

Highway 14 ribbon cutting marks celebration for Steele County and beyond

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OWATONNA — More than 100 people gathered Tuesday morning on the new westbound lanes of Highway 14 at the Steele County Road 7 overpass for a ribbon-cutting ceremony to celebrate the nearly completed four-lane expansion of Highway 14 between Owatonna and Waseca — a long-awaited milestone for the state of Minnesota and for Steele and Waseca counties.

“It’s a celebration because we’ve waited a long time to see this segment open,” said Nelrae Succio, Minnesota Department of Transportation District 6 engineer. “It’s a wonderful day to be here enjoying the day, and it’s a great day for an event like this.”

Gov. Mark Dayton, who was slated to be the first of 11 featured speakers at Tuesday’s ceremony, was not in attendance due to an unexpected illness.

MnDOT officials expressed Dayton’s regrets to those in attendance.

“I’d just like to start off by expressing the governor’s regrets for not being able to be here. I think most of you know that he is incredibly committed to this corridor,” said Bernie Arseneau, MnDOT deputy commissioner and chief engineer. “This really was an event he didn’t want to miss.”

With the absence of Dayton, U.S. Rep. Tim Walz was the first of the featured speakers. He expressed the importance opening this portion of highway has to southern Minnesota.

“This is what’s possible when you work together. This is what’s possible when you have a common vision. This is what’s possible when we decide to make things happen. This is the lifeblood of Minnesota,” Walz said. “This is one of the healthiest economies in the country. This is a place that is innovating and growing and we need to give our businesses that opportunity to have this piece of infrastructure.”

The ceremony marks the completion of more than 40 miles of four-lane highway between Owatonna and north Mankato, but Walz, like several other speakers, said the work on Highway 14 isn’t finished yet.

“It’s a great day, but it is not done. We are not done,” he added, referring to the two-lane stretch of Highway 14 from Owatonna to Dodge Center, which state, county and local officials are trying to get on the Minnesota Department of Transportation’s 20-year plan.

Bruce Kubicek, Steele County District 1 commissioner, and Owatonna Mayor Tom Kuntz echoed Walz’ remarks about the value of completing Highway 14 from border to border.

“It’s a great time to celebrate what we’ve accomplished because we have accomplished a lot with the Highway 14 Partnership and everybody involved has accomplished a lot,” Kubicek said. “But don’t forget the job is not done.”

Kuntz said he hopes the work from Owatonna to Dodge Center can be completed within the next five to 10 years.

State Sen. Mike Parry used his speech to raise concerns he has about the state’s release of old Highway 14 to Steele and Waseca counties.

Both Steele and Waseca counties and MnDOT are discussing possible agreements for the release. If the counties and MnDOT do not come to an agreement before Oct. 27, then the counties will lose the state-aid turn-back funding for a one-time construction fix of their portions of old Highway 14.

“This is a great day to celebrate what we have here, but we have two issues: We have to keep it moving forward and, by golly, we have to do the right things for the citizens of Waseca County, Steele County and Blue Earth County when we turn back old 14,” Parry said.

Les Abraham, Owatonna City Council and Highway 14 Partnership president, said the four-lane highway will save lives.

“We cannot rest until there is a four-lane all the way to Rochester,” Abraham said.

Arseneau emphasized MnDOT’s commitment to safety in talking about the state’s “Toward Zero Deaths” initiative — started in 2003 and is now a national program — to reduce traffic fatalities in Minnesota. MnDOT is partnering with the Minnesota Department of Public Safety and the Minnesota Department of Health to accomplish safety.

“Any death on our transportation system in Minnesota is absolutely unacceptable,” Arseneau said. “We started as a lead state in 2003 with 650 deaths and it was rising and growing at an unacceptable rate.”

After implementing various safety devices, he said there were 368 traffic fatalities, which is leading in the nation.

“It is really a model for the nation,” Arseneau said. “We want to work our way to zero.”

After the ribbon-cutting ceremony, state, county and local officials gathered at AgPower Enterprises in Owatonna to discuss the concerns about the last stretch of Highway 14.

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