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By *OPP Editorial*

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By LES ABRAHAM and BOB BEUSSMAN

There's a lot of well-placed concern right now in coffee shops and grocery stores across southern Minnesota about the future of Highway 14. Much of this concern stems from the Minnesota Department of Transportation's current efforts to update their 20-year plan. This plan, in case you missed it, will set the state's transportation priorities for the next two decades. Recently, Governor Dayton suggested that he is reluctant to intervene in support of Highway 14 to make sure it is included in this soon-to-be completed plan.

Simply put, there's a good reason for citizens to be concerned about Highway 14 expansion not making the 20-year plan. Here's why:

The most obvious reason is that it means no new funding for Highway 14 expansion. No local money, no state money and no federal money could be spent because this funding would be inconsistent with MnDOT's plan. Even if the economy improved or more funding was made available to the state, the plan would block Highway 14 expansion funding for 20 more years.

Second, it would negate all the progress we've made along Highway 14 over the last 50 years. Today, there are only two segments left to finish along Highway 14. When those are complete, there will be a four-lane highway between New Ulm and Rochester. Millions have already been spent to complete the environmental prep work for the two unfinished segments. All that is left is the final funding. If Highway 14 is not on the list, those gains are washed away and the money spent preparing for expansion is wasted.

Being left off the 20-year plan also ignores the future demographics in southern Minnesota. Our communities are growing rapidly and the traffic levels across Highway 14 are rising, even as much as 60-80% in segments by the year 2025. Highway 14 was never designed to handle the volume that has been produced by the regional centers dotting the highway. Our economies depend on Highway 14 keeping pace with our growth.

Finally, and most disappointing, failing to include the four-lane expansion of Highway 14 in the 20-year plan would represent a public statement from the Governor and the state that completing the four-lane expansion of Highway 14 is no longer a state priority. Minnesota's limited transportation dollars will be diverted elsewhere.

We know that funding for transportation projects in Minnesota is stretched thin; priorities will

have to be set and choices will have to be made. But when the state funds the Stillwater Bridge in the east metro to address congestion relief, and that bridge is double the cost of a four-lane expansion project along Highway 14 and is wrought with local controversy (one prominent local official referred to the bridge as “redundant and unnecessary” and a “monument to waste”), we question where the state’s priorities really are.

There is no controversy in our communities about expanding Highway 14. We’re in agreement that the four-lane expansion is a key to southern Minnesota’s safety and economic vitality and needs to be a priority in the 20-year plan.

Now you know the stakes. Call Governor Dayton today (800-657-3717) and ask him to make Highway 14 a top priority.

Les Abraham is the Council President of the City of Owatonna and Bob Beussman is the mayor of New Ulm.

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