

MnDOT, Steele County officials talk Highway 14

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OWATONNA — City, county and chamber officials want answers when it comes to projected Highway 14 construction plans, and representatives from all areas of the county were on hand Wednesday afternoon to ask those tough questions of regional Minnesota Department of Transportation officials.

MnDOT hosted a Corridor Investment Management Strategy (CIMS) meeting in Owatonna Wednesday afternoon. In addition to MnDOT representatives from the southern region and the Metro, about 25 regional business owners and elected officials attended the CIMS meeting. MnDOT's hopes for the CIMS meeting was to bring together local, modal and state partners to identify opportunities for collaborative and innovative investment.

"These are challenging and uncertain times in the transportation community," MnDOT's Brad Utecht said. "We met with key stakeholders, and they wanted more information and opportunities to be involved in MnDOT decision-making processes."

In the meeting that was the brainchild of that input from stakeholders, Utecht said MnDOT's 20-year plan for bridge and pavement construction totals 125 percent of the department's revenues just to get everything up to MnDOT's "target" condition.

"It will be hard to hit the targets given current funding," Utecht said. "This is sort of a first run at this kind of a meeting to address our highest needs in greater Minnesota."

MnDOT's Region 6 engineer Greg Paulson spoke about the 1,433 miles of trunk highway in southern Minnesota and the unique district that includes both Interstate 35 and Interstate 90 and makes up the most interstate mileage of any rural district in the state.

Though the forum held at the Owatonna MnDOT District Office was meant to be an information exchange and exploration of collaborative opportunities, the majority of those in attendance only had one thing on their minds: The completion of a four-lane Highway 14 from Owatonna to Dodge Center.

When it came time to split into three breakout sessions depending on the interest of the attendee (I-35, I-90 or Highway 14), most of the people in the room gathered around the Highway 14 project boards.

Paulson led the Highway 14 breakout discussion and sought information on the current condition of area roads as well as shared investment plan information and anticipated performance needs on the Highway 14 corridor.

“You can see we have a few challenges facing us when you look at this region,” Paulson said. “On average the oldest roads and bridges are in this part of the state and on top of that we’ve got all of the interstate mileage, which is a good thing for this part of the state from a travel and economic standpoint, but also a lot of needs with the interstate system being 50 years old.”

Paulson said overall MnDOT has “more needs than funds,” which made Owatonna City Councilman and Highway 14 Partnership member Les Abraham speak up first.

“These being some of the oldest roads, is there anything we can help do to make (highway 14) a greater priority over other projects?” Abraham asked. “Can we direct more money into this area for that reason?”

With more than 50 percent of MnDOT’s dollars allocated to the Metro area, Paulson said part of the purpose of Wednesday’s meeting was to “let folks know there isn’t a lot of extra money” in MnDOT’s budget.

Owatonna Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism President and CEO Brad Meier got straight to the point when he asked Paulson if Highway 14 from Owatonna to Dodge Center is “completely out of the 20-year plan” for four-lane completion.

“It’s completely ridiculous and unacceptable that this isn’t on the 20-year plan,” Meier said. “It’s crazy for southern Minnesota. We are frustrated and aren’t getting answers.”

“We do a long-range plan update every five years and our last update had (Highway 14) partially funded at the end of the 20-year period in the \$20- to \$30 million range,” Paulson responded. “We’re working on updating the statewide plan ... and whether any funding is designated toward this or not that’s yet to be determined.”

Owatonna Mayor Tom Kuntz said there needs to be a way to filter more funding to the local corridor. He called the two-lane portion of Highway 14 an “economic disadvantage.”

Owatonna Hospital President Dave Albrecht said the formula that figures MnDOT’s funding allocations is not accurate.

“We’re paying for a super highway from the Metro to Iowa and back and forth, where the majority of transportation is not locals,” Albrecht said. “The formula is flawed. You can’t explain it. It doesn’t take into consideration the fact most of the drivers on I-35 are not locals, and the funds for that portion of the road can’t be allocated where we need them.”

District 26A Republican House candidate John Petersburg said when he graduated in 1970, Highway 14 from Mankato to Rochester was supposed to be completed within 20 years.

“Who keeps people’s feet to the fire to say if you put it in the plan, don’t keep backing it away,” Petersburg asked. “If we had better transportation down here, we could grow faster like the cities, too.”

Put in a plan and find a way to maintain it. Three 20-years have gone by.”

Abraham asked what would be done with the feedback that was given at Wednesday’s meeting.

Utecht said the comments would all be put online and considered when the next 10-year outlook is projected.

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