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Highway 14 environmental study done



hwy 14 alternative route.jpg

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By Tim Krohn

Free Press Staff Writer (<http://mankatofreepress.com>)

State transportation officials have taken one more technical step toward the long-sought four-lane reconstruction of Highway 14 from North Mankato to New Ulm.

The environmental analysis is completed and available for public comment.

But local officials say the project is not getting the priority it deserves and they are pressuring the governor and the Minnesota Department of Transportation to include it in the agency's 20-year plan.

In the past five years 220 crashes occurred on the stretch of highway, seven of them fatal.

Brian Gramentz, city manager in New Ulm, said area city councils and county boards are sending letters to Gov. Dayton and other officials asking that the corridor get priority. MnDOT is revisiting its 20-year construction plan.

"We would like to see the project included in the 20-year plan. One of the worst stretches of road (in the state) should be addressed," Gramentz said. He said MnDOT's plan to study if smaller safety upgrades can be done along the route "just doesn't make sense."

Gramentz noted that MnDOT officials are looking at ways to improve a Twin Cities highway because of congestion and slow commute times. "I know you don't want congestion and it uses extra fuel and all that. But taking 10 minutes longer to get where you're going doesn't seem as important as fixing a road that has deadly crashes."

Rebecca Arndt, public affairs coordinator for the Mankato MnDOT district, said there is no funding in place for major work on the corridor, save for a bridge replacement over the Minnesota River in New Ulm slated for 2018.

She said MnDOT will be reviewing its 20-year statewide transportation plan this spring and summer. She noted that many projects in the district, including Highway 60 improvements near St. James, are in competition for a limited amount of funds. "We are behind," she said of road and bridge repair and replacements, locally and statewide.

The latest development is completion of the final Environmental Impact Statement for the proposed project. MnDOT and the Federal Highway Administration have signed off on the 338-page document and the public can comment on it until March 12.

The EIS looks at potential environmental impacts of various routes and ways to mitigate problems. The document also shows the preferred route of the highway, which includes bypasses of Nicollet and Courtland.

MnDOT is looking for smaller improvements that can be made for safety. It is conducting a Road Safety Audit, done by an independent team to review the crash history and places where smaller scale improvements can be made.

Copies of the final EIS are available at the Blue Earth County Library, Taylor Library in North Mankato, New Ulm Public Library, and online at www.dot.state.mn.us/d7/projects/14newulmtonmankato/.
(<http://www.dot.state.mn.us/d7/projects/14newulmtonmankato/>.)



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