

The Free Press, Mankato, MN

May 14, 2012

MnDOT seeks to lower expectations on Highway 14

New strategy emphasizes cheaper fixes to tackle safety problems

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MANKATO — If you wanted to summarize what local leaders said Monday when the Minnesota Department of Transportation asked them what they wanted for Highway 14, you could do worse than this line from North Mankato Mayor Mark Dehen.

“Anything short of the four-lane expressway to Nicollet is wasting dollars in the long-term,” he told MnDOT Traffic Engineer Scott Thompson.

It was an echo of nearly everyone in the room, from the Highway 14 Partnership’s J.D. Burton, to State Rep. Terry Morrow, to a North Mankato citizen who came to represent accident victims. They worried interim safety upgrades would be wasted money — or at least be perceived that way — if and when two more lanes get added.

Thompson said the state wants Highway 14 to be a four-lane road, too, eventually. But, like a parent trying to temper Christmas expectations, he asked what else might be acceptable given limited funding.

“It’s just we don’t know when we can afford to build it,” Thompson said of the four-lane option. A four-lane road between North Mankato and Nicollet would cost about \$15 million or \$16 million.

And that option is not off the table, Thompson said.

But he wanted to get reactions to other choices that would solve the biggest problem in this stretch — head-on vehicle crashes. There are, after all, cheaper ways to solve that problem. Some of them were raised in a recent safety audit of this stretch of Highway 14. Monday’s meeting was held to discuss these alternatives, as well as projects on Highway 169.

One choice Thompson brought up was a “2+1” road design, which has two lanes on one side of the road and one lane on the other, alternating back and forth. This method would cost about \$6 million between North Mankato and Nicollet, would also have a high-tension wire to prevent head-on crashes. It’s cheaper because you don’t have to add as much pavement, but you end up with much narrower shoulders.

Monday’s meeting was a part of MnDOT’s new way of looking at major highway projects. It’s called the “Corridor Investment Management Strategy,” or CIMS.

Here’s how MnDOT describes the strategy: “CIMS is a corridor-based initiative that brings MnDOT together with its local, modal and state partners to identify opportunities for collaborative and innovative investment. It offers a means to share information and identify opportunities to apply MnDOT’s suite of

lower cost, high benefit investment strategies that address safety and mobility.”

Translation: We don't have the money to rebuild and add onto highways that we once hoped we'd have. Let's talk about some cheaper options.

Not surprisingly, telling people to expect less was not a popular proposition.

Some resisted the less expensive options because they said Highway 14 has easily demonstrated it deserves four lanes.

Dehen said priorities that favored easing Twin Cities congestion were skewed.

Others said taxes need to go up.

New Ulm City Manager Brian Gramentz suggested levying a tax on tires because it, like the gas tax, would hit people who use the roads.

“We need to get over the whole idea of ‘no new taxes,’” he said.

Others bemoaned the fact that Minnesota's gas tax isn't tied to inflation, meaning everything gets more expensive but taxes don't increase.

“It puts us between a rock and a hard place, absolutely,” Thompson said.

In an attempt to show that MnDOT really does have way more demands than funding, Thompson gave to each attendee a series of 13 maps showing what's been spent in the past 10 years, what's budgeted for the next several and what the system will look like in 10 years.

There's \$4 million budgeted for 2015, and maybe more to come, for safety improvements between North Mankato and New Ulm.

But the long-term maps, which estimate what the system will look like from 2016 to 2021, are bathed in red — the color for “poor” road condition. There are more than a dozen bridges in need of repair or replacement in Mankato and North Mankato alone.

There were no dollar figures attached to the future maps, but the implication was clear: MnDOT has a lot of road to repair, and not enough money to do it.