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Our View: Public push bringing safety to Highway 14

The Free Press

— Last week's announcement by Gov. Mark Dayton and the Minnesota Department of Transportation that the state will go forward with a four-lane expansion of Highway 14 showed government can work for the people.

It showed that first and foremost the safety of motorists who use Highway 14 will be a priority. It shows, even more importantly, that safety will now be just as important a criteria for MnDOT road decisions as congestion and maintenance.

Highway 14 between North Mankato and Nicollet is one of the deadliest, if not the deadliest, stretches of highway in the state. MnDOT's recent audit showed a fatal crash rate three times the state average. A Free Press in-depth report on the highway's safety record two years ago showed a fatal crash rate at least two times the state average.

The plan for safety improvements also shows that when people and community leaders — and news organizations like The Free Press — can clearly articulate a public need, great things can be accomplished. Government can and will respond to people even though sometimes it takes a push or, as several legislators pointed out, a continual “drumbeat” to bring about progress and change.

The Free Press considered it our duty to be part of that drumbeat, and we thank those who told their stories of tragedy on Highway 14 to show this issue in human terms.

Dayton and MnDOT Commissioner Tom Sorel and several other lawmakers announced the improvement project at a press conference in Mankato on Tuesday. Highway 14 from North Mankato to Nicollet will be expanded to four lanes starting in 2017 with completion expected in 2020.

The road will be immediately improved for safety by creating an 8-foot median between lanes to reduce head-on collisions and the State Patrol will step up enforcement for seat belt use, drunken driving and other moving violations.

That solution is a combination of options offered by MnDOT after it completed its safety audit of the road earlier this year and took public input.

We believe it is the best possible option. It not only takes measures that can be implemented immediately for safety, but also makes a commitment to long-term safety of the highway and to accommodate an explosion of economic activity along the highway.

The truck traffic on Highway 14 is higher than normal, and with developments like Mankato's Walmart distribution center coming on line, it will only get busier. The Walmart project will add dozens of trucks a

day to Highway 14. The four-lane expansion also is another big step in making Highway 14 a significant corridor for commerce from Winona to the South Dakota border.

A new and improved, border-to-border, four-lane Highway 14 will be a boon to economic development in outstate Minnesota and regional centers like Mankato, Owatonna and Rochester.

MnDOT; Gov. Dayton; and legislators, such as Rep. Terry Morrow, Sen. Kathy Sheran and Rep. Kathy Brynaert, who made this happen deserve credit for responding to a public need and providing a reasonable, efficient and effective public solution.