

Steele County's Highway 14 needs to be a priority

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How many injuries and fatalities is it going to take before officials in the Minnesota Department of Transportation reach the same conclusion that most folks who live around this area already know — that Highway 14, as it is now configured, has sections of it that just aren't safe and that something needs to be done to fix the problem sooner rather than later?

How many? Apparently more injuries and deaths than are currently occurring, if the actions — or should we say, lack of action — being undertaken by MnDOT is any indication.

What makes MnDOT's inaction even more surprising is an independent safety audit report released by department just this past week that shows that a section of Highway 14 is even more dangerous than previously thought. That section, which runs from North Mankato to New Ulm, had about the same numbers of crashes as other similar roads in the state. But, when you compare the number of fatalities on that section of Highway 14 to those similar roads, Highway 14 has three times as many fatal crashes. Not only that, but its fatality rate is higher — 60 percent to 70 percent higher — than four-lane highways in the state that have similar traffic patterns.

Bottom line: This is one dangerous stretch of highway.

And what is MnDOT doing to fix the problem and keep Minnesotans who travel that road safe? In a word, not much.

Instead of expanding the road to four lanes, which would, no doubt, be costly, MnDOT has opted to consider what it calls "lower cost, higher benefit solutions" such as adding buffers or perhaps barriers between the two directions of traffic. There's even talk of adding a third lane — one right in the middle that east-bound and west-bound traffic can take turns using.

The report did not include data about the two lane stretch of Highway 14 between Owatonna and Dodge Center, but we have no doubt that if it had, it would have shown that stretch to be nearly, if not equally, as dangerous and deadly.

What makes this report even more disturbing is the fact that despite MnDOT's claims to the contrary, Highway 14 isn't even on the 20-year plan that MnDOT has presented to the Legislature. Members of the Highway 14 Partnership, of which Owatonna is a part, testified in St. Paul this last week. City Council President Les Abraham, who testified before the Senate Transportation Committee, noted correctly that the public needs to have the heavily traveled road completed into a four-lane road in order to ensure the safety of those traveling on it.

Safety ought to be the number one priority for MnDOT. But their lack of response to the conditions

of Highway 14 shows that safety has taken a back seat.

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