young bicyclists could cross.

Hwy. 14 is not just a city street, of course. It's also a rural highway, interstate alternative and small-town Main Street, slicing through mid-America from Chicago to Yellowstone.

And, for the second consecutive year, it has been named the worst nonmetro highway in Minnesota in an admittedly unscientific survey conducted at the State Fair by the Minnesota Highway Construction Industry Council.

That's despite the Minnesota Department of Transportation's

pouring millions of dollars into making the road wider, safer and, in some cases, speedier — especially in the Rochester-to-Mankato corridor that has elicited most of the complaints.

**HIGHWAY continues on B10:**

— A list of other bad Minnesota highways.



## HIGHWAY from B1

# Number of lanes, lane widths change abruptly along road

"That is an extremely important piece of roadway for southern Minnesota," said Owatonna Mayor Pete Connor, president of the Hwy. 14 Partnership, a group of 22 county and local governments promoting improvements between Rochester and New Ulm. "The people at the State Fair have it right on. . . . It is a treacherous highway."

Among the perceived problems: high speeds and slow-moving vehicles, heavy truck traffic, increasing numbers of commuters, dangerous intersections, curves, blind spots, some old roadbed, small-city bottlenecks and lots of side roads and driveways (about 150 in the 43 miles between Owatonna and Mankato alone, Connor estimated).

Sometimes the road changes abruptly from four lanes to two; sometimes it's three. Driving lanes were only 10 feet wide in one stretch until last year; they're still as narrow as 11 feet in some areas. Some gravel shoulders are too narrow for farm machinery.

**Varied people and places**  
A reporter and photographer drove most of the road's 287 Minnesota miles recently, discovering people and places as varied as its problems.

Gary Kohn and his son Mark, who farm and take care of a little cemetery near Courtland, east of New Ulm, find their farm machinery has to contend with increasing traffic on the highway.

Floyd LaMont, who has run Hi-Way 14 Auto Parts east of Wa-

seca for 43 years, has amalgamated some highway casualties into his expansive collection of scrap metal and rubber. On the highway, "a lot of it is five, six cars in a row, and they're all going too fast," said Tom LaMont, his son and partner.

Faye Hansen and Lorraine Benson say Walnut Grove, with about 625 people, was visited this year by 20,000 people, most traveling Hwy. 14 — the "Laura Ingalls Wilder Historic Highway" — to see environs of the author of pioneer books. "We have to thank Michael Landon [in the "Little House on the Prairie" TV show] for putting us on the map," Hansen said.

Indeed, Hwy. 14 is a highway of history. It's got the FarmAmerica history center near Waseca, a sod house exhibit near Sanborn and, just east of Dodge Center, the site of Plowville, where presidential candidates Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson promised in 1952 to keep price supports for basic crops.

It's also a corridor of commerce, so much so that some say it should have been the site for Interstate Hwy. 90, which parallels the highway from Winona to Rochester, then veers south. Also running parallel to Hwy. 14 is the Dakota, Minnesota & Eastern Railroad, whose owners want to spend \$1.5 billion to upgrade tracks for hauling Wyoming coal.

And Hwy. 14 is a road of sometimes quaintly named small-town institutions, such as the Frank 'n' Stein tavern in Byron, the Inn of



**NEAR WASECA:** Some of the vehicles that crash on the busy route end up at Hi-Way 14 Auto Parts, which Floyd LaMont has run for 43 years. Above, he cut up exhaust pipes for recycling. His son and partner, Tom LaMont, says he sees "five, six cars in a row" on the road — "all going too fast."

Seven Gables in Sleepy Eye and the Wheels Museum of railroad memorabilia in Tracy.

### From Mississippi bluffs

Driving west, Hwy. 14 starts in Minnesota along Mississippi River bluffs south of Winona. In places, it shares the pavement with Hwys. 61, 52, Interstate 35, 15 and 68.

At Dodge Center, the two-lane traffic count soars as high as 11,900 a day. "We've had a fair number of accidents along that stretch," said Brian Jergenson, a spokesman for the state Transportation Department.

The town's biggest employer is McNeilus Co., a manufacturer of concrete mixers, and just about all 750 employees use Hwy. 14 to get to work and to ship their products out.

"For us, it's real critical to get

four lanes out to [Interstate Hwy.] 35," said Tracy Timmerman, vice president of operations. A bypass will open next year, extending four lanes from Rochester to west of Dodge Center. Eventually, it is to be four lanes as far as Mankato.

But that comes at a cost. In Owatonna, John Deere dealer Ron Christensen said he'll have to move from County Rd. 6 if it is closed at Hwy. 14 for a four-lane improvement. The intersection has been the site of fatal accidents, he acknowledged, but "running farm equipment through town doesn't work."

Stoplights don't always work either. At Byron, the number of accidents increased when a traffic light was installed, although the severity went down.

In Waseca, traffic backs up and trucks have trouble turning

### Roads they ranted about

Hwy. 14, especially the stretch between Rochester and Mankato, received hundreds of votes to be named Minnesota's worst nonmetropolitan highway in an unscientific survey conducted by the Minnesota Highway Construction Industry Council at its State Fair booth.

The 3,948 participants named 318 road locations. These are the other roadways that received the most votes; most also are high on the work list of the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

### Outside the Twin Cities

- ▶ Hwy. 23, Willmar to east of St. Cloud.
- ▶ Hwy. 8, Chisago City to Wisconsin.
- ▶ Hwy. 169, northern Minnesota.
- ▶ Hwy. 61, North Shore.
- ▶ Hwy. 52, Rochester area.
- ▶ Hwy. 10, northwest of the Twin Cities.

### Twin Cities area

- ▶ Interstate Hwy. 494.
- ▶ Interstate Hwy. 694.
- ▶ Interstate Hwy. 35W south.
- ▶ Crosstown Hwy. 62.
- ▶ Hwy. 169.
- ▶ Interstate Hwy. 94 north.

at the downtown intersection of Hwys. 14 and 13. "It's almost a donnybrook," Connor said. "What you have, of course, is a need for a 21st-century roadway for a town that was built in the 1800s."

A bypass south of town is planned for 2008 to 2012 — or later — but Wells, the crossing guard, said it's needed now.

Hwy. 14 already bypasses Mankato, and there's talk of bypassing other towns between there and New Ulm.

The Kohns say they take side roads with their equipment and try to stay off Hwy. 14 because of heavy traffic. On Friday afternoons, "it's kind of awesome," Gary Kohn said.

West of New Ulm, the heavy traffic falls off as the road runs

past Lambertson and a University of Minnesota research facility Tracy and a broken tree sculpt that memorializes nine people killed in a 1968 tornado, Dame-settled town of Tyler — the wind-generating fields ab Lake Benton, a town that would like to see more tourism traffic.

The Transportation Department said it already has eliminated a lot of safety problems, such as a curve and railroad overpass at Eagle Lake. And a lot of Hwy. 14 paving is recent.

"They fixed on it a lot," said Dakota trucker Roger Anders said at a Hwy. 71 gas station adding diplomatically: "Their highways that are worse."

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