

Post-Bulletin

Our View: U.S. 14 project deserves prompt action

Jun 05, 2012, 6:23 am

We can't help but wonder how many more tragedies will need to take place on U.S. 14 between Dodge Center and Owatonna before Minnesota will step up and do the right thing; namely, turning this stretch of two-lane road into a four-lane highway.

Granted, the state isn't exactly flush with cash, and the cost of this project currently stands at about \$150 million. But an investment like this would have some immediate short-term benefits, such as putting people to work and pumping money into the road-building companies that get the contracts. And as everyone knows, with each passing year this project will become more and more expensive.

More importantly, it's hard to put a price on the time and the lives that would be saved by putting some distance between the eastbound and westbound traffic on a road that is traversed by more than 7,000 vehicles per day. For the past decade, there's been roughly one fatal accident per year on this stretch of blacktop.

That's what bothers us most about this project's endless delays: Everyone involved, including the Minnesota Department of Transportation, recognizes that it needs to be done. The engineering work is complete, the route for the new lanes has been plotted, and the environmental impact study is on file. Those who drive this 16-mile stretch of highway are weary of being stuck behind slow-moving vehicles and cringing as speeders attempt ill-advised passes. Yet, for the foreseeable future — perhaps three decades or even more — driving between Dodge Center and Owatonna, especially in the winter, appears likely to remain a white-knuckle endeavor.

The fact is, as long as MnDOT must use the same pot of money for both new road construction and "pavement preservation" on existing roads, the U.S. 14 project will remain on the back burner.

Rather than sitting around and hoping for some "special money" to become available, we hope that the Legislature that convenes in 2013 — a budget year, by the way — will take a more proactive approach to maintaining and improving our state's transportation infrastructure.