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Money continues to be Highway 14's roadblock

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MANKATO — Jim Swanson spent the first two decades of his career in the Twin Cities metro area, working on projects such as the St. Paul High Bridge and the I-494 bridge over the Mississippi River.

In 1987, Swanson was transferred to the Minnesota Department of Transportation's Mankato office, and it didn't take long for the assistant district engineer to hear about a local desire to see Highway 14 expanded to four lanes.

"Oh, about a day," said Swanson, who became the head of District 7 six years later. "Not very long, because it's always been a priority. It's just not an easy one to tackle."

The intensity of the lobbying for an unbroken Highway 14 expressway from Rochester to New Ulm has only grown between then and now. Advocates for the project have a variety of ammunition to fire at MnDOT — the argument that the highway is crucial to economic development, the reasoning that 40 years of waiting is long enough, and the tragic stories that come with every death on the 24-mile stretch of two-lane between North Mankato and New Ulm.

Swanson's arsenal for responding to the complaints contains a ledger sheet and an explanation that highways can't just be built, they also have to be maintained.

The ledger sheet shows \$42 million to \$45 million coming into District 7 each year for all highway work — new construction and basic maintenance — across 13 counties stretching from Waseca to the South Dakota and Iowa borders.

Completing the Highway 14 expressway to New Ulm would cost between \$294 million and \$346 million, according to preliminary estimates.

The expansion of a two-lane segment between Owatonna and Rochester, which is the responsibility of Rochester-based District 6, would cost another \$165 million to \$195 million.

"We'd like to do Highway 14," Swanson said. "But it comes down to dollars."

A pause in progress

Under current MnDOT plans, progress on the expansion of Highway 14 to four lanes will stall

for at least two decades after 2012. It would be the longest period of inactivity since the expansion began in Rochester and Mankato-North Mankato in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the 1990s, the four-lane was expanded eastward from Mankato past Eagle Lake and westward from Rochester to Dodge Center.

In the first decade of this century, MnDOT extended it from Eagle Lake to the edge of Waseca, along with building a short piece east of Owatonna.

After construction is completed in 2012 on the expressway from Waseca to Owatonna, nothing further is slated to happen through at least 2030.

Advocates of completing the expressway say that's unacceptable.

Swanson said it's unavoidable — short of a surprise influx of funding. It goes back to the bottom line.

Putting 60 first

In 2008, when the DFL-controlled Legislature overrode Gov. Tim Pawlenty's veto of the first gas-tax increase in 20 years, they needed a handful of Republican votes to reach the two-thirds majority required. Included in the bill was a provision that successfully attracted the support of Mountain Lake Republican Rep. Rod Hamilton.

The provision required MnDOT to prioritize the completion of Highway 60 as a four-lane expressway between St. James and the Iowa border. The legislation also required the department to focus more money on bridge replacement following the collapse of the I-35W bridge in Minneapolis.

"They put a lot of that money into bridges and directed us where to spend it," Swanson said. "They wanted Highway 60 done.

That's where most of the money went (for District 7)."

Starting in 2013, \$10 million is dedicated to the Highway 60 expansion, followed by \$15 million a year the ensuing five years. A final \$5 million allocation to that project in 2019 will complete the work.

Throughout the decade, the money remaining will be dedicated to preservation of the dozens of other highways in the district, Swanson said. And it's not enough.

"We're down to just a few projects we can do, and we should be doing 10 jobs," he said of the annual mill-and-overlay and reconstruction work that is needed. "... We are all sitting here facing the fact that most of these roads were built in the '30s, '40s and '50s, and they're wearing out."

Catching up

So, with the completion of Highway 60 toward the end of the decade, District 7 should find itself with an extra \$15 million on the bottom line that hadn't been there for many years. But Highway 14 supporters shouldn't get too hungry for those funds starting in 2020.

District 7 will be applying a lot of Band-Aids to many roads throughout the upcoming decade because so much is dedicated to the Highway 60 expansion and because \$65 million was aimed at the Highway 14 work stretching from west of Waseca to Owatonna starting in 2008.

"Consequently, our pavements are suffering," Swanson said. "... And it's harder to catch up than it is to maintain a good surface.

You have to rip it all up."

It wouldn't be a responsible to move right into a huge investment in the expansion of Highway 14 to New Ulm without getting existing highways back into shape first, he said.

"Nobody would love to do 14 more than me. We can't do it. It's not the right use of the money."

The increase in the gas tax — now 27.2 cents per gallon after sitting at 20 cents for 20 years — raised expectations that longdelayed projects would be funded. Those hopes proved unrealistic partly because of the focus on bridges and the directive to finish Highway 60, but also because the deep economic recession created a drought for MnDOT revenue pools such as the gas tax and motor vehicle excise tax.

"The economy went south on us," Swanson said. "All of a sudden, people stopped driving, our revenue went down. People stopped buying cars as much."

Cash considerations

The recession might put one small positive mark on District 7's ledger. Lower prices for oil (a key factor in construction costs) and a soft market for road contractors could result in lowerthan-expected bids on the Highway 60 work and other projects, Swanson said.

And the federal government could direct money to Highway 14 when Congress passes a transportation reauthorization, possibly next year.

"The federal dollars may or may not be there," he said. "Obviously, we're up against health care, education, all sorts of things. ...

You can only tap the public for so many dollars. There's only so much they're willing to spend."

Swanson said he recognizes the deep desire to get Highway 14 finished to New Ulm. It's a vital corridor for the southern Minnesota economy. And every crash creates more people who know someone injured or killed on the increasingly busy two-lane.

“Anytime you have a death, it’s personal,” Swanson said. “ We understand that.”

He’s much closer to retirement than he is to that day in 1987 when he first heard about southern Minnesotans’ yearning for an improved Highway 14.

It’s very unlikely to be completed in his tenure, but he’s proud of the fact that soon Mankato will be connected by four-lane to I-35 at Owatonna.

Finishing the expressway in the stretch from Waseca to Owatonna was the top priority of local transportation advocates, he said. The two-lane segments at Waseca are also the most crash-prone portions anywhere on Highway 14, including three small segments where severe crash rates are three to seven times higher than the statewide average.

And Swanson is pleased that MnDOT, in conjunction with Iowa’s transportation department, will have created a direct four-lane path all the way to Denver when Highway 60 is completed in 2019.

Those were important projects, Swanson said. So is 14 to New Ulm. And so is keeping existing highways from falling apart.

“Anybody sitting in this chair, given the same information I have, I think they’d make virtually the same decisions we make,” he said.