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Safety audit team gets crash course on Highway 14 problems

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NORTH MANKATO —

A five-person road-safety audit team received a cram course Wednesday on the hazardous nuances of the North Mankato-to-New Ulm portion of Highway 14.

The independent audit group will perform a field review today of the highway to assess short-term safety strategies for one of the deadliest two-lane highway stretches in the state. The long-term plan calls for a four-lane Highway 14.

The “briefing” session Wednesday at the Mankato Minnesota Department of Transportation office gathered law enforcement, city officials, trucking interests and other concerned parties, who supplied the audit team with a shopping list of well-chronicled hazards.

Howard Preston, a consulting engineer with the audit group, said the purpose of the gathering was to ramp up the group’s learning curve on Highway 14. Not that they’re unfamiliar with its reputation.

“We have a notebook of crash records going back five years,” Preston said, holding his thumb and forefinger 3 inches apart.

Those in attendance provided the team with their impressions and experiences involving the two-lane road that was conceived and built as a rural highway but has become a high-traffic urban corridor.

New Ulm Mayor Bob Beussman spoke of the glut of large trucks using the road daily.

“And they’re getting bigger and longer,” he said. “When I drive on 14, those semis are right on my tail. And if I go 55 (the posted speed limit), my little vehicle is going to get run over — or at least it feels that way.”

Bob Schabert of Courtland and others at the meeting said Highway 14 is so dense with traffic at times that it can be a five-minute wait to cross it or merge onto it.

Former North Mankato Mayor Gary Zellmer, who has lost a relative and a friend in Highway 14 crashes and has long worked to achieve improvements to it, said the evolution of farming transit also has created hazards.

“Every farmer has their own semi now and they’re pulling out on that road. It takes them a long time to get up to speed and no one (other motorists) wants to wait.”

His implication was that impatience leads to reckless passing, which leads to accidents.

He also cited the many intersections along Highway 14 that connect to it at unsafe angles rather than straight on.

The audit team is expected to share its findings sometime in February. Preston said he and his group will work to ensure that all low-cost safety improvements have been implemented and will identify smaller-scale safety improvements that could be put in place in the next few years.

Preston said he realizes the traffic logistics challenges posed by Highway 14, but as he and his team wade through reams of highway crash data, a sobering common theme emerges.

“The most severe crashes aren’t the result of infrastructure. They’re a result of behaviors. If you give people enough of an opportunity to screw up, some of them will.”