

Story originally printed in the Winona Daily News or online at www.winonadailynews.com

Published - Tuesday, October 30, 2007

GUEST VIEW: Highway 14 roadwork should not be delayed

By U.S. Rep. Tim Walz and Owatonna (Minn.) Mayor / Tim Kuntz

When people from several different communities come together to fight for a common cause, it makes a powerful statement.

In the case of U.S. Highway 14, the statement could not be clearer. The members of the Highway 14 Partnership span southern Minnesota, representing diverse towns and diverse economic interests, but they are all in agreement about the need to move forward quickly with the upgrade of Highway 14.

MnDOT recently decided that, if it becomes necessary to delay funding for greater Minnesota transportation projects to help pay for reconstruction of the I-35W bridge in Minneapolis, the Waseca-Owatonna phase of the Highway 14 project will be one of the first projects delayed. That is unacceptable.

The delays and the backpedaling on Highway 14 are symptoms of a larger problem. It is unfortunate that some at the state Capitol have failed to see the need to invest in Minnesota's transportation infrastructure. Those failures have led directly to our current funding shortfall and a situation in which MnDOT threatens to rob Peter to pay Paul — or more accurately, to take money from rural Minnesota's vital transportation needs to pay for metro Minnesota's vital transportation needs. That is not a long-term solution.

Rebuilding the I-35W bridge is certainly critical to Minnesota's economy. We were pleased when Congress responded to the bridge disaster with an immediate offer of federal funds, and we support efforts to rebuild the bridge as safely and quickly as possible. But we must not lose sight of other projects that are critical to the economy of southern Minnesota and the state as a whole.

According to one study, 70 percent of the largest employers in southern Minnesota — who together provide jobs to more than 45,000 people — rely on Highway 14 to move supplies and finished products to market. Failure to move forward with the Highway 14 upgrade will make it more difficult for these companies to grow and prosper.

The expansion of Highway 14 is important for safety reasons, as well. Traffic fatalities along Highway 14 may not come with the shocking suddenness of a bridge collapse, for example, but they are no less devastating to the friends and family members of those who lost their lives.

And, sadly, these accidents are very common: In the past five years, more than 25 people have lost their lives on Highway 14, an average of one death every 21/2 months. Nearly three-quarters of those accidents occur along stretches with single lanes going each direction.

The members of the Highway 14 Partnership realize that improvements along one segment of the road are to the benefit of every community through which it travels. Expanding the Waseca-to-Owatonna segment is good for the residents of New Ulm; upgrading Highway 14 through North Mankato benefits residents in Janesville. It is disappointing that this impressive level of cooperation and coordination cannot be better rewarded with a concerted effort by the state to make investments in badly needed transportation improvements.

As the 2008 legislative season approaches, voters should ask their elected officials — city council members, mayors, state senators and representatives and, yes, even your members of Congress — to support efforts on the state level to raise and appropriate enough money to ensure that Minnesota can

take full advantage of funding offered by the federal government.

Additionally, Minnesota must make a long-term commitment to rebuilding our roads and bridges throughout the state. Appropriating only enough money to get MnDOT through 2008 or to only start work on the Waseca-Owatonna section of the road may be the easy way out, but it is not a long-term solution. Leadership means addressing the root cause of the problem, rather than just treating the symptoms. For the sake of rural Minnesota and the communities that Highway 14 serves, we hope that some real leadership will be shown in St. Paul this year.

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