


City, county support Hwy. 14 project

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Officials with both Steele County and the City of Owatonna have penned letters to the Minnesota Department of Transportation and Gov. Mark Dayton urging them to move the completion of the Highway 14 project higher on the state's priority list. (Press file photo)

OWATONNA — Citing safety concerns and a need for growth and job creation, both the Owatonna City Council and Steele County Commission have forwarded letters of support for the completion of U.S. Highway 14 to Gov. Mark Dayton and the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

“We keep losing people on this stretch of highway, and it isn't safe,” council president Les Abraham said. “That's the most important thing — the safety. We want our residents to travel safely.”

The city council approved a resolution Tuesday night to have the letter passed on, while the commissioners approved theirs Jan. 24. The move comes as MnDOT works to establish the state's transportation policies for the next 20 years — a plan that includes the Highway System Investment Plan that will direct the use of revenue from both the state and federal governments.

MnDOT's intention with Highway 14 is to reconstruct and expand the capacity of the highway by turning it into a four-lane divided freeway. There are multiple segments included in the project. The commission's letter supports the completion of Highway 14 between North Mankato and New Ulm as well as from Owatonna to Dodge Center, while the city's letter focuses on the segment from Owatonna to Dodge Center and the related interchanges.

The city's resolution states that interchanges will improve safety and reduce traffic congestion.

There is no funding source for the project yet, and the last update showed it wasn't set to start until at least 2032. That's not soon enough for local officials, however.

"Originally they said 2028, now they're saying 2032. It keeps getting moved out and we want to get it done now instead of waiting," Abraham said.

The reason for the push is two-fold. Commission chairman Bruce Kubicek pointed to both the safety issue of the two-lane highway and the possibility of economic development as reasons for the county's support, and Abraham had similar sentiments.

"We believe that better road systems attract businesses," Kubicek said. "When we have a good road system, the businesses may not locate right in Owatonna, they may go to Ellendale or Blooming Prairie, but they'll be here. More businesses will benefit everybody in terms of jobs and the economy."

Both letters cite traffic statistics for the segments of Highway 14. Since 2001, there have been 42 fatalities and 47 serious injury crashes along the corridor between New Ulm and Rochester. From the years 2008 to 2010, the fatality rate along Highway 14 between North Mankato and New Ulm is 2.2 times above the statewide average.

"The consequences of failing to include completion of Highway 14 as a top priority in your short- and long-range plans are unacceptable," Kubicek wrote in the county's letter. "The completion of Highway 14 has been delayed long enough."

Also on Tuesday night, the city council moved forward with the annexation of 48 acres of land that was purchased by Steele County to construct a highway operations complex. The plan is to begin building the facility early this summer, and annexation will allow the facility to get hooked up to city services like sewer and water.

The cost to extend sewer and water to the site has been estimated at \$138,000 and, according to a memorandum prepared by community development director Troy Klecker, Steele County will be assessed \$44,733. Klecker wrote that there are many residences and commercial buildings outside city limits that could access the new services in that area, and that users choosing to hook up would be assessed costs as well.

Until then, the balance of \$93,267 will be covered by the wastewater treatment fund. Klecker said it has been the city's past practice to use the fund to cover such expenses. Any assessments paid in the future will be put back toward the wastewater treatment fund.

The proposed annexation was approved unanimously Tuesday night, but it will go before the city council for a second reading in March.

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