

## Highway 14 group demands urgency at annual meeting

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OWATONNA — Fix it now.

That is the slogan the Highway 14 Partnership hopes to hammer into the legislature's collective conscience this year, to push through refurbishing what is known to many Minnesotans as the deadliest highway in the state.

"It is with the idea when the legislature hears 'fix it now,' they will know we are talking about Highway 14," said J.D. Burton, an attorney with the law firm Flaherty & Hood P.A. which represents the Highway 14 Partnership.

The U.S. Highway 14 Partnership held its annual meeting in Owatonna on Friday. The partnership is made up of counties and cities throughout southern Minnesota, including Owatonna and Steele County. It was formed to monitor and lobby state legislatures in an effort to expand what used to be a two-lane highway across the southern portion of the state into a safer, four-lane roadway.

Some parts of the road have been completed while the section from Waseca to the Steele County line is currently under construction and construction from Highway 218 west to the Waseca County line will begin this year.

However, as the state and country are facing difficult economic times and Highway 14 is not the only major highway partnership lobbying for funding, the partnership wants to ensure the southern roadway stays at the forefront of both state and federal legislation that will help finish it quickly.

"We're going to have to put more pressure on the individual legislators," Burton said.

Burton and Gary Zellner, Highway 14 Partnership president and North Mankato mayor, said after the I-35 bridge in Minneapolis was completed in just over a year, the public knows large projects shouldn't have to take 10 years or more. It is the partnership's goal to ask for legislation which will help streamline the processes to allow the road to move forward.

This includes passing legislation by the end of 2009 which would require statutory language confirming the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for Highway 14 from New Ulm to Nicollet County Road 6 and from Highway 218 east to Dodge Center.



Minnesota Department of Transportation Commissioner Tom Sorel discusses transportation in Minnesota's future Friday.

An EIS has been completed for the portion from Dodge Center and a design option is expected to be chosen by next week. However, the state must confirm the EIS before MnDOT can vie for funding in the future.

With Minnesota in a near \$5 billion deficit, the amount of funding that MnDOT will still receive is undecided.



“We feel we are OK for ‘09 but we’re really concerned about 2010 and 2011,” said Minnesota Department of Transportation Commissioner Tom Sorel. “We’ve got tremendous challenges in transportation but I really see them as opportunities.”

Sorel said he is excited to help local governments and the Highway 14 Partnership work together to find easier options for infrastructure projects to move forward.

“What we are going to try to do is not so much list the projects but what we want to do is make sure we have the processes out there,” Sorel said. “Those guidelines are really going to define what projects we can then get done.”

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