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Pessimism emerges on Highway 14 expansion

March 29, 2012

By Josh Moniz - Staff Writer , The Journal

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ST. PAUL - The chances of the long-sought, four-lane expansion for Highway 14 being placed on the Minnesota Department of Transportation's 20-year plan dimmed Wednesday following a presentation by MnDOT Commissioner of Transportation Tom Sorel.

New Ulm Mayor Bob Beussman and several members of the Highway 14 Partnership traveled to St. Paul as guests of Progress In Motion, the public outreach arm of the Minnesota Transportation Alliance.

Sorel and Chief Engineer Bernie Arseneau discussed MnDOT's 20-year Capital Investment Plan. Members of the Highway 14 Partnership have expressed concern in recent months that the Highway 14 four-lane expansion seems likely to not be included in MnDOT's 20-year construction plan. A draft of the plan is due in October, and the final version is expected in January of 2013.

The meeting focused on a broad range of transportation topics and MnDOT's efforts to deal with billions in unmet highway needs due to limited funds.

Beussman said that when the topic of Highway 14 was brought up, Sorel acknowledged safety concerns, but focused on pushing projects that emphasized being sustainable, having risk management and utilizing technology- based solutions to save money.

"I'm pessimistic [about the four-lane expansion]. Sorel basically insinuated they wouldn't have the funds for the project. It seems they won't be doing the four-lane expansion, if they do anything," said Beussman.

The meeting comes on the heels of Gov. Mark Dayton stating earlier this month that he wouldn't ask MnDOT to add the Highway 14 project to its 20-year plan. He expressed concern that pushing a particular project, especially with his limited expertise, would be a slippery slope.

The Highway 14 Partnership held a press conference in North Mankato prior to that to urge Dayton to act on Highway 14.

Beussman blamed MnDOT's situation on the "no new taxes" sentiment in the Minnesota Legislature. He said the effort may achieve its goals, but it means there is less and less money for needed projects.

Although Beussman said the Partnership had other avenues to pursue to keep the Highway 14 four-lane expansion alive, he declined to provide details.

He said that he suspects that improvement to Highway 14 will ultimately take a grassroots movement by taxpayers advocating the updates.

"Voters will have a lot more influence than a few officials like us," said Beussman.



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The dangers of driving on Highway 14, particularly the two-lane portions between North Mankato and New Ulm and between Owatonna and Dodge Center, have come to the public's attention in recent years. Highway 14 has been shown to have roughly twice the average state fatality rate, and it has had more than 25 fatal crashes between New Ulm and Owatonna in the last decade.

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