

State moves Hwy. 14 to back burner

Wendy Reuer

Posted: Tuesday, October 27, 2009 11:08 pm

By WENDY REUER

wreuer@owatonna.com

OWATONNA — Members of the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership are asking the Minnesota Department of Transportation to explain why the road expansion program will not be one of the MnDOT's priorities in the next 20 years.

In August, MnDOT released its 20-year-plan for transportation across the state. The plan outlines projects and the chronological order in which MnDOT will attempt to fund and complete the projects.

After years of pushing by southeastern Minnesota authorities, counties and other officials, the expansion of Highway 14 from a two-lane road to a four-lane expressway still remains undone from New Ulm to North Mankato and from Dodge Center to Owatonna. The two pieces are the last in making the road four-lanes across Minnesota from South Dakota to Wisconsin.

U.S. Highway 14 Partnership president Gary Zellmer said he waited before filing a written response to MnDOT on Tuesday to allow southern Minnesotans a chance to digest the announcement.

**COLDWELL
BANKER**
Home Connection
[Click Here](#)
To Find Your
Dream Home
Today...

But now, Zellmer and other members of the Partnership want answers.

“The conclusions reached by the department are disappointing, and unacceptable. After so many years, how could these two Highway 14 projects still remain a low end priority for the Department? How many more deaths on Highway 14 must occur before the Department considers the completion of Highway 14 expansion a top priority?” Zellmer wrote in his letter to MnDOT Commissioner Tom Sorel.

The 20-year investment plan does identify the two unfinished Highway 14 projects as mid to long-range investment plans. In MnDOT district 6, the plan would tentatively schedule the Dodge Center to Owatonna section for construction sometime

between 2019 and 2028, contingent on funding being available.

Zellmer added that this segment is only identified for “partial” funding, with the connotation that the segment will be completed in piecemeal fashion, if at all.

District 6 Representative Kristine Hernandez said although the work isn't scheduled in, the district is still moving forward, noting its dedication to completing the Environmental Impact Statement, which must be finished before funding can be applied for. If federal funding would become available for the project, it could certainly change the plan's status.

“We recognize this is an important segment,” Hernandez said. “But at a cost of \$152 million, our district simply can’t handle a project of that size. We’re hoping funding will become available.”

State auditors have mandated District 6 focus on the maintenance and repair of major roads rather than a re-build, which Highway 14 would be.

In the meantime, Hernandez said the district is installing as many safety features as it can to help improve Highway 14 as it is.

In 2009, MnDOT installed edge-line and center rumble strips and improved signage. In 2010, plans allocate further safety signage, such as a delineator signs which reflect drivers speeds. Delineator signs will be placed where the speed limit changes from 65 mph to 55 mph.

Wendy Reuer can be reached at 444-1565.