

Hwy 14 4-lane expansion unlikely

Audit highlights road's dangers, difficulty in expansion

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MANKATO - The Highway 14 Safety Audit report was unveiled Tuesday, revealing the infamous roadway was even more dangerous than previously reported and that the sought four-lane expansion was unlikely.

The report covered the two-lane segment of Highway 14 from North Mankato to New Ulm and focused on possible solutions to crash risks. It was compiled for the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) District 7 by the independent firm CH2M HILL. MnDOT District 7 Transportation Engineer Jim Swanson and CH2M Senior Transportation Engineer Howard Preston gave the presentation.

The report's analysis of data from 2006 to 2010 showed that Highway 14 crash numbers at the normal state average, but it had a jaw-dropping three times as many fatal crashes as the state average for similar roads. Its fatality rate was also 60 to 70 percent higher than state average for four-lane highways with similar traffic.

The report's findings outpaced previous reports that Highway 14's fatality rate was double the state average.

Statistics on the types of crashes also showed the most dangerous portion of Highway 14 was between North Mankato and Nicollet. Preston said he didn't know exactly why this is so, but he said it could be that drivers are less attentive when coming off the four-lane into a two-lane. The statistics also showed the majority of accidents were caused by vehicles crossing the center lane and colliding with oncoming traffic.

Four-lane expansion unlikely

The meeting's clear message was that MnDOT is very unlikely to fund a four-lane expansion in the coming years.

The MnDOT officials, which included Swanson and MnDOT Deputy Commissioner Bernard Arseneau, indicated that the project lost out to MnDOT's emphasis on maximizing the number of projects it could do with its limited funds by focusing on low-cost, high-benefit projects. They argued this approach generated the biggest amount of good around the state by greatly increasing the number of projects done. Greatly diminished gas tax and other revenue sources were indicated as the source of MnDOT's financial situation.

However, Arseneau said MnDOT still cared about projects like Highway 14, which often didn't meet MnDOT's maximization method due to quirks or costs. He said it is pushing a new highway corridor investment strategy program, under the acronym of SIM, which would target a large fund for non-standard projects like Highway 14. He declined to say the amount, but said all similar projects across the state would compete for it. He said it provided an in-between option to reduce problems on highways instead of doing nothing until funds were available for big projects.

The safety audit report suggested some improvements to Highway 14 that are less costly than four-lane expansion. The suggestions only target the North Mankato to Nicollet portion.

The first proposal suggested doing an overlay of Highway 14, instead of a full reconstruction, to redraw the road lines with a 4-foot buffer zone filled with rumble strips between the two lanes. The buffer zone is intended to give space when a driving mistake occurs, allowing the driver space to recover instead of immediately being in front of oncoming traffic.

The second proposal provided a 12-foot buffer zone. Both lane changes to the highway were obtained by shrinking the size of the highway shoulders. Both designs don't completely prevent a vehicle from crossing into oncoming traffic.

The third proposal suggested having a two-lane on one side of the highway and one-lane on the other side. They would be divided by a 4-foot gap with a cable barrier in the middle to prevent vehicles from crossing into the other lane. At regulated intervals, the two-lane on one side would reduce to one-lane while the other side expanded to two-lanes, effectively swapping off the two-lane. The two-lane segments would act as passing lanes to improve traffic. The trade-off would be the loss of road shoulders and only select roads could cross the highway.

The proposals' prices come up favorably compared to the nearly \$15 million four-lane expansion of the portion, with the first two proposal cost around \$4 million and the third cost around \$5 million.

Many of the people in attendance voiced opposition to anything besides a four-lane expansion. New Ulm driving instructor and Minnesota House 16B candidate Jerry Pagel said the two-lane and one-lane proposals were "a good way to get many Germans killed."

Mankato City Councilor and Highway 14 Partnership Vice President Mike Laven said he felt like the weight of lost human life wasn't being as valued by MnDOT as it used to. Officials said they rejected those charges, arguing their method did a lot of good for the state.

Laven also said he took issue with the smaller plans because none of them eliminated the fatality rates, only minimized them, and none improved economic growth in the area. He said the only way to guarantee either factor is a four-lane expansion.

The first meeting on the SIM corridor investment strategy will be held on May 14 in Mankato.

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