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Highway 14 in southern Minnesota ranks among state's most dangerous

The Associated Press

12/17/2007

MINNEAPOLIS — Blind intersections. Unexpected curves. No left-turn lanes. Narrow shoulders. Heavy truck traffic. Slow-moving farm machinery. A mix of newer four-lane sections interrupted by two-lane stretches. Few opportunities to pass on some stretches. No dividers to stop head-on crashes.



Highway 14 in Minnesota considered one of deadliest in state.

They're part of why U.S.

Highway 14 in southern

Minnesota is considered one of the deadliest roads in Minnesota. On average, someone dies on it every two months. Since the mid 1980s, state records show, the death toll is more than 145.

When Al Forsberg drives it, he sees numerous death traps.

"Being an engineer, I tend to always see the smallest characteristics on a road that will cause death or injuries," said Forsberg, the longtime head of public works for Blue Earth County. "But I'm also a citizen, and I know how badly this highway needs to be fixed for everyone's sake."

Forsberg and other officials in communities along the 265 miles from of Highway 14 from Winona to the South Dakota border have spent years demanding an overhaul from the Minnesota Department of Transportation. They contend MnDOT's response has been agonizingly slow.

Just two of five major sections have been modernized over the past 40 years. On one two-lane stretch where crashes are frequent, widening might not begin until 2023 or later.

"The carnage that we see along Highway 14 is a sad reflection of the unwillingness of our leaders to make needed improvements in our transportation infrastructure," said Owatonna Mayor Tom Kuntz, president of the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership. The group includes 21 municipalities and 55 private-sector affiliates.

Lt. Gov. Carol Molnau, the state's transportation commissioner, defended her agency's decisions.

"This administration inherited the problems on Highway 14 — but we're the ones fixing them. ... This administration has supported Highway 14 improvements and will continue as funds allow," she said in a written statement.

One major frustration for local officials is that MnDOT has not yet set a definite time to widen the increasingly busy two-lane stretch from New Ulm to North Mankato. No construction is scheduled on that segment, MnDOT said, because no money is available.

"It makes me want to puke," New Ulm Mayor Joel Albrecht said. "This has been going on for lo these many years, and there isn't any relief in sight."

The problem isn't unique to southern Minnesota. Across the state, local officials complain about highway safety improvements repeatedly being put on hold because of lack of money.

"There's just not enough money in the pie to go around," said former Crow Wing County Highway Engineer Duane Blanck, a past president of the National Association of County Engineers.

Gov. Tim Pawlenty vetoed transportation bills in 2005 and 2006 that would have raised the gas tax to fund the most needed highway and bridge improvements. He still opposes a gas tax increase, said Bob McFarlin,



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Molnau's assistant.

Instead, the governor has proposed selling \$1.7 billion in highway bonds over the next 10 years. Under Pawlenty, MnDOT has steadily increased its borrowing for road projects: In 2003, interest payments on trunk highway bonds were \$8.8 million. That's risen nearly six-fold, to \$53.7 million in 2007.

North Mankato Mayor Gary Zellmer's brother-in-law, Joel Dauffenbach, was killed in April in a crash on Highway 14 outside of North Mankato. His pickup drifted over the center line and collided with a semitrailer.

"It's a death trap," Zellmer said. "There's not too many people around here who don't know somebody who hasn't been killed or severely injured on that highway."

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