

The Free Press, Mankato, MN

April 18, 2012

Our View: Highway 14 needs full funding for safety

The Free Press

— There is virtually no highway in the state more dangerous than Highway 14 from North Mankato to New Ulm, yet state officials contend they simply don't have the money for the safest solution of making it a four-lane freeway for the entire 24 miles.

That's an excuse that shouldn't be tolerated by taxpayers.

A safety audit by an independent consultant released Tuesday showed Highway 14 has a safety record even worse than previously thought.

A Free Press examination of crash rates in 2010 showed the highway had a fatal accident rate twice the state average. But the recent safety audit showed a fatal crash rate that is nearly three times worse than the state average.

The recent report showed the serious injury crash rate was 50 percent higher than the state average. If these figures don't qualify this road as the biggest public safety menace to Minnesotans, we don't know what does.

Yet, MnDOT continues to say there is not enough money, an estimated \$300 million, to make the road four lane all the way to New Ulm. That has long been the most sensible and demanded fix. MnDOT Deputy Commissioner Bernie Arsenau said severe funding shortages make that impossible.

We're not buying it. MnDOT is spending \$125 million for one interchange in the Twin Cities at Highways 169 and 494. The federal government and MnDOT worked together for a Stillwater bridge that will cost \$600 million. MnDOT is spending \$24 million on a short stretch of Interstate 94 in St. Paul that will "resurface road, reconstruct median and add Smart Lanes."

Leaders in south central Minnesota have been asking for these Highway 14 safety improvements for decades. We're done being polite. While temporary solutions like wider medians, median fences and initial expansions are needed as the four lane gets completed, they should not be considered permanent solutions.

If MnDOT and government in general does not have public safety as its number one priority, we need to change the government.

For too long, outstate Minnesota's horrific highways have been second in funding to dozens of metro projects funded not for safety but for convenience. This kind of misguided prioritization has to stop. Political leaders need to get involved to change the way MnDOT makes decisions on road funding.

While local legislators and even Gov. Mark Dayton have said they don't want to get politics involved in road funding decisions, they need to understand this isn't about politics. This is about saving lives and public safety, and if there is a state agency that is not making public safety its number one road funding priority, the system needs to be changed.

When the I-35 bridge collapsed in Minneapolis killing 13 people, it took a mere 11 months to fix. Since 2000, 17 people have been killed on Highway 14 from North Mankato to New Ulm, and the fix is not even on the 20-year list.

Evidence now shows funding for a four-lane Highway 14 from North Mankato to New Ulm should be the state's number one road funding priority. There is no other road that poses as much a safety threat, and the people of south central Minnesota have paid too often with their lives on this hazardous and deadly highway.

The Legislature, the governor and Minnesota's congressional delegation need to step up and show that public safety is government's number one priority.