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Highway 14 funding a go **(<http://mankatofreepress.com/local/x325560615/Highway-14-funding-a-go>)**

Dangerous strip will be widened, interchange added

By Tim Krohn
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NORTH MANKATO — It's finally a go.

The Minnesota Department of Transportation has committed to building the interchange on Highway 14 and County Road 41 on the west edge of North Mankato and doing other realignment and widening for a couple of miles on 14.

Rep. Terry Morrow, DFL-St. Peter, said the decision was made because of safety problems on the highway between North Mankato and New Ulm.

A three-day series on the safety concerns of Highway 14 published by The Free Press brought statewide attention to the need for the project.

"This is going to be a performance-based design decision, primarily based on safety factors," Morrow said Tuesday.

Past estimates have put the cost of the interchange at between \$27 million and \$35 million. Morrow said MnDOT was still working on exact timelines for the project, though construction is expected to start as soon as preliminary steps like design and land purchases are completed.

"I'm pleased that years of effort to improve the safety of Highway 14 ... have come to this point," Morrow said.

He said the interchange has long been seen as the first step toward the eventual goal of making the highway a four-lane to New Ulm. "Now that we have taken the first step, we can continue working with MnDOT as it plans Minnesota's transportation system into the future."

He said it's also a time to reflect on the carnage that has taken place on the highway.

"Today, it's important to keep in our hearts and our minds the friends and families of those who've died or been seriously injured. My hope is that beginning this work will reduce those risks in the future."

North Mankato City Administrator Wendell Sande said that it was a relief to hear the announcement. "It's been a long time coming.

"We know how important Highway 14 is from an economic and safety standpoint."

He praised the efforts of the Highway 14 Partnership, which included local leaders from across the region, and local lawmakers who've pushed for funding.

Morrow gave special thanks to former North Mankato Mayor Gary Zellmer for his work on the issue.

While exact details of the highway alignment are not set, it's likely that the interchange and a new stretch of Highway 14 will be built to the north and east of the current stretch of highway coming out of North Mankato.

A Free Press investigation last fall found the fatality rate on Highway 14 west was far higher than the state average. The Free Press also published several editorials calling for funding for the project.

"Certainly the civic leadership by The Free Press in studying the Highway 14 situation helped bring greater focus to the deep need regarding safety," said Morrow, who has made funding a high priority.

"I'd like to thank MnDOT and our local officials, our community for working on this."



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