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## Group rallies for funding to improve Highway 14

*By Mark Fischenich*

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NORTH MANKATO — Several elected officials, a pair of truckers and one disabled victim spoke Friday of the need to complete the four-lane expansion of Highway 14, hoping to persuade Gov. Mark Dayton to push for funding for the long-sought project.

News conferences in North Mankato and Owatonna were scheduled by the Highway 14 Partnership, an organization that's been pushing for years for an uninterrupted four-lane between Rochester and New Ulm.

Progress has been made, but 22 miles of crash-prone two-lane remain west of North Mankato and a 15-mile gap in the four-lane exists between Owatonna and Dodge Center.

The Minnesota Department of Transportation is preparing its new 20-year plan, and it appears no money is included for major Highway 14 improvements, North Mankato Mayor Mark Dehen said.

"We are asking the governor to intercede with MnDOT on behalf of Highway 14," Dehen said.

Mankato City Council President Mike Laven, city officials from New Ulm and Owatonna, and trucking company presidents from New Ulm and Mankato said the improvements are desperately needed for safety and economic development.

And Eric Jacobs, a survivor of one of the many fatal crashes on the two-lane section west of North Mankato, talked of the head-on collision on the foggy roadway in August 2010 that took the life of a 21-year-old National Guard soldier headed to Camp Ripley and left Jacobs disabled.

"Before I'd never thought much about it, thought about how people were dying left and right on Highway 14, until it happened to me," said Jacobs of the Aug. 13 crash when a vehicle crossed into his lane, killing the other driver and leaving Jacobs with numerous injuries.

Jacobs was commuting to his job at Frito Lay in New Ulm for the last time. He'd gotten a promotion to a position the company had in Mankato and was to start the next day.

Instead, he was hospitalized with fractures to his pelvis and leg, a lacerated spleen and other injuries after his vehicle flipped over in the crash, leaving his arm pinned underneath.

"Now I'm 26 years old and I'm permanently disabled," said Jacobs, the father of a 14-month-old daughter.

That section of highway has a fatality rate double the statewide average for two-lane highways, and Laven said it's striking how many people have personal stories of someone they know who was killed or injured there. After lobbying for a four-lane for more than four decades, local officials are losing patience.

“To have a statewide plan for the next 20 years that fails to include (Highway 14) is preposterous,” said Laven, vice president of the Highway 14 Partnership. “It’s something the governor can fix.”

MnDOT officials have conceded the work should be done and pledged to try to do it in stages as money becomes available, starting with a new interchange and about a mile of additional four-lane on North Mankato’s west side starting this summer.

But to complete the entire section to New Ulm would cost \$300 million or more — another \$165 million to do the Owatonna-Dodge Center work — money the agency said can’t be dedicated to a single highway when funding is inadequate to even maintain existing highways.

Troy Volk, CEO of Mankato’s Volk Transfer, and Florian Dittrich of D & A Trucking of New Ulm spoke on behalf of finding money to do the work. The corridor is crucial for moving goods in and out of southern Minnesota cities, and improving the safety and efficiency of the highway is crucial to the region’s economic health, they said.

Dehen said the Highway 14 Partnership has lobbied MnDOT Commissioner Tom Sorel to schedule more four-lane construction but has decided to turn to Dayton, who supported federal funding for previous projects as a U.S. senator and is Sorel’s boss.

“We’re not confident we’re high enough on (Sorel’s) priority list,” Dehen said.

MnDOT is planning to release a draft 20-year plan in the fall and finalize its long-term construction plan by January.