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Transportation committee appeals to president for action on Hwy. 14

By Ron Larsen Staff Writer

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ST. PAUL - In an un-anticipated move, 15 members of the state Senate Transportation Committee last week signed a letter to President Barack Obama expressing - as a primary argument for federal highway funds - the committee's concern that U.S. Highway 14, as a two-lane roadway, remains an unfinished and deadly highway.

"That is why we write you today to urge you to support increased federal funding for transportation projects nationwide. The passage of a transportation funding reauthorization bill is imperative for the economy and transportation safety of both our state and nation, and something that needs to be accomplished in short order," they wrote.

"We have seen first hand the benefit that comes from increased federal funding for transportation, not only in terms [of] transportation safety and mobility, but in stimulating the economy. In the \$787 billion American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, the investment in our nation's transportation and infrastructure totaled \$62.5 billion," they continued.

"However, this 6 percent for transportation provided half of the jobs created by the ARRA. Clearly, investing in our nation's infrastructure gets people back to work. We feel these efforts need to be built upon to continue to generate economic recovery in our state and nation," the letter continues.

"Further, there are safety concerns across our nation that warrants immediate action and investment. For example, we call attention to U.S. Highway 14, which spans southern Minnesota. This highway has a higher crash and fatality rate than any other similar two lane highway in the state. It also has a heavy truck traffic volume above the state average and portions of this highway are counted as the busiest in the state," it continues.

"Several stretches of this highway need to be expanded from two to four lanes to accommodate these safety concerns and improve traffic capacity, including the portion from New Ulm to North Mankato and that from Owatonna to Dodge Center. Residents of southern Minnesota have waited almost forty years for these projects to be completed, and have been told that they can expect to wait another twenty before adequate funding materializes," it continues.

"The New Ulm to North Mankato portion is estimated to cost \$300-350 million. Altogether, the project components of the Owatonna to Dodge Center segment approximate \$170 million. With annual budgets at \$40-50 million, the Mn/DOT Districts can't realistically program these projects without displacing nearly every other road need in the Districts for years."

Noting that the Highway 14 project is one of the many examples of large projects that Minnesota cannot do alone, the bi-partisan group of senators call upon Obama "to work with Congress to swiftly enact a federal transportation investment, so further progress can be made in addressing the safety and economic needs of our state and nation."

Lending further credence to the appeal, only one signer, Sen. Michael Parry of District 26 (Owatonna area), has a part of Highway 14 in his district.

For his part, New Ulm Mayor Joel Albrecht, former chairman of the Highway 14 Partnership that has been lobbying for years to get Highway 14 transformed into a four-lane roadway, is somewhat reserved in his reaction to the senators using Highway 14's condition in their appeal to Obama for federal funds.

"If the federal funds require a state match, it's not going to happen because the state doesn't have the money," Albrecht said.

Ron Larsen can be reached at rlarsen@nujournal.com

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