



## Area provision endangers bill

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NORTH MANKATO May 23, 2009 12:22 am

— Lawmakers passed a provision that attempts to prod state transportation officials to move quicker on environmental studies that must be completed before Highway 14 can be expanded to four lanes to New Ulm. The provision was included in a larger transportation policy bill that Gov. Tim Pawlenty still hadn't signed or vetoed as of Friday evening.

Supporters of an expressway that stretches from New Ulm to Rochester want the environmental impact statements completed as soon as possible in case federal transportation aid becomes available in coming months. The last stretches of two-lane highway are west of North Mankato to New Ulm and east of Owatonna to Dodge Center.

"A completed EIS moves Highway 14 closer to being shovel-ready," said Rep. Terry Morrow, DFL-St. Peter, referring to the criteria for some of the economic stimulus funding approved previously by the federal government.

Being ready to go also might help the highway in competition with others around the country for funding in an upcoming five-year federal transportation bill. Congressman Tim Walz of Mankato is seeking \$103 million for Highway 14 projects from that legislation, including \$70 million for converting the two-lane sections to four.

But Pawlenty has at least some concern about the Legislature dictating when the Minnesota Department of Transportation completes individual environmental studies.

"The bad part is the governor is threatening to veto the legislation, and part of the reason is we got it into the bill," said North Mankato Mayor Gary Zellmer, who is president of the Highway 14 Partnership — a coalition of public and private supporters of improvements to the highway.

Morrow said he worked with MnDOT officials on what deadline was realistic — choosing the end of 2010 for the EIS on the North Mankato to New Ulm stretch and a May 31, 2010, for the EIS between Owatonna and Dodge Center. And he gave them the option of missing the deadline as long as they provide an explanation and periodic updates to the Legislature and public.

"So why this would be that big of an issue, I don't know," said Zellmer, who credited Morrow; Sen. Kathy Sheran, DFL-Mankato; and Sen. Dick Day, R-Owatonna, for getting the provision included in the bill.

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