

Wanted: Legislators who can get the job done on U.S. Highway 14

By Robert Beussman, mayor of New Ulm and president of the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership

The 2016 legislative session was a major letdown for transportation advocates. Despite bipartisan agreement that it is one of the biggest issues facing our state, legislators could not agree on how to fund transportation needs across Minnesota. As a result, the project to expand U.S. Highway 14 to four lanes from Rochester to New Ulm once again fell by the wayside.

Only 24.5 miles remain to complete the expansion of this vital corridor of commerce, but it's going to take a lot of money to finish the job—MnDOT estimates about \$300 million—and the price will only go up if we delay any longer.

That is why the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership is asking all legislative candidates along Highway 14 to support an increase in the gas tax to raise the money needed to finish Highway 14 and fund other transportation projects across the state.

Many current legislators and candidates are quick to argue that the public doesn't support a gas tax increase. However, we disagree. In August and September, the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership received nearly 700 separate survey responses from residents and business leaders from Brown, Blue Earth, Nicollet, Waseca, Steele, Dodge and Olmsted counties. The results of this survey found that 64.3 percent of respondents support increasing the gas tax if it would raise the money needed to finish Highway 14. When told the amount an average driver would pay, that support rose to 74%.

Further, our survey found that there was little appetite for diverting funds from other state programs such as education and health and human services to pay for transportation needs. It was clear that respondents would prefer to pay a little more to finally finish Highway 14 rather than see cuts to other programs.

While our survey was not scientific, the results are very similar to a scientific poll conducted by the national firm Harper Polling in November 2015. In that poll, which was authorized by the Minnesota Transportation Alliance, 61 percent of respondents from the counties along Highway 14 said they would support raising the gas tax if "the revenue it generated would be specifically directed to fund the completion of the repairs and widening along Highway 14."

I understand a politician's fear of touting a tax increase, but it's time for our legislative candidates to face the facts. In 2015, Republicans and Democrats agreed that the state needs an additional \$600 million per year for highways and bridges. Nothing comes close to raising this money as quickly and efficiently as the gas tax. For example, a gas tax increase of 10 cents per gallon would raise about \$300 million a year while costing the average driver in Minnesota around \$54. The state could make significant progress on highway repairs, and most drivers would only have to pay about as much as it costs a couple to go out to dinner and a movie.

As we move into the home stretch of the election season, it's crucial that voters along Highway 14 speak up about the need to finish Highway 14. Only 24.5 miles remain, but it is going to take strong leadership at the State Capitol to get it done. We deserve leaders who are willing to stand up for their constituents and support a realistic and responsible solution to finally fix Highway 14.

To see the full results of the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership's transportation funding survey, go to <http://ushighway14.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Survey-Results-packet-9.29.pdf>.