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Highway 14 deemed more deadly than once thought

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MANKATO — Highway 14 between North Mankato and New Ulm is even more deadly than previously reported; construction of a four-lane expressway along the most dangerous stretch is less expensive than anticipated; and state transportation officials are likely to opt for quicker, less expensive fixes than an expressway.

The fatal crash data and range of possible improvements were part of Highway 14 safety audit released by the Minnesota Department of Transportation Tuesday. The prediction about MnDOT's response, which was not well received by local advocates of the long-sought expressway, came from Deputy Commissioner Bernie Arseneau.

Money is short at MnDOT and planners are likely to deem Highway 14 worthy of approval for "lower-cost, higher-benefit solutions" such as adding buffers between the two directions of traffic — possibly with a center barrier, Arseneau said.

"We do not want to allow 14 just to continue (as is) until we can build a four-lane roadway there," he said at a meeting where the audit's conclusions were presented.

Deadlier than ever

While Highway 14 has been expanded to four lanes most of the way from Rochester to Mankato, a 2010 Free Press examination of accident statistics found that the two-lane segment from North Mankato to New Ulm had a fatal crash rate nearly double the rate for rural two-lane highways statewide.

Several additional deaths have occurred since then, driving the crash rate on that segment of highway to three times higher than comparable two-lane highways around Minnesota.

"This is starting to suggest that there's something different going on on Highway 14," said Howard Preston, a private consultant who led the team that did the safety audit for MnDOT.

A broader look — adding crashes that included serious but not fatal injuries — showed a crash rate 50 percent higher than average.

One of the factors that makes Highway 14 different, Preston said, is the number of crashes where a vehicle crosses the center line and collides with an oncoming vehicle. Of severe crashes, 70 percent are head-on or a sideswipe with a vehicle traveling in the opposite direction — triple the 23 percent rate for typical Minnesota two-lanes.

The highway also carries more heavy truck traffic — nearly one of every eight vehicles. That percentage is 50 percent above the norm.

MnDOT's Mankato-based District 7 has made several low-cost improvements to try to reduce accidents, including rumble strips on the center line between the eastbound and westbound lanes.

“But unfortunately it appears not to be substantial enough to drive these severe crash rates down,” Preston said.

The 6.5-mile segment between North Mankato and Nicollet was identified as particularly perilous, along with the intersections between Highway 14 and other state highways at Nicollet and New Ulm.

Fixes identified

The audit team focused on four options for reducing the number of severe head-on crashes.

Three involved creating a buffer between the two driving lanes in the 6.5-mile segment between North Mankato and Nicollet where the bulk of the severe crashes occur. (See accompanying story.)

The fourth option is the one local officials have been advocating for decades — a four-lane expressway. The buffers could be added relatively quickly at estimated costs of \$4 million to \$6 million.

Building the expressway to Nicollet would cost an estimated \$14 million to \$16 million.

“You can see there’s a very significant (escalation) in the cost,” Preston said.

Preliminary estimates for converting the entire 24 miles of two-lane to New Ulm, however, were roughly \$300 million. So the estimate in the audit is that 25 percent of the entire length of the two-lane could be expanded to four-lane for just 5 percent of the total price-tag.

Jim Swanson, district engineer for the Mankato MnDOT district, said that’s possible because the 6.5-mile segment would involve no expensive interchanges and few bridges.

But even at a discounted cost, the project is unlikely to be included in an upcoming 20-year construction plan being developed by MnDOT due to severe funding constraints, Arseneau said.

Prospects are much better that the buffer projects between North Mankato and Nicollet would be placed ahead of other contending projects around the state, he said.

“Certainly the segment we’re talking about, based on the data Howard developed, can compete,” Arseneau said.

Local officials were displeased by the news.

Mankato City Council President Mike Laven said he will tell lawmakers at a Highway 14 hearing at the Capitol today that if there’s no money for a four-lane expansion of a highway with a fatal crash rate triple the average, there should be no funding for any highway expansion in the state.

Laven also suggested that MnDOT funding priorities are too focused on alleviating traffic congestion rather than saving lives.

“Dead people don’t count as much as they once did in the new policies,” he said, prompting strong disagreement from Arseneau.