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Highway 14 issues grow in intensity

By Mark Fischenich

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NORTH MANKATO — The latest traffic fatality on Highway 14 between North Mankato and New Ulm prompted a letter from state Rep. Terry Morrow to Minnesota Department of Transportation head Tom Sorel that began with a blunt salutation: “Commissioner Sorel, enough is enough.”

The letter prompted a closed-door meeting Thursday in North Mankato with Sorel’s top deputy, a trio of state lawmakers, aides to Congressman Tim Walz and Sens. Amy Klobuchar and Al Franken, and representatives of local governments along the stretch of two-lane highway.

“It was a real frank meeting,” said North Mankato Mayor Gary Zellmer, the president of the Highway 14 Partnership — which has been pushing for decades for the expansion of the highway to four lanes to New Ulm. “Probably the frankest we’ve ever had with MnDOT and all the partners there.”

Morrow said the message was clear for MnDOT Deputy Commissioner Khani Sahedjam.

“My sense is the deputy commissioner will be talking to the commissioner very soon about the level of concern locally and about the need for action soon — rather than planning,” Morrow said.

The meeting also launched a strategy of breaking the four-lane expansion into more manageable phases than the \$300 million-plus total cost of completing the project. MnDOT District Engineer Jim Swanson, who heads District 7 headquartered in Mankato, will in the next month establish how the broader project could be tackled incrementally, Morrow said.

That document also will include rough cost estimates.

Likely to be the first phase is an interchange on the west side of North Mankato at Rockford Road (Nicollet County Road 41) and the extension of the four-lane for nearly three miles to County Road 6. Earlier cost estimates put that work at \$44 million to \$46 million, including the cost of right-of-way acquisition.

MnDOT officials also were asked Thursday if it didn’t make sense to construct a new four-lane interchange on the north side of New Ulm at the intersection of Highway 14 and Highway 15 when a nearby bridge over the Minnesota River is slated to be replaced in 2018.

After Swanson has completed the document showing potential phases of construction, the group will meet with Sorel to discuss possible sources of money to begin at least one of those phases, Morrow said.

The St. Peter Democrat said existing pools of funding and bonding authority could allow Sorel to get the project under way, including tapping some of the approximately \$40 million for interchange projects, a similar amount for projects that promote economic development, and excess funds stemming from low bids on projects being constructed during the current recession.

“Once we know the dollar figures, we will be working with Commissioner Sorel to determine what funds would be available from Central Office to develop one or more of those phases,” Morrow said. “And we’re talking near-term, not 20 years out.”

Zellmer was satisfied with the two-hour meeting despite no firm promises from MnDOT.

“We don’t have an answer yet, but we do have a strategy in place,” he said. “... That’s a great step forward, because before we were just sitting in limbo. We’re not even in the 20-year plan.”

And Zellmer would be thrilled to see the interchange project getting under way in North Mankato because it’s important to the city’s economic growth. But it’s also key, he said, because construction on Highway 14 heading west from North Mankato could build momentum for beginning future phases of work.

Calls seeking comment from a MnDOT representative in St. Paul weren’t returned Thursday afternoon.



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