

The Free Press, Mankato, MN

April 18, 2012

Area senators critique MnDOT corridor plan

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— The Highway 14 Partnership made its annual appearance at the Capitol Wednesday, making the pitch for funding to expand the remaining stretches of dangerous two-lane rural highway to four-lane expressway.

But to state Sen. Kathy Sheran, a founder of the partnership in her days as a Mankato City Council member, it appeared that the Minnesota Department of Transportation was beyond persuasion.

“I hear from what you’re saying that you’ve already decided,” Sheran told MnDOT Deputy Commissioner Bernie Arseneau. “You’ve already decided — so you might as well avoid public meetings in the rural area — that an expansion to four lanes is not appropriate for 14. And that’s very troublesome to me.”

Arseneau led off the meeting of the Senate Transportation Committee with an explanation of MnDOT’s new approach for addressing numerous requests for improvements to highway corridors in outstate Minnesota. The Corridor Investment Management Strategy — CIMS for short — will identify “low-cost, high-benefit” fixes that can be implemented quickly to improve safety and performance of roads like Highway 14 across the state, Arseneau told the committee.

CIMS is expected to replace specific corridor projects in the new 20-year highway plan MnDOT is currently formulating and expects to finalize early next year.

Community leaders along Highway 14 were hoping the document would include explicit plans to build expressway on the two remaining gaps between New Ulm and Rochester — a 16-mile stretch east of Owatonna and the 24-mile segment between North Mankato and New Ulm. If CIMS is adopted instead, money would be dedicated to corridor projects in general and specific projects would be approved later based on criteria being developed.

Arseneau said Highway 14 would be in a strong position to win funding in that competition, particularly after a safety audit released Tuesday showed a fatal-crash rate triple the statewide average between North Mankato and New Ulm.

While he didn’t rule out that an expressway might be the best option, especially in the deadly 6.5-mile section between Nicollet and North Mankato, Arseneau repeatedly spoke of the need to look at less costly but still effective alternatives.

Traditionally, MnDOT’s first thought might have been adding lanes to a dangerous two-lane highway or building an interchange with ramps and overpasses at a perilous intersection. But the agency doesn’t have the revenue it once did and needs to look at more creative ways to fix problems.

“We’re just in a different world today,” he said. “It’s a new normal.”

Instead of costly interchanges where a two-lane highway intersects with a busy four-lane, MnDOT might go with a J-turn intersection. On crash-prone two-lane highways, the approach might be a cable-barrier in the median rather than building an expressway costing tens of millions of dollars.

A cable barrier between the opposing lanes is one of the options under consideration for the two-lane sections of Highway 14.

“We’ve been deploying (cable barriers) across the state,” Arseneau told the senators. “And it’s gone a long way in helping us reduce our fatalities.”

Sen. Mike Parry, R-Waseca, told Arseneau that the Highway 14 expansion deserves to be in the 20-year plan after waiting for decades to be completed. And Parry suggested that outstate residents are convinced MnDOT favors projects in the Twin Cities metro area.

“I’m frustrated,” he said. “I think many southern Minnesotans are frustrated.”

Arseneau said about 30 highway coalitions are pushing for funding, following the lead of the pioneering Highway 14 Partnership. The CIMS approach will spread the benefit around rather than dedicating large sums to only a handful of projects.

“We can address more roads across the state,” he said. “I just think that makes more sense from a stewardship point of view.”

Which, to Sheran, sounded like the Highway 14 expansion is being put on hold again — even before public hearings are held on the 20-year plan this summer and fall.

“It really is clear to me from what you’re saying (that public opportunity to influence the plan) is not real,” she said.

Arseneau disagreed, saying that expansion of Highway 14 hasn’t been ruled out.

“That is a potential solution,” he said.

Members of the partnership, invited to the committee by Sen. Gary Dahms, whose district includes New Ulm, went ahead with their pitch despite Sheran’s skepticism.

Mankato City Council President Mike Laven talked of the strong economic growth in the Mankato area and of Highway 14’s importance in maintaining that vitality.

“Failing to fix Highway 14 now will only lead to more deaths and cripple southern Minnesota’s economy,” Laven said.

New Ulm Mayor Robert Beussman emphasized that Highway 14 is different from other corridors seeking money, both in the number of severe crashes and in the length of time the region has been waiting for improvements.

“Generations have made this same argument,” Beussman said. “Progress is slow. I guess you could even say non-existent.”