

Partnership discusses future of Hwy. 14 project

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Lobbyist J.D. Burton and Les Abraham lead a meeting of the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership on Monday. Abraham was recently elected president of the advocacy group, which pushes for the continued expansion of the road.

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OWATONNA — The fate of Highway 14 was the hot topic on Monday, as officials and lobbyists pondered how to approach the new political landscape in St. Paul and Washington.

“There’s no perfect solution except a \$500 million earmark,” said J. D. Burton from Flaherty & Hood, who represents the City of Owatonna as a part of the Highway 14 Partnership.

The partnership — a lobbying group made of up cities and businesses running along the stretch of road, which is often billed as one of the most dangerous in the state — is pushing to complete an expansion of two stretches of road from North Mankato to New Ulm and another running between Owatonna and Dodge Center.

The earmark and the completion of the expansion would be a tall order indeed, Burton said. For the first time in well over three decades, conservatives have control of both the state House and the Senate, though a DFLer now helms the executive branch.

For the most part, the House has been a home to a DFL majority, except for a stretch between the late 1990s and the mid-2000s, when Republicans seized control. Their latest coup gives the Republicans a 7 percent margin over the Dems. The last election changes the balance from 87 DFLers and 47 Republicans to 62 DFL members and 72 representatives from the GOP.

Republicans now hold an even larger margin in the Senate, a body of state government that was solidly in the DFL’s hands for at least 30 years. That body went from having 46 DFL senators to just 30 DFL seats. The Republican party gained 16 spots — their caucus swelled from 21 to 37.

The shift has completely changed the game. New legislators hold power in the transportation committees, though Gov. Mark Dayton chose to retain Tom Sorrel, the commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Transportation under former Republican Gov. Tim Pawlenty.

The dynamic between the two men has not been established as of yet, though Burton said in the past, Dayton has been supportive of Highway 14 as a U.S. senator.

“We don’t know if it will be Gov. Dayton telling Tom Sorrel which projects to do or if Tom Sorrel will be telling the governor which projects are a priority,” Burton said.

Burton also noted that both the Senate and House now have a significant number of freshmen legislators — a wild card for the partnership. What this means for Highway 14 is unclear at this point. Burton said that legislators from greater Minnesota might have greater sway within the new majority. Under the old order, DFLers from Greater Minnesota were largely outnumbered by their cohorts from the metro area. This is not necessarily the case in the GOP, which relies heavily on outstate areas for support at the polls. Their influence could make the road a higher priority.

On the other hand, the principal roadblock is funding, and rhetoric on the conservative side has focused on cutting spending, and some have suggested eliminating earmarks altogether. The party has also expressed antipathy to raising taxes of any sort, which could mean that the project will languish.

Burton proposed that, given the changing political climate, the partnership should adopt a new approach: Instead of playing up the economic benefit of finishing Highway 14, they should throw scrutiny on MnDOT’s inner workings. The group will henceforth push the Legislature to make “safety” a major criteria when ranking projects for funding.

“Everybody makes the economic development argument. We can’t distinguish ourselves there,” Burton said.

MnDOT should also be called on to provide more insight into how it decides which roads take a front and which can slide. Burton suggested that the lobbying group ask legislators to demand an annual report from the agency, detailing which roads were the most dangerous.

“There’s no guarantee that Highway 14 will be one of the most dangerous roads, but it will take away some of the opposition,” Burton said.

Meanwhile, the group is facing financial challenges of its own. Because portions of the highway have been completed, many cities along the route have dropped out. Rochester, for instance, did not renew its membership after its length of Highway 14 got a facelift. At the meeting, the group’s treasurer reported that annual revenues have slipped from \$55,000 — a typical take prior to 2005 — to about \$33,000, due to declining membership.

“We’re looking to expand membership with affiliate (businesses that have a potential stake in Highway 14). We have a finite number of local governments, but there are many affiliates out there who could be strong partners,” Burton said.

Burton asked each person in the room to come up with two or three local businesses who might lend support to the effort.

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