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Highway 14 group hopeful after seeing Franken's reaction to tour



Highway 14 Partnership President Gary Zellmer (left) talks to U.S. Sen. Al Franken about the importance of expanding remaining two-lane segments of the highway to four lanes. To Franken's left are New Ulm Mayor Joel Albrecht and Owatonna City Council President Les Abraham. John Cross

Senator says Mankato to New Ulm 'project is a No. 1 priority for us'

By Mark Fischenich
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A little more than a year after U.S. Sen. Al Franken took office, he received the Highway 14 Partnership's traditional initiation for anyone representing southern Minnesota in Congress.

Franken rode the highway between Mankato and New Ulm with Highway 14 Partnership President Gary Zellmer and then listened to stories about the notorious roadway from members of the coalition from a half-dozen communities along the route.

The junior senator came into the meeting saying the expansion of the highway to four lanes was "incredibly important," "a big project" and that he was "fully supportive." A good starting point for the coalition, which has been pushing for years to scrape together the hundreds of millions of dollars required to finish the expressway between Rochester and New Ulm.

By the end — after the somber discussion of the deadly crashes, explanation of the economic importance of the roadway, descriptions of the decades of patience shown by Highway 14 communities — Franken was saying exactly what the partnership wanted to hear.

"This project is a No. 1 priority for us," he said.

Partnership members already have heard Sen. Amy Klobuchar say the same words and they're hopeful the two Democratic senators, working with House members, will be able to get a substantial federal appropriation for Highway 14 in the next transportation authorization bill.

The partnership has been obtaining similar pledges for years, getting them from Sen. Norm Coleman, Sen. Mark Dayton, Sen. Paul Wellstone and essentially all of the lawmakers representing southern Minnesota in the U.S. House.

Franken joked that he began to get suspicious during his ride to New Ulm, seeing so many

semi trucks roaring down the two-lane highway that he wonders if New Ulm Mayor Joel Albrecht arranged with local trucking firms to send a few dozen extras.

Zellmer, North Mankato's mayor, said Tuesday's drive could hardly have been more illustrative of the traffic the highway carries.

"The statistics say one out of nine," Zellmer said of the fraction of vehicles on Highway 14 that are heavy trucks. "It had to be one out of five coming over."

There was also the John Deere combine that pulled onto the busy highway, forcing a semi to pass it.

Klobuchar could have had her own suspicions about Highway 14 Partnership choreography when she made a previous drive down Highway 14 to meet with the group. She was forced to swerve out of the way of a bail of hay that fell off a truck, Zellmer said.

Both senators already have joined Congressman Tim Walz in making their support clear for moving forward with the expansion project, although in very small increments compared to the roughly \$500 million required to convert two-lane segments east of Owatonna and west of North Mankato to four-lane expressway.

Franken sponsored a \$250,000 appropriation to do design work on the piece between Owatonna and Dodge Center, making it one of 11 projects he sponsored out of more than 100 requests in the state. Walz and Klobuchar have sponsored similar appropriations for pieces of the project there and in the Mankato-New Ulm stretch.

Those appropriations and much larger ones are good investments for the federal government, Franken said. He noted the recent deaths on the road and also talked about the need to have a more efficient highway for private industry along the corridor.

"Even though we have deficits, we need to make very smart investments," Franken said. "... And this is one of those."



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