

## Highway 14 Partnership meets in Owatonna to push roadway

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OWATONNA — City, county and state officials as well as business and organization representatives who live along the Highway 14 corridor remain determined to get the roadway completed.

More than 60 people gathered Monday morning in Owatonna for the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership's annual meeting to talk about its 2013 goals.

And the completion of Highway 14 from New Ulm to Dodge Center was a key talking point.

U.S. First District Rep. Tim Walz said now is the time to get Highway 14 done.

"The momentum is there. Now is the time to build the roads and improve the infrastructure," Walz said. "Now is the time to get it done."

District 24 state Sen. Vicki Jensen, DFL-Owatonna, said the completion of the roadway is her top priority. She will serve on the Senate Transportation and Public Safety Committee.

"To bring people and keep people in Greater Minnesota, we need to finish Highway 14 along the east and west corridor," Jensen said.

Les Abraham, president of the partnership, said that getting Highway 14's four-lane expansion back into the Minnesota Department of Transportation's 20-year Highway Investment Plan is a top priority. The plan will outline MnDOT's project spending for the next two decades. A draft is due in March and a final report in May.

"If Highway 14 is left out of the 20-year plan, progress will be stalled, our region's economic development will be hampered and our safety will be jeopardized," said Abraham, who is also an Owatonna City Council member. "It's especially concerning that even if future transportation funding were to become available, those funds couldn't go toward completing Highway 14 if the projects aren't included in the plan."

Abraham said this is why the partnership will be reaching out to Gov. Mark Dayton, MnDOT Commissioner Charlie Zelle and legislators to stress the importance of Highway 14. He encourages citizens to do the same.

He also noted that as the Legislature discusses transportation funding, Highway 14 must be part of the conversation.

"Highway 14 is an economic corridor that must be consistent four lanes from Rochester to New Ulm

to meet the needs of our citizens and businesses. This unsafe road has already taken too many lives, and our traffic counts, population and industries are only expected to grow,” Abraham said. “The longer we wait to finish the four-lane expansion, the more expensive the projects get, the more unsafe the road becomes, and the more economic opportunity that is lost. We need to find a way to get this done, now.”

The partnership projected, as of now, that the cost of completing the Owatonna-Dodge Center stretch would be \$199 million and the stretch from North Mankato to New Ulm would cost \$188 million. However, this does not include the cost of right-of-way.

Some of the partnership’s other goals include keeping the progress on the Owatonna and Dodge Center stretch of Highway 14 going to keep the environmental impact statement — which lasts only three years — from expiring in August 2013; ensure the North Mankato and Nicollet expansion moves ahead as planned, set for 2017-2018; and promote the reconstruction of the Highway 14 and Highway 15 interchange in 2018 with the New Ulm bridge reconstruction.

At the meeting, New Ulm Mayor Robert Beussman, who formerly served on the partnership’s board of directors, was elected vice president of the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership.

“I look forward to playing a more active role in advocating for Highway 14,” Beussman said. “The expansion of this highway is critically important to my community.”

The partnership plans on putting its priorities into action through member communications and legislative advocacy.

The partnership will meet again in the summer.

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