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## Dayton not likely to push Highway 14

*By Mark Fischenich*

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MANKATO — Gov. Mark Dayton said he's been aware for 11 years of the desire for an expansion of Highway 14 to four lanes between Mankato and New Ulm, but he is reluctant to compel his transportation department to include the project in its upcoming 20-year construction plan.

"I think it's a slippery slope because I don't have the expertise," Dayton said of forcing his opinions on the MnDOT plan. "There needs to be a set of objective criteria that needs to be applied fairly across the state."

The Highway 14 Partnership, a coalition of communities along the road from New Ulm to Rochester, held press conferences earlier this month urging the governor to push MnDOT to include funding for the upgrade.

"To have a statewide plan for the next 20 years that fails to include (Highway 14) is preposterous," said Mike Laven, the Mankato City Council president and vice president of the partnership, at a March 9 news conference. "It's something the governor can fix."

During a visit with The Free Press editorial board Tuesday, Dayton said the state is failing to properly invest in highway maintenance and improvements. That's why he's assigned MnDOT Commissioner Tom Sorel to lead a task force to look into new ways of financing needed work such as Highway 14.

The report won't be completed until next year, and Dayton indicated he won't intercede with Sorel on behalf of a particular project when the 20-year plan is finalized over the next nine months.

The section of two-lane Highway 14 between North Mankato and New Ulm has been the site of numerous deadly crashes in recent years. A Free Press examination of crash statistics found that section of highway has a fatal crash rate that's nearly double the statewide average for Minnesota two-lanes.

Dayton said his role would permit him to ensure the 20-year plan takes crash rates into account in determining which projects are prioritized.

"If there's something missing like the safety factor, then that's a valid issue to interject," he said. "But for me to be picking this project instead of that one will lead people to question the integrity of the process, which is paramount."

While MnDOT officials concede that an uninterrupted four-lane is warranted from Rochester to New Ulm, they said the cost can't be covered by existing revenues without seriously compromising maintenance work

that's needed on existing highways.

Expanding the 22 miles of two-lane to New Ulm and a 15-mile gap in the four-lane between Owatonna and Dodge Center would cost \$465 million or more, according to preliminary MnDOT estimates.

Simply increasing the state's 28-cent-per-gallon gas tax — the major source of highway construction funding in Minnesota — won't get the job done, even if the tax was raised by 25 cents a gallon, Dayton said.

A penny increase in the gas tax generates about \$31 million a year, according to the Minnesota Department of Revenue. MnDOT has previously estimated that its funding needs over 20 years could be as much as \$50 billion higher than the projected revenue.

Dayton said the state clearly needs to take another look at how roads and bridges are funded, which is why he wants the task force to examine all options — including bonding for high priority projects.

“Look at what other countries are doing as well as other states,” he said. “Because we've got a crisis and it's only going to get worse.”