

Walz presents Highway 14 grant

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By RUTH ANN HAGER

News Editor

WASECA — Funding for the expansion of Highway 14 got a boost Thursday morning when First District Congressman Tim Walz and members of the Highway 14 Partnership met in Waseca. They stood on the grass across from Kiesler's Campground, their backs to the highway they all want to see converted to a four-lane.

Walz, a Mankato Democrat, was in town to announce federal grants for two sections of Highway 14. Joining him were the mayors of Waseca, Owatonna, North Mankato and Courtland and officials from Waseca and Owatonna.

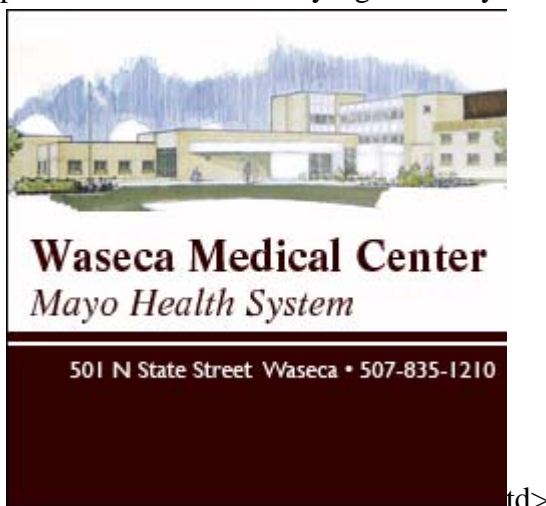
Walz said the highway is a major artery in the First District, used by 80 percent of the area's largest employers.

He said the Federal Highway Administration grant is the result of the financial commitment the state of Minnesota has made to the finish the project.

The grant was also made possible, Walz said, because of the commitment of the partnership members who understood the need to band together to get a new highway built. The new highway will improve safety and the economy and infrastructure for the future, he said.

"It's another piece of the puzzle."

In the grant, the highway section from North Mankato to New Ulm will receive \$315,000 towards purchase of the necessary right-of-way for the four-lane expansion to the west.



The second section, from Waseca to Owatonna, will receive \$451,000 to help pay for utility relocations needed to prepare the way for construction of the four-lane between the cities.

Owatonna mayor Tom Kuntz, former president of the highway partnership, said he appreciates the help from both the state and federal governments. He emphasized the bipartisan partnership and the hard work of all the state's federal representatives to secure highway funding.

Next year, he said, he hopes to see work begin from the Steele County line to I-35W.

"We're off and rolling," he said.

Waseca mayor Roy Srp said "so many citizens made their feelings about Highway 14 known" that

federal dollars have come in response to those citizens.

“If the road is safer, fewer people will die,” Srp said. “It’s a reality.”

Walz said the federal dollars belong to the people of the First District and he intends to keep pushing to accelerate funding for the entire project.

With Minnesota’s transportation bill in place, MnDOT has guaranteed Highway 14 funding will continue, he said, but on the federal level, the discussion of how to fund infrastructure still needs to take place.

While this money is a federal grant, which is tied to state money already in place, Walz also secured \$850,000 through an earmark in 2007 and has requested additional funding for Highway 14 this year.

Beginning last year, earmarking required a representative’s name and a signed affidavit attached to it. In addition, Walz and 45 other members of Congress published their earmark requests.

Earmarks reflect a district’s highest priorities, Walz said, and add nothing to the national debt.

“It comes back to the integrity of the elected official and the openness of the public process,” Walz said.

In order to qualify for a funding request at the federal level, he said, projects must be on MnDOT’s priority list, he said.

“This piece of highway is on everybody’s list.”

Open house Tuesday

According to the Minnesota Department of Transportation’s Mankato office, construction around the city of Waseca is expected to begin the second week of July.

An open house has been set for Tuesday from 4 p.m. to 6 p.m. at the Waseca County Public Works Facility for the public to learn about the construction plans and have their questions addressed.

MnDOT representative Rebecca Arndt said the construction of a new Highway 14 south of Waseca (from Waseca County Road 2 to the Waseca/Steele County line), with interchanges at County Road 2 and Highway 13, will take about three years to complete. The Steele County portion of the expansion to Interstate 35 at Owatonna will begin in 2009.

The \$56.2 million project includes grading, paving, constructing 10 bridges and doing mill and overlay work on Highway 13 from 5th Street to the railroad tracks. C.S. McCrossan Construction, Inc., is the primary contractor for the project.

The work planned for 2008 will have no traffic impacts to Highway 14 motorists and only minor impacts to local roads. As construction progresses in 2009 and 2010, detours will be needed for Highway 13 and County Road 2 traffic.

For more information on Highway 14 construction, go to www.mndot.gov.

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