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OUR VIEW

SAFETY FIRST FOR FUNDING HIGHWAYS

A three-day Free Press series ending in today's edition shows that Highway 14 between North Mankato and New Ulm has a fatal crash rate nearly double the state average, but the project was not enough of a Minnesota Department of Transportation priority to make its list of projects to be started in the next 20 years.

A Free Press analysis of funded road projects around the state shows many of them are already safer than Highway 14. (See chart on page A8.) Six highways from the Iowa border to northern Minnesota have fatal crash rates far below Highway 14. Two have severe crash rates below Highway 14 and two have total crash rates lower than Highway 14.

Yet, Highway 14 goes unfunded, and the others will be getting money.

Officials, legislators and city leaders have questioned the decision to leave Highway 14 off the list for about a year now, since the MnDOT 20-year plan was proposed.

MnDOT's priorities for funding focus on congestion in the Twin Cities and "preservation" of deteriorating roads elsewhere. This policy is driven in part by criticism from the legislative auditor that said MnDOT was not focusing on its preservation as much as it should, said Rep. Terry Morrow, DFL-St. Peter, and a member of the House Transportation Committee.

With limited funds, the agency finds it must cut back on other road projects, including expansion projects such as Highway 14. Officials say there's just not enough money to go around.

Morrow has been pushing MnDOT to change the way it allocates funding and to make safety rankings more of a priority — especially on Highway 14, where local leaders have been pushing for improvements for 40 years.

"Safety is often in that gray zone," Morrow said.

Typically, MnDOT regional transportation partnerships recommend funding of projects, and those partnerships include local officials. But in the end, the commissioner of transportation and his staff have authority to make the final decision.

The theory behind this decision-making process is to keep politics an arm's length away from road decisions.

It's a procedure long supported by legislators until recently. Morrow doesn't doubt that some political influence still occurs with the commissioner's decisions.

Morrow says there is \$300 million in unspent state bonding authority due to bids coming in low on construction projects statewide. The group of leaders aims to persuade MnDOT Commissioner Tom Sorel to set aside some money where funding decisions will make safety more of a priority, perhaps the highest priority.

In that case, Highway 14 should be in line for some money. We support that effort, as should much of rural Minnesota, which continues to deal with a lack of road funding not only to move goods to market, but to simply keep motorists safe.

Why it matters

MnDOT's formula for deciding where to spend money for highway upgrades puts the priorities on metro-area congestion and highway preservation, not safety.