

# MnDOT officials and Owatonna-area professionals voice Highway 14 concerns

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OWATONNA — About 25 Minnesota, Steele County and Owatonna officials, as well as local business owners, met after the Highway 14 ribbon-cutting ceremony Tuesday morning to voice their concerns to Minnesota Department of Transportation officials about the stretch of highway from Owatonna to Dodge Center.

The main concerns of those in attendance included funding and safety.

“One of the things that I did mean to talk about during the (ribbon-cutting) ceremony but didn’t, is that it is clear that there is a tremendous need in terms of transportation systems here in Minnesota,” said Bernie Arseneau, MnDOT deputy commissioner and chief engineer. “We know there are needs that haven’t been met.”

He added, “There is a blaring gap between Rochester and Mankato.”

Arseneau, who spoke on behalf of Gov. Mark Dayton because Dayton was ill, said the governor pulled together a transportation finance advisory committee that has been meeting since April.

“The goal of that group is to look at ways to close the gap on the needs we have on the transportation system,” he said. “That happens to be going on at the same time we are trying to develop our 20-year highway transportation plan, so it really is a nice time for these types of activities to be going on.”

Arseneau said the state is trying to reduce the more than \$50-billion need by pulling together a list of transportation projects.

“The governor is trying to figure out how we can move these projects that have been struggling to get to the front of the line, so they can get built. This (Highway) 14 piece is one of those,” he said. “We are going to continue to work with the locals down here, continue to try and be creative in any way that we can to try and meet the needs.”

U.S. Rep. Tim Walz said the funding issue is more of a national problem than a state problem.

“Without commitment from everyone in the room and everyone out there involved, this wouldn’t have gotten done because the need is great,” Walz said. “MnDOT does an incredible job, but it can only do with what resources they have been given.”

He said that if the country is too broke to build roads, then it is in big trouble in the future.

“We don’t have to spend a penny more than we do now,” Walz said. “We just have to make sure we are

putting it into the right things.”

He believes safe transportation arteries are one of those things.

Arseneau said safety is absolutely MnDOT’s No. 1 priority.

“We’re national and world leaders in that area,” he said.

Kris Busse, Owatonna city administrator, said that once the stretch from Owatonna to Waseca opens, then there will be a lot of pressure on the next segment.

“We are going to have concerns with traffic safety,” Busse said. “Whatever we can do, we cannot wait.”

Troy Hansen, director of materials at Viracon, said safety is critical in his line of work.

“We literally have hundreds of employees who travel (Highway) 14 to our facility every day,” Hansen said. “Our (private) fleet also runs these roads every day and having this go to a four-lane is critical.”

Dave Albrecht, Owatonna Hospital president, said it is also an inconvenience and safety hazard for the medical profession.

“We in Owatonna are linked to Rochester from a medical perspective,” he said.

Albrecht said the hospital will not send an ambulance on that section of the highway.

“They will come by helicopter because of the delays and the safety on that,” he said.

He also said more hospital employees are traveling from Rochester.

“It is just waiting for a disaster to happen,” Albrecht said.

Mike Milstead, co-owner of AgPower Enterprises — located north of the new section of Highway 14 — said the company waited to move until it saw activity with the construction project on the highway.

“We tried to plan it to coincide right with the grand opening,” he said. “We missed it a little bit, but we are getting closer and we are real anxious for that.”

He said one of his concerns is that customers don’t know how to get to AgPower, which is especially difficult with the harvesting season approaching.

Milstead his employees who live east of Dodge Center will not drive on Highway 14 because it is too dangerous.

“It would be the easiest way to get there, but they are scared to death and don’t want to get in an accident,” Milstead said. “They take county roads back and forth to get here.”

While there were several concerns, there were also some positive feedback given to MnDOT.

Mike Peterson, a chiropractor in Owatonna, said that he is proud to be a part of southern Minnesota because of the quality of the roads compared to other states in the country.

Les Abraham, Owatonna city council president and Highway 14 Partnership president, said it is a group effort in Minnesota to get work done.

“It is not an us versus them, a metro versus outstate. We are all together in this,” Abraham said. “We need them and they need us, and we all need to work together to get it done.”

Todd Jennings, Gopher Sports CEO, said he has lived in a bunch different places, but Minnesota has awesome roads and bridges.

“I’m appreciative for what we do with the roads and it will be exciting if these new lanes get built because then that will probably improve our ability to get employees from different parts of Minnesota,” Jennings said.

Owatonna Mayor Tom Kuntz said Dayton has committed to reschedule his visit and will visit Owatonna in the future to speak with local business and industry leaders.