

MnDOT gets funds for Highway 14 study

Study could suggest new route for roadway between New Ulm and Mankato

By CHRIS VETTER
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NEW ULM — The Mankato office of the Minnesota Department of Transportation announced Wednesday that it has secured funding to plot out the fu-

ture location of Highway 14 between New Ulm and Mankato.

MnDOT will pay for the \$200,000 study. New Ulm, Courtland, Nicollet, Nicollet County and Brown County also have contributed funds toward the study, which may suggest new routes for the road, as it stretches across the region. For instance, the study might move the road away from towns it currently runs through.

It will also determine if the road remains at two-lanes or is expanded — as expected — to

four lanes across.

The study is expected to begin this spring and will be completed in about a year, according to a MnDOT press release.

Rebecca Arndt, spokeswoman for MnDOT, said the study was the top priority the Mankato office submitted to the state office last fall. Arndt spoke highly of the study and how it will help all parties involved.

"It's certainly going to be a benefit to communities like Nicollet and Courtland for their zoning, and where they'll place

businesses and homes," Arndt said. "It's a benefit to MnDOT because we can preserve the corridor."

MnDOT plans to purchase right-of-way land along the corridor. Purchasing property in North Mankato is a priority before it is developed or increases in value.

New Ulm city councilors were pleased to hear that the funding measure received approval.

"This is a very positive thing," said Council President Dan Beranek. "The traffic on that road seems to increase every year, and

if we get this road rebuilt earlier, it will be safer."

New Ulm City Councilor Joel Albrecht said the funding measure is long past due.

"It's the most fundamental thing that needs to be done for a road project," Albrecht said. "Ultimately, it will be a huge savings because we won't have to go through condemnation proceedings on buildings that were built in the wrong place."

Councilor Ron Fleischmann

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said credit must be given to Mayor Bert Schapekahn, who died last year, and Rep. James Clark for their work to get the money from MnDOT. Fleischmann said the road, when expanded, could bring more visitors to town and tournaments to the city's newly-expanded recreation facilities.

Any expansion of Highway 14 from two-lanes to four-lanes is not slated to happen until 2014 or 2015. Arndt said the study, while important to area communities, does not necessarily speed up the process for the road to be rebuilt.

"There is no construction dollars tied to this study," Arndt said.

After the planning study is completed, an environmental study must be performed before any new roadwork can begin.

While it is unclear how much the environmental study would

cost, Arndt compared the 28-mile trek from New Ulm to Mankato to a similar 31-mile strip between Mankato and Owatonna. MnDOT spent \$1.7 million to conduct the environmental impact statement along that route recently, Arndt added.

An environmental study would look at the impact of road expansion to the natural habitat, homes in the area, and historical and cultural points, she said.

"It's quite an undertaking," Arndt said.

Dan Wietecha, city administrator for Courtland and Nicollet, agreed that the study is a positive move.

"It's important to our planning today," Wietecha said. Both communities are growing. Plans for a major highway running through the town is important to our land-

use decisions today. It will be a benefit longterm."

Wietecha said Courtland city officials hope to move Highway 14 about 1/4 of a mile north of its existing location, still within town limits.

Meanwhile, Nicollet officials would like to see the road moved about 1/2 mile south of town. Wietecha said he prefers the road placed south so it does not impact wetlands north of town. He added that expanding Highway 14 on its existing route would cause the removal of homes and businesses in both communities.

"We need to have an idea of what we want (the road) to look like 10 years from now," Wietecha said. "We can start to control, locally, development in those areas."