

StarTribune.com | MINNEAPOLIS - ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

Part 2: Hwy. 14, Highway of horrors

By **Tony Kennedy and Paul McEnroe**, Star Tribune

December 18, 2007

Every time Al Forsberg drives U.S. Hwy. 14, he sees death traps where others see the open road.

The highway, a mix of old two-lane and reconstructed four-lane sections, has blind intersections, heavy truck traffic, narrow shoulders and unexpected curves. It may be the deadliest highway in the state.

Since the mid-1980s, more than 145 people have been killed on the highway, which winds through 265 miles of farmland from Winona to the South Dakota border. On average, someone dies on the road every two months. And 75 percent of the deaths between 2000 and 2005 occurred on the two-lane stretches, state records show.

“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.”

He and other officials have spent years demanding that the Minnesota Department of Transportation overhaul the harrowing parts of the highway. MnDOT’s response, they say, has been agonizingly slow.

Over the past 40 years, just two of five major sections have been modernized. Widening one two-lane stretch of the highway where crashes are prevalent might not begin until 2023 or later. Similar delays — and the same frustration — are apparent across the state. From St. Cloud to Nisswa to Lake Mille Lacs to Remer, local officials are complaining about highway safety improvements repeatedly being put on hold because of lack of money.

In north-central Minnesota, for example, MnDOT has delayed several major projects that would improve road safety in a region that has seen fatality rates increase with the population, said former Crow Wing County Highway Engineer Duane Blanck. Right now, there is a \$3.5 billion gap in funding through 2030 for preventive and corrective safety projects on Minnesota highways, according to MnDOT.

“There’s just not enough money in the pie to go around,” said Blanck, who worked on Crow Wing County’s roads for 32 years and is a past president of the National

Association of County Engineers. "There's just a tremendous backlog of state transportation needs." Motorists who travel Hwy. 14 are more blunt.

"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 nonpartisan group includes 21 municipalities and 55 private-sector affiliates along the corridor, which 45,000 people use every day.

Cuts were on the table

This fall, the group swung into action after MnDOT told legislators that it was considering \$8.4 million in cuts to projects scheduled for the south-central district that includes a large portion of Hwy. 14.

The proposed budget cut threatened to stall preliminary work next summer on a \$150 million expansion of Hwy. 14 from two to four lanes between Owatonna and Waseca.

"The four-lane upgrade of Highway 14 from Rochester to New Ulm has been in process for four decades," Kuntz wrote to Lt. Gov. Carol Molnau, MnDOT's commissioner. "The citizens of southern Minnesota should not have to wait any longer for a safe and reliable route." Bob McFarlin, Molnau's assistant, said MnDOT is no longer considering budget cuts that would interfere with that work on Hwy. 14.

Work on the four-lane expansion from Owatonna to Waseca is expected to begin by midsummer and be finished by 2012 at the latest, McFarlin said.

Molnau declined to be interviewed, but said in a written statement, "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."

Kuntz and other southern Minnesotans say that MnDOT is putting fiscal restraint ahead of road improvements that would save lives.

Their biggest frustration is that MnDOT has not yet set a definite time to widen the increasingly busy two-lane stretch from New Ulm to North Mankato. According to a MnDOT document, one part of that road has a crash rate and crash severity rate "significantly higher than average for a rural two-lane road."

No construction is scheduled on that stretch, MnDOT said, because no money is available.

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

Albrecht said the junction of Hwy. 14 and southbound Hwy. 15 leading into New Ulm is so dangerous that when you approach, "You hold your breath."

Republican State Rep. Ron Erhardt of Edina, vice chairman of the House Transportation Finance Division, said rural Minnesota has twice as many traffic deaths as the Twin Cities. The root problem is massive transportation underfunding, he said.

In 2005 and again last year, Gov. Tim Pawlenty vetoed transportation bills that would have raised the gas tax to improve funding for the most needed highway and bridge improvements.

Instead, the governor has proposed selling \$1.7 billion in bonds over the next 10 years to accelerate road construction — an approach that the Highway 14 Partnership has called irresponsible because it would cost taxpayers \$892.5 million to pay interest on the bonds.

'Not fiscally prudent'

"We do not believe it is fiscally prudent to put the entire cost of our generation's road construction upon our children," Kuntz said last spring.

McFarlin shot down the Highway 14 Partnership's position that the dangerous stretches could be eliminated by increasing the gas tax. "The governor doesn't support a gas tax," he said.

Since Pawlenty took office, MnDOT has steadily increased its annual transportation borrowing: In 2003, interest payments on trunk highway bonds were \$8.8 million. That amount has risen nearly six-fold, to \$53.7 million, in 2007.

McFarlin said the governor has supported increased highway bonding because it speeds the state's ability to buy transportation projects.

"You cannot attack the backlog of projects with tax increases alone," he said.

McFarlin also said the current state of underfunding for transportation in Minnesota grew from political differences that existed before Pawlenty was elected governor in 2002.

"There are corridors throughout the state where people feel the exact same way that they feel about 14," he said. "There are choices to be made all around the state."

Hwy. 14 is a patchwork highway that has been under reconstruction since the late 1960s. It originally was two-lane all the way. Over time, two major sections were upgraded to four lanes: Rochester to Dodge Center, and just west of Waseca to Mankato.

Three sections remain two-lane: Owatonna to Dodge Center, Owatonna to Waseca and North Mankato to New Ulm.

The Owatonna-to-Waseca route — currently scheduled for a \$140 million four-lane upgrade from 2008 to 2012 — is 15 miles of intense driving. It's a narrow, crowded two-laner with difficult sight lines and overrun with roaring semis.

With few opportunities to pass, impatient motorists take passing risks that they wouldn't need to consider on a four-lane expressway.

Farm tractors amid traffic

Often, seemingly out of nowhere, a huge tractor ambles out of a farmer's driveway into traffic that's zipping by at more than 60 mph.

In Waseca, where a planned bypass of the town has yet to be built, school crossing guards find themselves in danger as they escort children across the highway. In 1999, a sun-blinded driver struck and injured a 75-year-old crossing guard.

MnDOT estimates the crash severity on Hwy. 14 in Waseca is about three times greater than that expected on the proposed bypass. Sight lines are obscured by curves that sweep around hills — a layout that would be re-engineered if the highway met current safety standards. There also are no left-turn lanes; when a driver wants to turn left, trailing vehicles often must come to a complete stop, with high-speed traffic barreling toward them from behind.

And when a driver makes a mistake, there is little forgiveness — no dividers are in place to stop head-on crashes.

Each day, more than 8,000 cars and 1,200 heavy trucks use that section of the highway. "This road was built for traffic you had in the '30s and '40s," Forsberg said.

Scores of side roads and driveways connect to the highway between Waseca and Owatonna. Come winter, snow and ice hazards are compounded, because many miles of the highway are level with the terrain and unbuffered from snow buildup.

Albrecht, New Ulm's mayor, blames the highway's poor safety profile on politicians from both parties who make campaign promises to bolster the state's infrastructure, but don't follow through after election.

"Other social issues take precedence over a road," he said.

Everyone knows someone

In late September, almost two months after the Interstate 35W bridge in Minneapolis collapsed, about a dozen state representatives from the House Transportation Finance Committee found themselves in the Blue Earth County Board room in Mankato, the same place where Al Forsberg had made the case for years to remake Hwy. 14.

This time, Forsberg told the key lawmakers that the highway would remain a deadly alley unless they passed a comprehensive transportation bill — one that included a gas-tax increase.

By night's end, the discussion of longstanding transportation needs had shifted into heartfelt storytelling of personal tragedies.

North Mankato Mayor Gary Zellmer stood up and described how his brother-in-law, Joel Dauffenbach, 60, was killed in April in a crash on Hwy. 14 outside of North Mankato.

Head-on crash with a semi

Dauffenbach, a veteran who served two tours in Vietnam and then returned to work as a postal employee, was driving his pickup when it drifted over the center line and collided with an eastbound semi.

Two other friends of Zellmer were killed in December 2003. A beloved community leader, Al Fallenstein, and his wife, Erla Mae, were killed when the van he was driving skidded on black ice and spun into an oncoming semi. Fallenstein was a friend of Timberwolves owner Glen Taylor and held a minority interest in the team.

In 1996, a neighbor of U.S. Rep. Tim Walz, D-Mankato, died one foggy morning east of Mankato. The neighbor, Charles Ingman, was struck head-on by an oncoming vehicle that was passing another car.

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

Tony Kennedy • 612-673-4213 tonyk@startribune.com Paul McEnroe • 612-673-1745
pmcenroe@startribune.com

© 2008 Star Tribune. All rights reserved.