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# MnDOT debuts CIMS funding program

## Pessimism about Hwy 14 persists

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MANKATO - The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) unveiled its new Corridor Investment Management Strategy (CIMS) program Monday at the MnDOT District 7 office in Mankato. Discussions during the event about Highway 14 indicated the long-sought four-lane expansion was still unlikely.

Currently, MnDOT is facing two major problems with its annual funding: hyperinflation on the cost of construction material and rapidly shrinking revenues from the state gas tax. Anti-tax sentiment in the Legislature has made the possibility of increasing or new tax revenue sources unlikely in the near future.

"People think of gradual increase with general inflation. They don't realize how much fast it's been going up with construction material like concrete. We can't fund as much work with the same amount of money compared to a few years earlier," said Philip Schaffner, CIMS Project Manger for MnDOT.

MnDOT has responded by aggressively pursuing projects with "low-cost, high benefit" to maximize the use of its funds. This has created problems for projects like Highway 14 that do not meet MnDOT's cost assessment criteria.

CIMS is MnDOT's attempt to address the gap by dedicating a fund specifically to projects in Minnesota's major highway corridors. MnDOT only provided minimal details of CIMS parameters at the meeting.

The meeting focused on the gathering information stage of the CIMS program. MnDOT will host similar meetings around the state

and will use the information to develop potential projects for its 20-year construction plan and CIMS projects.

### Highway 14 and CIMS

The largest contingent at Monday's event was New Ulm, Mankato and North Mankato officials, who primarily focused on Highway 14. The group has long advocated for a four-lane expansion of the remaining two-lane segments of Highway 14 between New Ulm and Rochester. In particular, the segment between New Ulm and North Mankato has received the most attention due to its accident rate, which is three times the fatal crash rate of the state average for similar roads.

In recent months, MnDOT has indicated a preference to move away from the expensive four-lane project. MnDOT has instead emphasized intermediate, short-term projects to reduce some of the highways dangers until funding for the four-lane can be obtained. The example most encouraged was a two-and-one highway design. For the Nicollet to North Mankato segments, the short-term projects would only cost approximately \$5 million while a four-lane expansion could cost around \$15 million.

Highway 14 advocates strongly rebuked MnDOT's emphasis on

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ing many of the road projects strongly favored MnDOT's emphasis on short-term projects. They voiced concern that a CIMS approach would not result in the four-lane expansion project being placed on MnDOT's 20-year plan, which could jeopardize its access to federal funds.

North Mankato Mayor Mark Dehen said the group's concern was that the project would limit their leverage for a four-lane project. He also said they felt short-term projects were a waste of funds because the road would be redone when a four-lane expansion was eventually implemented. He said they would rather see the funds put towards a four-lane project.



MnDOT District 7 Traffic Engineer Scott Thompson said MnDOT's ultimately also wanted to have a four-lane expansion, but it was looking for solutions during the immediate funding crunch. He said the short-term projects would improve safety immediately until full funding for a four-lane project could be obtained.

He admitted the situation was frustrating. He said Highway 14 was not the only project out there, so it had to run through MnDOT's criteria like any other project to be fair to all.

New Ulm City Manger Brian Gramentz said MnDOT could possibly fund the highway and still meet its fairness standards by emphasizing its unique nature, similar to the Stillwater Bridge project.

Thompson said Highway 14 had high fatality rates, but he doubted it was sufficiently high enough than other deadly roads to qualify.

Rep. Terry Morrow (DFL- St. Peter) also spoke at the meeting, suggesting a four-lane was more cost effective since the highway already needed approximately \$5 million in repaving in the coming years. He said MnDOT could consider it as cost saving towards the project.

MnDOT officials took notes during the discussion, which will be used to develop projects for the Highway 14 corridor that can utilize CIMS funds. The results and potential funding will be announced by MnDOT towards the end of the year.

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