

Mankato Free Press 09/12/2010

More trucks, more traffic make road more dangerous

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It's somewhere north of 11,000, the number of trips Bryan Clancy has taken on Highway 14 between New Ulm and North Mankato.

One 25-mile eastbound drive in the morning, a westbound return in the afternoon.

"I live on Highway 14," Clancy said. "I kind of call it the Buffalo Trail. It's just a slow-moving path." Trying to change that for the last several decades have been local leaders, state lawmakers, members of Congress. Dozens have come and gone, all pledging to make Highway 14 funding a top priority, but 24 miles of the path between North Mankato and New Ulm remains two lanes.

In recent years, that two-lane stretch has been exceptionally deadly. Six fatal accidents have occurred since the beginning of 2007, a fatal crash rate that's nearly double the statewide average for rural two-lane highways.

Yet however deadly and unsafe, Highway 14 has not made MnDOT's priority list for the next 20 years.

For 23 years, Clancy has been driving Highway 14 five days a week, 48 weeks a year. In that time, everything on the road has seemed to grow except the number of lanes: the traffic counts, the size of the trucks and farm equipment, the variety of distractions available to the commuters and students, the list of people maimed and killed.

Clancy sees it all from above as the driver of 10speed, 1999 International day cab semi tractor.

He can be called a trucker, but that's not precise enough a term because there are three categories, Clancy said.

"You have the basic steering-wheel-holder, that's one.

You have the truck driver, that's two. And there's the one that I am. We joke about this: I'm a PFRE — professional freight relocation engineer."

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North Mankato Mayor Gary Zellmer is only the latest president of the Highway 14 Partnership, following city leaders from Owatonna, New Ulm and Mankato. But Zellmer probably rises to the top when it comes to anger.

When the Minnesota Department of Transportation put out a draft 20- year investment plan in 2008, Zellmer didn't try to temper his criticism.

The plan had no funding to eliminate the two- lane gaps and complete the four- lane expressway between Rochester and New Ulm.

“ Outstate, to put it bluntly, is getting screwed,” he said.

The final plan was better overall but still left little hope of an expressway to New Ulm in the next two decades. Zellmer — on behalf of the cities, counties, private employers and others in the partnership — wrote a letter to MnDOT Commissioner Tom Sorel.

“ How many more deaths on Highway 14 must occur before the Department considers the completion of (the) Highway 14 expansion a top priority?”

Zellmer asked in his letter.

The former Taylor Corp. executive has had friends and a family member killed on the highway, but Zellmer seems to take every fatality personally now.

Just before a recent City Council meeting, another head- on collision occurred on the two- lane portion of Highway 14 just west of North Mankato. One of the drivers died five days later from his injuries.

“ Enough is enough,” Zellmer told the council.

“ Dammit, we've got to get it done.”

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Clancy, even as he pulls a 53- foot trailer down the highway, has a laid- back, utterly relaxed attitude despite spending his workday on a road that he considers undersized for the traffic it's carrying.

The New Ulm resident has complaints about the highway, but the biggest problem is sharing a dangerous stretch of road with too many inattentive and impatient drivers.

One guy pulls so close to Clancy's trailer that the pickup nearly disappears from the semi's side mirrors.

“ If my tire were to blow out and he took one in the windshield, he could get injured. I don't know what these people are thinking.”

Then there's the danger of a chain reaction accident because there would be no margin for error if a quick stop was needed. On a twolane highway, veering right or left means the ditch or a potential head- on with oncoming traffic in the opposing lane.

The pickup passed.

Within seconds another vehicle took its place.

“ There, I’ve got another one — a little red car right on my ass,” Clancy said.

On Highway 14, it’s that way all of the time, snow or shine.

“ I’ve had people pass me in a fog so thick that I can’t see that mile marker in front of me,” he said, pointing to a marker about 40 feet away. “ It’s crazy.

They’re in a hurry. It’s like they don’t have any respect for safety, any respect for common sense.”

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A highway with four lanes can’t completely make up for drivers with no brains, but Zellmer is convinced many of the crashes would be eliminated or greatly reduced in severity if the expansion had been completed sooner.

“ That’s the problem.

There’s no leeway,” he said.

“ If you make a mistake, odds are somebody is going to be coming at you.”

And there’s a 13 percent chance that somebody will be driving a heavy truck, Zellmer said.

He has told the story numerous times at the state Capitol and to any federal lawmakers willing to listen.

Recently, it was U. S. Sen. Al Franken who agreed to ride with the North Mankato mayor from a meeting in Mankato to one in New Ulm.

“ I’ll be giving him an earful about Highway 14 on that drive,” he promised in advance.

Last winter, Zellmer’s sights were on the state Senate Transportation Committee.

“ The last three years I’ve been up here, every year’s been after a death on that road,” Zellmer told the committee. “... Four years ago, I lost some very good friends I’d worked with my entire career. Two years ago, I lost a brother-in-law. All on that two-lane stretch of road that’s no more than four miles from North Mankato.” Zellmer isn’t looking for compassion, he’s looking for money. Ultimately, it would take \$ 294 million to \$ 346 million to complete the 24-mile segment to New Ulm, according to MnDOT estimates. Another \$ 165 million to \$ 195 million would be required to eliminate the 16-mile two-lane gap between Owatonna and Dodge Center.

The sums are daunting even by government standards.

MnDOT's Mankato-based District 7 would be responsible for the \$ 300 million or more required to construct the two dozen miles from North Mankato to New Ulm. The district, which serves 13 counties stretching from Waseca to the Iowa and South Dakota borders, receives about \$ 45 million a year to cover the cost of both new construction and maintenance and preservation projects on all of its existing highways.

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At age 50, Clancy isn't sure he'll drive an 18-wheeler on a four-lane expressway out of New Ulm before he retires.

"I don't know. Even if they start it, it's going to take 10 years. So maybe — maybe — at the end of my driving time, I guess."

He likes what's been completed already to the east.

"Everything is so smooth and easygoing," he said.

"People are able to access the highway and leave it.

It's such a better setup."

Clancy, though, is sticking with the two-lane segment closer to home.

Married for 31 years and the father of three, it's a route he prefers to over-the-road trucking spanning 48 states — something he did for more than six years at the beginning of his career.

He drives for D& A Trucking of New Ulm, hauling LTL (less than truck load) freight.

"Kind of like a UPS driver with a semi," he said.

The difference is the size and the weight of the freight, stuff too big for UPS. In the morning, his truck is filled with pallets of items hauled in from around the country by other D& A trucks.

Clancy drops the pallets off at places such as Kato Engineering, Corporate Graphics and North Central International. In the afternoon, he does pickups — freight that will go back to New Ulm to be loaded on other trucks for delivery around the region and nation.

North Mankato and Mankato industries make up most of his stops, but he also serves businesses and sometimes farms between there and New Ulm.

While he doesn't often drive east of Mankato, his fellow D& A drivers do and he's looking forward to the completion of the four-lane expressway between Waseca and Owatonna,

scheduled for 2012.

“(Highway) 14 in Waseca, that road will shake fillings out. That road is terrible.”

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Words like “ terrible” have been applied to Highway 14 for decades. People lobbying for improvements routinely say the calls for an expressway are at least 40 years old.

It was a priority when Kathy Sheran was on the Mankato City Council in the 1980s and 1990s, and the Highway 14 Partnership was her brainchild. Cities along the route working solo weren't getting much accomplished.

“ In a coalition, you have more than one voice,” Sheran said. “... We had a whole corridor of legislators, city council members, county commissioners and business people speaking for the project.”

Getting the coalition organized in the 1990s, Sheran suggested they set a goal of 2011 or 2012 for completing the expressway.

“ They were saying, ‘ It's too ambitious, ’” Sheran recalled. “ I said, ‘ Well, what do you want to say — 2050?’” After 16 years on the council, Sheran is now a state senator. A goal of completing the highway by 2050 is starting to look less farfetched.

The governors and many of the state and federal lawmakers the partnership initially lobbied are in retirement, new ones have taken their place. The extra two lanes are still nowhere in sight west of North Mankato and between Owatonna and Dodge Center.

In the 2010 legislative session, Sheran introduced legislation that would have forced MnDOT to put the two expansion projects on its four- year funding schedule. It's a controversial move in a state where the Legislature has steadfastly — and mostly successfully — kept regional politics out of MnDOT's road- funding choices.

“ My constituents have been fighting to finish this project for over 40 years,” Sheran told the Senate Transportation Committee in March. “And now, this past summer, we find out that the Minnesota Department of Transportation has no plans to finish the project for another two decades.

(MnDOT's announcement) means we will be waiting 60 years for the project to be completed.”

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Like Sheran, Clancy understands MnDOT's argument — that the list of needed improvements is much larger than the list of revenue sources. He mentions Highways 7, 212 and 71 from personal experience.

But Clancy, having driven roads across the continental United States, can offer an informed opinion on where Highway 14 sits on the spectrum of undersized, hazardous highways.

“ It’s just kind of a nasty road,” he said. “ I’ve seen a lot of accidents.”

A number of factors make it unique, truck traffic being one that’s hard to miss.

Chicago is a transportation hub, and a lot of trucks heading to the western and northwestern United States can shave off some time and a few miles by taking Highway 14 when I- 90 veers to the southwest at Rochester.

Trucks are drawn to major New Ulm manufacturers such as Kraft, 3M and AMPI, the country’s biggest butter manufacturer. And despite a population of fewer than 14,000, the city has long had a disproportionately large trucking industry (Zellmer: “ I think they breed truckers over there.”) But the road simultaneously serves a lot of commuters and students — drivers preparing for work or class, rushing to beat the clock. Add the fact that it’s a farm road with slow- moving machinery regularly joining the other traffic.

“ There’s many areas where you just can’t see far enough to safely pass,” Clancy said. “A lot of people are in a hurry, and this is no place to be in a hurry.”

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Unless, according to area lawmakers and members of the partnership, the rush is for funding to get the road improved.

Sen. Mike Parry of Waseca has just one legislative session of experience, but he wasn’t in the mood to be counseled on patience when fellow senators spoke against Sheran’s bill. A former cop, Parry said he’s among the people along the highway who have grown tired of watching the tragic toll rise.

“ I like it when everybody says they can sympathize,” Parry said at the hearing.

“ But until you’re the officer like I have been and pick up the bodies on the road, when you know things could change, when you’re the officer who has to walk into the home and tell the husband, the wife, that they’ve lost a child, they’ve lost a good friend. ...”

Rep. Terry Morrow, who’s district includes North Mankato, is also relatively new to the Highway 14 fight. A member of the House Transportation Committee, the latest fatality prompted another letter to Sorel from Morrow — with the State Patrol’s crash report attached.

“ Yes, some safety measures have been implemented. But as long as it is a heavily- traveled, two- lane, undivided highway, these tragedies are going to continue,” Morrow wrote on Aug. 14. “ On behalf of my constituents, I must demand that MnDOT act.

Now.”

Morrow listed unallocated spending authority and reserve funds that Sorel might tap to get work started on the Highway 14 expansion.

“ Without prompt action by MnDOT ... I am going to be left to conclude that the only option is for the Legislature to statutorily require that MnDOT undertake this project,” wrote Morrow, DFL- St. Peter.

“ Minnesotans’ safety cannot continue to be jeopardized.”

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The one certainty for political leaders and Highway 14 drivers, alike, is that they won’t see a completed expressway for many years, even if the project is targeted for more funding soon.

But Clancy — who’s witnessed plenty of crashes while keeping his rig out of all of them — said he knows one group of people who can save a bunch of lives on Highway 14 immediately: the people who drive it.

After making sure to point out that he sees many good drivers too, Clancy gets uncharacteristically somber when he talks about the ones that put him and others at risk.

His first advice?

“ Lights on, even on a sunny day. With that much traffic, you need to be seen.”

Keep a safe distance between vehicles.

“ Basically, this is my office. Don’t drive into my office.”

Set aside the distractions. “ There’s so many people texting all the time. People putting on makeup. I mean, it’s crazy. You watch, you can see ’em go off the shoulder, over the center line.

You know what they’re doing.”

And on a highway like 14, sometimes there’s nothing reasonable that a driver can do when stuck behind a slowpoke — other than wait.

After all, waiting has become sort of the essence of Highway 14 — for drivers and politicians alike.

“ I just back off and keep my distance and ride it out,” Clancy said. “...

There’s not much I can do — just play it safe and get through the day.”

