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OUR VIEW

MAKE ROAD FUNDING DECISIONS TRANSPARENT

A Free Press in- depth look into road funding in Minnesota and its connection to highway safety has revealed one thing: The criteria for road funding seems fuzzy at best and unfair at worst.

As part of the current three- day series, with the second installment in today's newspaper, The Free Press has studied in- depth just why some roads in Minnesota get funded and why some don't. While safety is certainly one criterion MnDOT examines in road funding decisions, more and more the decisions seemed to be based on a top- down basis.

While legislators argue they don't want to start dictating MnDOT road funding decisions, taking it away from knowledgeable engineers, politics already are involved in these decisions, though those political considerations may be subtle.

When the Interstate 35W bridge collapsed, that put pressure on the Pawlenty Administration to emphasize bridge inspections and bridge repairs. Fair enough . A legislative auditor's report showed MnDOT was too far behind on its pavement preservation schedule for roads statewide. So MnDOT started emphasizing that. And finally, there was an emphasis on relieving congestion in the Twin Cities. We're guessing that came mostly from urban legislators.

Legislators can say MnDOT's decisions aren't politically influenced, but clearly, they are.

Not so surprisingly, safety of two-lane roads in rural Minnesota that have been shown to have high crash and fatality rates are not apparently a priority.

MnDOT officials say their hands are tied. They want to improve the safety of these two-lane roads, but do not have the money. There is not enough transportation funding to fill all the needs. They're right, and that's all the more reason for MnDOT and legislators to come forward with clear- cut criteria for road funding.

We would suggest safety should be a primary concern.

Right now, there appears to be no process in place to compare various roads across the state and rank them in terms of funding based on their relative safety.

In fact, The Free Press series has shown that Highway 14, one of the most dangerous roads in the state, is not in line for funds for 20 years, while other roads that have better safety records are on the list.

While legislators say they don't want to politicize road funding, they need to get involved to the

extent where they require the knowledgeable engineers and experts at MnDOT to come up with a criteria to rank the relative need for funding among all the roads in the state. Safety should certainly be one of those criteria.

We can make the drive times on roads faster and we can reduce congestion, but we haven't served the public if the roads are not safer.