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Parry presents Highway 14 amendment, pulls after earmark challenge

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By Josh Moniz - Staff Writer , The Journal

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ST. PAUL - Sen. Mike Parry (R-Waseca) introduced Tuesday an amendment to the Omnibus Transportation bill mandating progress on the infamously dangerous Highway 14. His action mirrored that of Rep. Terry Morrow (DFL - St. Peter), who offered a symbolic Highway 14 amendment on the House version of the bill on April 26.

Anger among Highway 14 legislators due to the Minnesota Department of Transportation's (MnDOT) recent policy decisions prompted the amendments.

MnDOT announced last month that it was essentially forgoing the long-sought four-lane expansion for Highway 14 due to its new emphasis on "low-cost, high-benefit" projects to maximize its limited funds. Instead, the MnDOT announced plans to target projects across the state that do not qualify for its standards.

The announcement came at the same time MnDOT's Highway 14 Road Safety Audit showed that the two-lane segment between Nicollet and North Mankato was three times the state's fatal crash rate for similar roads.

Parry spoke while introducing the amendment, which required that Highway 14 be put on MnDOT's 20-year plan and kept there until a four-lane expansion is completed. He said Highway 14's two-lane segments made it the deadliest road in Minnesota and claimed 42 lives since 2001.

"If MnDOT's priorities say Highway 14 cannot or should not be done, there's something wrong with those priorities," said Parry.

Following his speech, Transportation Committee Chair Joe Gimse (R-Willmar) said he would make Highway 14's four-lane expansion a priority as long as he held the chair position. But, he urged legislators to not get "parochial" by trying to determine MnDOT's agenda by legislation.

Sen. Katie Sieben (DFL - Newport) also spoke, calling Parry's amendment an earmark. She asked whether his amendment meant he supported earmarks and whether he intended to overturn the federal ban on earmarks.

Parry responded that he considered the amendment to not qualify as an earmark because it had been on the 20-year plan for decades. He said that he had been personally told last year that Highway 14 would be in the 20-year plan. He said the amendment was intended to demand a firm answer from MnDOT on why Highway 14 wasn't being included.

"Sooner or later, there has to be some intestinal fortitude with legislators to do the right thing," said Parry.

He said that he felt the Gimse's promise would suffice, and he withdrew his amendment.



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In an interview afterwards, Parry said he felt the accusation of presenting an earmark was a trick by the DFL to score points. He said that the four-lane expansion of Highway 14 had been on the books for years, so it wasn't something new to be earmarked.

He said that he pulled the amendment because there were not enough votes to pass it. He said he simply wanted to demand answers for MnDOT's new policy.

"The tail is wagging the dog with MnDOT," said Parry. "By 2030, traffic on all of Highway 14 is expected to grow by 60 to 80 percent. Does that mean we'll have to have 100 deaths because the work's not done?"

Parry said his amendment was meant to draw public attention to Highway 14. He said he was planning to possibly introduce another Highway 14 amendment at the next Transportation bill to hit the Senate floor. He said he was already working on the amendment, but declined to say whether he will change the wording.

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