

Post-Bulletin

Supporters push Pawlenty for U.S. 14 expansion

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Advocates pushing for further expansion of U.S. 14 are calling on the governor to publicly support requesting that state transportation officials set deadlines for two key project studies.

The move by the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership comes after Gov. Tim Pawlenty vetoed a transportation policy bill that contained a provision aimed at pushing the project forward.

Those provisions would have required that the Environmental Impact Statement for U.S. 14 from Owatonna to Dodge Center be finished by the end of May 2010, and another stretch from New Ulm to North Mankato be completed by the end of 2010.

Partnership president and North Mankato, Minn., Mayor Gary Zellmer was quoted in a news release saying it is time for Pawlenty to stand up for the project.

"Families in southern Minnesota have waited a long time for the state to fix this killer highway," Zellmer said.

"If the governor doesn't oppose the Highway 14 deadlines and reporting requirements in the bill he vetoed, then he should publicly instruct MnDOT to follow them regardless of his veto."

Governor's go-ahead

Pawlenty's spokesman Alex Carey said the governor was not opposed to the U.S. 14 language in the bill and that he has instructed MnDOT to meet the deadlines in the bill.

The push for these deadlines comes amid frustration that U.S. 14 was not eligible for federal stimulus dollars because these studies had not been completed. There are also safety concerns for the highway, where more than 145 people have died since the mid-1980s.

Senate Minority Leader Dave Senjem, R-Rochester, and Rep. Terry Morrow, DFL-St. Peter, both authored bills that would require MnDOT to finish the studies by the end of this year.

"It just seems like we needed to move Highway 14 closer to shovel-ready, and in order to do that the (study) needed to be completed," Morrow said.

MnDOT's role

But Morrow said MnDOT indicated it would not be able to meet those deadlines due to various requirements, instead suggesting the alternative deadlines that were included in the bill. In a letter given to lawmakers, Transportation District Engineer Nelrae Succio said it is important to keep in mind that "many things are not within MnDOT's control." She noted that the agency still has to adhere to state and federal laws while working with affected agencies and landowners.

MnDOT spokeswoman Kristine Hernandez said MnDOT is committed to getting the project done promptly and hopes to have the Environmental Impact Statement done by April 2010.

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