

Legislators: Highway 14 a priority, but project lacks funds

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Posted: Wednesday, July 14, 2010 9:29 pm



Rep. Kory Kath (DFL) speaks to the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership, a public-private lobbying group that advocates for the expansion of the road.

OWATONNA — Local politicians appeared before the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership on Wednesday, offering a mixture of praise, pleas and promises.

Such was the campaign trail buzz surrounding Highway 14 — a major regional conduit whose re-construction and expansion has long been in varying states of action or inaction, depending on the point of view.

The U.S. Highway 14 Partnership is a lobbyist group made up of 17 local government entities — counties and cities — and 28 “affiliates,” businesses and non-profits that have an interest in the improvement of the roadway that

stretches from New Ulm to Rochester.

With the November election approaching, partnership lobbyist J.D. Burton encouraged the group to step up its own campaign to influence challengers and incumbents alike to take up the cause. Early in the meeting, the group’s treasurer gave a short accounting of the money available for the push to the polls.

Highway 14 did make several appearances during the last legislative session, with bills HF 2427 and SF 2794 — two pieces of legislation similar to a previous effort vetoed by Gov. Tim Pawlenty in 2009. The bills were chief authored by Mankato Sen. Kathy Sheran (DFL) and Rep. Terry Morrow, a DFLer from St. Peter. All of the local legislators — DFL Reps Kory Kath, Patti Fritz and Republican Sen. Parry — were listed as co-authors.

The bills pushed MnDOT to complete the necessary preliminary paperwork, Environmental Impact Studies, by the end of May. They also called for the project to take a higher priority on the project list, which would hasten completion of two portions of the roadway — one being a segment from Dodge Center to Owatonna. The stretch between Waseca and Owatonna is in progress and should be completed by the end of next year.

Parry added, in an amendment, that the project could not go forward until the federal government agreed to pay at least 80 percent of the cost.

In spite of much talk of support from Transportation Committee members in both the House and the Senate, the bill stalled before reaching the floor, Burton said. Though the EIS studies have been completed, as per the legislators’ request. Funding remains a problem.

“I would like to say that we have the money to do this, but that’s not the case,” said Jim Swanson, a district engineer with MnDOT District 7. “We’re moving forward as we can, but it’s a role of the dice game as to where the money will come from.”

Most of the members of the Senate Transportation Committee signed onto a letter asking President

Barack Obama for federal funding. All DFL members of the committee signed the document, but just two of the Republican contingents agreed to do so — Parry and Sen. Mike Jungbauer.

In the house, Kath, Morrow and Fritz also put forward a bill that would create vanity license plates bearing “Support Highway 14.” Money generated by the vanity plates would go toward the construction. This proposal has yet to take off.

In the upcoming year, Parry and Kath both suggested that the Partnership should work its powers of persuasion on other legislators who need to be brought into the fold.

“Right now everybody that’s running should know about the problems concerning Highway 14 — current leaders and those trying to win a seat — because what I found out on the transportation committee is that I worked hard trying to convince someone like Sen. (Rick) Olseen how important this highway project was to the lives of people,” Parry said.

Olseen brought the letter to the president forward. Nevertheless, Parry cautioned that the partnership has to be “very aggressive” through the end of this year “touching every one of the legislators.”

The remaining portions of the project are estimated to cost more than \$500 million — \$300 to \$350 million for the road between New Ulm and North Mankato, and \$170 million for the portion from Owatonna to Dodge Center. Parry suggested that this would be a tough sell for a legislature facing a multi-billion dollar deficit.

Then Parry threw in a pitch of his own for a specific contractor.

“We have a company in this state that does reclamation. They’re doing a huge project for the state of Iowa on Highway 30 yet he can’t get anywhere in our own state. I have an issue with that,” Parry told the group. “He can do a mile of roadway for 50 percent of what we’re charging right now. If all these facts are true, shouldn’t we be working that way? By the way if you want to know, his name is Tom Johnson and he owns Midstate Trucking and Reclamation.”

Parry also suggested that the state could stretch its funds by changing statutes calling for prevailing wage. Minnesota’s prevailing wage law requires that contractors working on state-funded projects pay their employees “wage-rates comparable to wages paid for similar work in the area where the project is located.” According to the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry, in Steele County the basic prevailing wage for a common laborer is currently \$22.31 an hour, not including fringe benefits.

During his stump speech, Kath praised the group itself and told them to ask other candidates what they would do to move the initiative forward.

“Getting you guys up there to tell the story is important. I was very, very concerned when (prior Highway 14 legislation) got vetoed (in 2009),” Kath said. “We’ve used the public safety aspect a lot, now I really do think that in this economic climate we need to promote the economic development element.”

Representatives from the federal level were also present — including staff members of Congressman Tim Walz (DFL), Sen. Amy Klobuchar (DFL), and Sen. Al Franken (DFL). As yet, Walz is the only one to have submitted a request for federal funds.

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