

The Free Press, Mankato, MN

May 15, 2012

Our View: Four-lane is best option for Highway 14

The Free Press

— Few area taxpayers would argue that transportation funding is the tightest it's ever been and clearly there is not enough money to meet the needs of repairing all the state's bridges and roads in the next 20 years.

But few area taxpayers would disagree with the fact that Highway 14 is the most dangerous road in the state and in need of a solid upgrade to four-lane from North Mankato to Nicollet in the short term and all the way to New Ulm in the long-term.

The Minnesota Department of Transportation took public input at a meeting Monday and presented a newfangled approach to fixing roads called Corridor Investment Management Strategy. The principle behind such investment management is that some problems can be fixed in ways that are cheaper than others.

In the case of Highway 14, the suggestion that's part of MnDOT's "lower cost, high benefit" strategy would be to spend about \$6 million on a "2+1" road design, which offers two lanes on one side and one on the other in an alternating way depending on traffic and other factors.

The corridor management system in general makes sense. It calls for the management of an entire highway corridor, such as Highway 14 from Rochester to New Ulm. Corridor management calls for joint planning and cohesive strategies among the various business, government and general taxpayer stakeholders along the entire corridor.

But it's hard to see how it would apply to get the needed \$15 million for the first phase of a four-lane Highway 14 from North Mankato to Nicollet. A corridor management system by its nature includes a political coalition that would likely reject a safety improvement that is so targeted. Other partners might be inclined to ask how the improvement using a good portion of MnDOT regional resources would assist a Rochester trucking company that uses 14 to go to Interstate 35, never coming near the North Mankato to New Ulm corridor.

MnDOT must view Highway 14 between North Mankato and New Ulm as a road that is the most dangerous in Minnesota and one that has extracted a toll in human lives for decades. And given the increase in truck traffic expected with new Mankato development, it has the potential to have an even higher fatality rate than the current one that is three times the state average.

This isn't the first time this issue has been brought up. Fortunately, MnDOT did its own safety audit a few months ago and determined the highway was even more unsafe than an in-depth report by The Free Press

showed two years ago.

And finally, MnDOT has really not provided engineering data to suggest the “2+1” option would be as safe or safer than the four-lane option. It may be more safe for the money, but that’s a relative term, and one not likely to be accepted by families who’ve lost loved ones on this dangerous road.

A four-lane expansion not only takes care of the safety problem — as it has on other pieces of Highway 14 — but also allows for an anticipated stream of truck traffic that will only grow.

With MnDOT having spent \$125 million or so on the Highway 169 and Interstate 494 interchange, the argument we don’t have enough money isn’t flying when it comes to a road as dangerous as Highway 14. We spend scarce transportation dollars all the time on what are arguably convenience roads and interchanges to make life more comfortable for metro commuters.

Local area representatives Sen. Kathy Sheran and Rep. Kathy Brynaert of Mankato and Rep. Terry Morrow, St. Peter, have been strong advocates for the four-lane option on Highway 14. They’ve urged Gov. Mark Dayton and MnDOT to upgrade the safety in the best way possible on Highway 14.

Granting the full \$15 million for Highway 14 expansion to New Ulm would be the right move for MnDOT and Dayton. It would be an action that says safety is still important even when road dollars are scarce.