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Invest in Corridors of Commerce

Guest Column by U.S. Highway 14 Partnership President Bob Beussman, Mayor of New Ulm

Disappointed and confused. That's how I feel about the lack of focus on transportation this legislative session.

The case has been made that there needs to be an investment in our state's transportation system. This is demonstrated in MnDOT's 20-year plan, which barely has the resources to maintain our current infrastructure, let alone fund needed highway expansions. With construction costs rising and fuel consumption falling, existing state transportation revenues are losing their buying power. Add the fact that the federal Highway Trust Fund is projected to be insolvent by September, it is not an exaggeration to call Minnesota's transportation situation a crisis.

Advocates continue to deliver this message at the Capitol, in the media, at community meetings. Lawmakers and the Governor acknowledge that transportation resources are needed. Yet, there is no action—it's an election year.

Providing safe and efficient roads and bridges is a core function of government and should not be political, but I understand that it has become so.

What I can't comprehend is, knowing the great needs facing our transportation system, why aren't legislators seizing the opportunity of a state budget surplus to direct more funds to transportation improvements?

Last year, the Legislature passed \$300 million in initial funding for the Corridors of Commerce program. The program focused on building capacity and fixing missing links on Minnesota's highway corridors. More than 120 projects from across the state applied for this funding, of which 10 were selected. We're very fortunate that this initial funding will help make meaningful progress on expanding Highway 14.

We're thankful that legislators and the Governor chose to make this investment, and for the safety improvements and economic opportunities that will result.

However, the fact remains that more work still needs to be done to provide a four-lane Highway 14 corridor from Rochester to New Ulm. As evidenced by the number of program applicants, clearly there is great demand for highway improvements all over the state. Absent the willingness to raise needed transportation revenues to provide ongoing program funding, state leaders should at least be directing surplus dollars to the Corridors of Commerce program to address some of the major deficiencies of our state's highway infrastructure.

Currently, the supplemental budget bill passed by the Minnesota House contains a \$10 million appropriation for the Corridors of Commerce program. Despite the efforts of the Senate Transportation Committee to pass \$30 million in program funding, it remains unclear if Corridors of Commerce will be funded in the Senate, as transportation spending will be taking another path in that chamber.

The Legislature is currently on its Easter/Passover break. When lawmakers return to St. Paul, I hope it is with renewed focus on the critical role that highway corridors play in our state's economic success.

The U.S. Highway 14 Partnership strongly supports a statewide investment in transportation and will continue to work hard to get these funds passed into law. However, at the very least, the current budget surplus should be used to fund Corridors of Commerce in 2014.

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