

## Fighting for 14

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OWATONNA — A bill making its way through the Minnesota Legislature that would fund the completion of Highway 14 across the state is just fine with Sen. Dick Day — fine, that is, as long as the stretch between Owatonna and Dodge Center is the bill's top priority.

Last week, Senate Minority Leader Dave Senjem, R-Rochester, authored a bill that if passed, would allot \$650 million to convert Highway 14 from two lanes to four lanes from New Ulm to Rochester. The funding would include money for right-of-way acquisition and construction. A partner bill was introduced in the House by Rep. Terry Morrow, DFL-St. Paul.



A Volkswagen Beetle heads toward Rochester on Highway 14 East Wednesday afternoon, near the intersection with County Road 59. Highway 14 is known as one of the most dangerous in the state and drifting snow and icy conditions made it hazardous.

The U.S. Highway 14 Partnership, which comprises representatives from cities and counties along the highway, is pressing for passage of the bills.

Gary Zellmer, Highway 14 Partnership president, said the bill may not pass as it stands but he is glad to see it on the table.

“This is what it is going to take to finish this road. We’ve been looking at it for 40 years now and we’re still looking at another 20 years before it’s done,” he said.

Although, Day, R-Owatonna, said he agrees he would love to see the whole highway finished, he believes the priority should be on the section of road between Owatonna and Dodge Center.

“I’m going to help out all I can in the other bill as long as the bill has that section from Owatonna to Dodge Center placed first,” he said. “The reason this is so important from Rochester to Owatonna is because our car count is a lot higher than that from Mankato to New Ulm. It’s almost double.”

Zellmer, who is also mayor of North Mankato, said if sections of the road are prioritized, it will be based on which sections already have completed right-of-way acquisitions or environmental studies.

Day said he plans to introduce another bill by March which would focus solely on the section east of Owatonna. The bill would ask for \$150 million even though that still might not be enough.

Kristine Hernandez of the Minnesota Department of Transportation said MnDOT would not support either bill. Although MnDOT considers the highway a priority, MnDOT does not support bills that

allocate money to specific roads.

“It’s an engineering decision on how money is allocated to our highway system,” she said. “Basically, what MnDOT says is leave it to the engineers to decide what is best.”

Highway 14 from Owatonna to Mankato is expected to be finished by 2013 with construction beginning this year from Owatonna to the Waseca County line. However, funding for Owatonna east to Dodge Center has not been secured. The section would not qualify under the federal stimulus package because it is not “shovel ready” or, in other words, construction could not start within 180 days as the stimulus package requires.

Highway 14 has been nicknamed Minnesota’s deadliest road. The partnership cites 145 fatalities since the mid-1980s. However, Minnesota Department of Transportation officials say to be careful of the statistics.

“Highway 14, as far as their crash stats, is not abnormal. It falls in the normal range for two-lane, two-way highways throughout the state. But there may be pockets or segments that may be higher than average,” said Hernandez. “We are aware this is a high priority project in southeast Minnesota and we realize that and that is why we keep working on it.”

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