

Highway 14 improvement paved with frustration

Local officials anxious for 4-lane upgrade

By RON LARSEN Journal Staff Writer

NEW ULM-- Frustration is growing from New Ulm to Owatonna about Minnesota Department of Transportation's reluctance to devote more funding resources faster to upgrading U.S. Highway 14 to a four-lane highway west of Rochester.

The frustration stems from MnDOT's project time line for completion of the Owatonna-Mankato leg, involving 31.6 miles of pavement, which is driven by MnDOT's allocation of funds to each of its projects.

Most troubling to Highway 14 proponents is that construction of the 7-mile Waseca bypass segment isn't scheduled to start until 2008 and is projected to be completed in 2013.

Meanwhile, work is scheduled to start on the first segment, between Highway 60 junction east of Eagle Lake to Janesville, a distance of 4.8 miles, next year with completion expected in 2004. The 9.8-mile segment from Janesville to near Waseca is scheduled for 2005-2007.

Then, MnDOT's Rochester district doesn't begin construction on the 10-mile segment between Owatonna and Waseca until 2007, finishing in 2011.

Doubling the frustration for local Highway 14 project supporters is that MnDOT has not even put the Mankato-New Ulm segment on the project schedule board.

In other words, in proponents' eyes, MnDOT doesn't seem to be in a big hurry to complete the Owatonna-Eagle Lake segment and get on with construction on the Mankato-New Ulm leg, even though MnDOT admits virtually all paperwork has been done including environmental impact statements.

New Ulm City Councilor Joel Albrecht, who was among those testifying at a state House Transportation Finance Committee hearing last week at Farmamerica near Waseca, said he's extremely frustrated.

"They say 'we have all the money, we've done all the studies, it's just a matter of going to bid' and the money is still there," Albrecht said.

"They're very cordial, but they aren't willing to do something."

Even members of the Transportation Finance Committee are frustrated, not just because of what is happening, or not happening with Highway 14, but because MnDOT hasn't used most of the \$459 million the 2000 Legislature allocated for highway and bridge construction.

"We want to see asphalt being laid," said Rep. James Clark, R-New Ulm, member of the transportation finance committee and vice chair of the House Transportation Policy Committee, which routes finance issues to the finance committee.

"In 2000, we were told numerous projects were ready to go if we allocated the \$459 million to highway projects," Clark explained. "The results are MnDOT says now the projects weren't ready to go."

Of the money allocated, Clark said, "Our transportation district received \$4.2 million of which \$4 million went for purchasing rights-of-way and \$200,000 went for a study of the New Ulm-Mankato stretch of Highway 14. I'm frustrated that MnDOT can't make it a higher priority."

Part of the problem, Clark added, is that the Ventura administration has downgraded Mankato from a primary to a secondary regional center. The state is divided into regional corridors, and population is a major factor in determining the primary regional centers.

"The problem I have with it is that the criteria used by the governor was based on a 25-year-old study."

Another frustration legislators are experiencing stems from a legislative decision to give MnDOT an undesignated lump sum for highway and bridge construction. In the past, the Legislature had specified the highway project for which the money was to be used.

"We wanted to take the politics out of determining which road projects would get money," Clark explained.

Clark admits that the politics didn't disappear but simply moved into the governor's office, but he maintains it was the right thing for the Legislature to do.

Owatonna Mayor Peter Connor, chairman of the Highway 14 Partnership, a group of 25 communities and 65 private-sector members, doesn't agree.

"I feel that is a mistake. The Legislature should tell MnDOT how those dollars are to be spent. Those dollars should be tied to specific highway projects."

Be that as it may, the partnership still has the challenge of convincing lawmakers and government officials alike that completion of the Highway 14 project should have higher priority than it does now.

The partnership will be lobbying Congress for \$32 million in demonstration project funds, a move that Highway 14 proponents hope would trim two to three years off MnDOT's current project schedule and get the Mankato-New Ulm leg scheduled that much sooner.

"I feel that's all we can do at this point is work with our two congressmen to get the \$32 million," said Albrecht.

Highway 14 Partnership already has had meetings with Congressmen Gil Gutknecht and Mark Kennedy, both Republicans, to urge their support in getting the money included in the 2003 highways funding bill.

Albrecht says he expects to be going to Washington to help lobby for the grant when the time comes.

But the Highway 14 Partnership isn't giving up on getting the Legislature, MnDOT and the governor to see the value in funding the project.

"We're going to redouble our efforts," said Connor. "I intend to seek to broaden the base of our private sector membership."

Connor is convinced that private-sector members can best tell the story of what a four-lane highway means in terms of economic development, as well as what an improved highway means to the safety and welfare of their employees.

"We as public officials can talk all we want to, but in the end we can't tell the story like those who are actually using the highway for commerce and for getting to work," he noted.

Highway 14 Partnership will continue to stress the safety factor. Between Rochester and New Ulm during the past 17 years, there have been 95 fatal accidents with a total of 106 deaths, two times the rate of fatalities on any other non-metro highway in the state.

"We're going to continue pushing this message with a direct-mail campaign," said Corey Elmer of Flaherty & Hood, St. Paul, lobbyists for the communities involved in the partnership.

As Albrecht put it, "We're going to hound them; we'll be on their doorstep."