

Mankato Free Press 09/14/2010

Highway projects get done with MONEY & INFLUENCE

Numerous parts of the state compete for scarce road funding

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To New Ulm Mayor Joel Albrecht, it's a no-brainer.

“Any reasonable thinking person will come to the conclusion that Highway 14 has to be done first,” Albrecht said.

Community leaders from Minnesota's southwestern corner to the Canadian border would probably beg to differ. Not that they would begrudge Highway 14 advocates the money to get a four-lane built to New Ulm, but local officials from Marshall to International Falls have their own fourlane dreams that they've been patiently, relentlessly, cooperatively trying to turn into reality.

Like Highway 14, all have safety issues.

Highway 23 from Marshall to Willmar actually has a fatality rate worse than Highway 14.

And when it comes down to it, they're all seeking to dip into the same too-small pot of money. Money is key but so is MnDOT's decisionmaking process. Safety is often a secondary criteria, says Rep.

Terry Morrow, DFL-St. Peter, and a member of the House Transportation Committee.

New Ulm sits 20 to 26 miles from fourlane Highway 60 to the south, four-lane Highway 169 to the northeast and fourlane Highway 14 to the southeast.

Steve Strautz, a Marshall real estate agent and chairman of the Marshall Area Chamber of Commerce Transportation Committee, said he knows the two-lane segment of Highway 14 between New Ulm and North Mankato is a dangerous, truckclogged stretch.

Still, Strautz has a map — used every time he lobbies for a four-lane expansion of Highway 23 — that demonstrates Marshall is even more isolated. Truckers and travelers have to travel more than 60 miles on two-lane to reach I-90 near Sioux Falls, 50 miles to I-29 near Brookings, S.D., and more than 100 miles to the Twin Cities.

“ We're as far as anybody from good four-lane access,” Strautz said. “ So that's kind of been our rallying cry: If we're going to survive out here and be economically viable, we've got to have access to good four-lane transportation.”

Isolated up north

When Strautz said Marshall is as far as anyone from four-lane access, he's careful to add the caveat "outside of the northern tier of the state where it's all forest."

But the forest dwellers need four-lane highways, too, said Bob Anderson, vice president for public affairs at Boise Cascade in International Falls.

"Geographically, we're 100 miles from the nearest city — Virginia or Hibbing," Anderson said.

And n early 100 miles to the nearest four-lane.

International Falls is working to change that, having formed the Highway 53 Long Range Task Force.

Like the Highway 14 Partnership that Albrecht once led, the Highway 53 group is made up of city and county leaders, state lawmakers and industry representatives such as Anderson.

Northern Minnesota might not have the population density of other parts of the state, but it has mines and forest-based industries that require good roads, he said. It also has the added traffic complication of thousands of boat-pulling tourists.

Lobbyists for Highway 53 cite an enormous percentage of 18-wheelers on the stretch south of International Falls — 18 percent, according to Anderson. That's higher even than the 12 percent on Highway 14 east of New Ulm.

But Highway 53 doesn't have the alarmi ng crash statistics of some two-lane highways in Minnesota.

Most of the highway has crash rates that are more than 60 percent below the statewide average for rural two-lane highways, although the fatal crash rate is much closer to the average.

From Marshall to Willmar, Highway 23 is safer than average when it comes to overall crash rates. Look only at fatal crashes, however, and the 57-mile stretch of two-lane is double the statewide average — worse than Highway 14 from New Ulm to North Mankato.

Anderson, recognizing that Highway 53 can't make the case for state and federal funds based on crash statistics, said it's important to consider economic factors as well when making decisions about distributing funds.

" There are other factors that need to be put in their formula for determining when roads get improvements," Anderson said.

MnDOT's criteria

The Minnesota Department of Transportation considers three general issues when allocating

money — safety, mobility and preservation of existing roads and bridges, said Timothy Henkel, director of MnDOT’s Modal Planning and Program Management Division.

Henkel was answering the Highway 14 Partnership’s demand for an explanation of why funding for the expansion wasn’t included in the latest 20year plan.

He wrote that MnDOT analyzes the entire highway system to see which highways are meeting performance standards. Current and expected future traffic levels and travel times are included in the analysis, along with safety issues — and funding is distributed to the districts based on the level of need. The department also instructed its eight districts to summarize the priorities of communities in their region, according to Henkel. In District 7, based in Mankato, \$2.1 billion in needs were identified during the next 20 years.

Funding for the district is expected to be about \$1 billion. Statewide, the gap between revenue and overall transportation needs over two decades reached \$50 billion in one study.

Along with the disparity between desired projects and available revenue, MnDOT also faces demands to catch up on maintenance of existing roads. A 2008 report by the Minnesota Legislative Auditor flatly stated that MnDOT was placing too much of a priority on road expansion and shorting its maintenance duties.

So MnDOT is being pulled both toward expansion and away from it, and it’s happening at a time when the economic recession is cutting into the department’s primary revenue sources — the gas tax and car sales taxes.

“Financially, the state of Minnesota is in a pickle, shall we say,” said John Bray, special assistant to the district engineer in MnDOT’s Duluth-based District 1. “We have very, very limited funding sources that are in a downward trend.”

A friend in Washington

For District 1, which sprawls from International Falls to Duluth to the tip of the arrowhead, there are no plans for highway expansion on Highway 53 or anywhere else.

“We here in northeastern Minnesota are what’s called a ‘preservation- only district,’ with the exception of (federal) projects,” Bray said. “All we can do is keep it safe, hold it together, not do what should be done. Because the money isn’t there.”

District 1 has something going for it that other districts — and most other states — don’t.

“Luckily, we have the big gorilla who happens to make his home in our district in northeastern Minnesota, and that’s Jim Oberstar,” Bray said. “... He gets things done.” Chairman of the U.S.

House Transportation Committee, Oberstar has already successfully obtained federal funding for Highway 53 that financed an interchange and will — over the next four years — extend the four-lane 21 miles north from Virginia to Cook. The total cost of the project was nearly \$70 million.

Finishing the final 71 miles probably isn't realistic in the near future, even with Oberstar's help, according to Anderson and Bray.

"It's astronomical," Bray said of the cost. "It's a couple of hundred million bucks."

Alone in Willmar

At least District 1 has four-lane highways. Willmar-based District 8 is one of only two in the state without an interstate highway, and it's the only district in the state without a four-lane expressway leading to the interstate system.

"So that is a significant issue for this part of central and west-central Minnesota," said Patrick Weidemann, planning director for District 8. "It remains the No. 1 transportation issue for the whole district. They want access to a four-lane."

The district has three regional economic centers — Willmar, Marshall and Hutchinson — and community leaders in each want connections via four-lane to the broader world.

"In this economy, our communities need that to survive," Weidemann said.

Highway 23 is the current focus, and progress is being made on connecting Willmar to St. Cloud and I-94. Four-lane roadway now exists to the New London area, and an expensive four-lane bypass of Willmar is complete.

District 8 also is financing a three-year \$42 million project to build a bypass around Paynesville, even though that city is in St.

Cloud-based District 3.

"That leaves two eight-mile segments on both sides of Paynesville to be done," he said.

The combined cost is estimated at \$50 million.

While that will bring Willmar residents an expressway to St. Cloud, it leaves a 57-mile stretch of two-lane between Marshall and Willmar.

Pushing Congress

Highway 23 and Highway 14 aren't likely to ever be as near or dear to Oberstar as northeastern Minnesota roads, but supporters of both projects are hoping he can work with the state's two senators and local congressman to bring funding in the next federal transportation bill.

The Highway 14 Partnership wants money both for the New Ulm-North Mankato segment and for a two-lane gap east of Owatonna. The Highway 23 supporters, who are in the process of forming a coalition, are looking for federal funds to finance a corridor study all the way to I-90.

Efforts are also under way at various levels of intensity to get state or federal funds to expand Highway 15 from I-90 to St.

Cloud, to build a short fourlane from Northfield to I-35, and to expand the Highway 212 expressway west from the Twin Cities to Granite Falls.

Coalitions and patience are vital for any of those efforts, Bray said. A former Wisconsin resident, he points to Highway 53 on that side of the border as a source of hope.

Leaders in Superior, Wis., had long sought a four-lane connection to Eau Claire and the interstate-system serving the southern part of the state. When Wisconsin Secretary of Transportation Lowell Jackson told them 30 years ago that it was never going to happen, some of the folks in Superior got a little bit mad and a lot bullheaded, Bray said.

Starting in the mid-1980s, local elected officials and citizens organized annual lobbying trips to Madison during the legislative session and eventually found a key ally in then-Gov. Tommy Thompson.

“ The last ribbon was cut seven years ago. ... It’s a helluva nice drive,” Bray said.

“It shows it can be done.

You just have to have the right people in the right place, and then you have to stick with it a long time.”