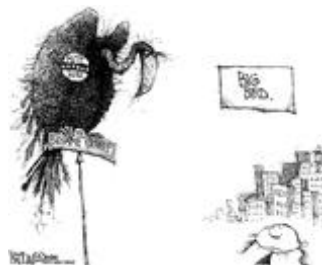


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Our View: Make Highway 14 part of MnDOT 20-year plan



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The Free Press (<http://mankatofreepress.com>)

— The Highway 14 expansion project from North Mankato to New Ulm has finally gotten off the ground after years of delay, but MnDOT can also show its commitment to the long-term expansion by including it in the 20-year transportation plan.

The Mankato MnDOT District 7 office held one of a several public meetings on its overall 20-year plan this week and while the overall plan hasn't yet drawn widespread public interest it will have huge implications for public safety, economic development and commerce for the region.

While the 20-year plan does not technically include specific projects, it influences what projects can be funded by setting priorities on different overall needs.

The public needs to get involved and be heard.

The 20-year transportation plan aims to prioritize a growing number of important road projects with a dwindling amount of state funding. It also asks the public to decide how much funding should go to a variety of areas from road maintenance to local and regional road expansions. MnDOT has scheduled more public meetings and will finalize the plan next spring. Then, MnDOT district officials must make decisions on which roads will be priorities. (You can find how to provide your input at www.dot.state.mn.us/publicinvolvement).

The Mankato district office has approximately \$40 million for projects each year and a list of dozens of potential worthy projects. When projects get on the 20-year list, MnDOT makes some level of commitment to completing them. If projects do not make the 20 year list, they may very well be dead for all intents and purposes.

Highway 14 from New Ulm to North Mankato should be on the 20-year list. The Highway 14 Partnership – a coalition of businesses and governments along the highway – is pushing for the New Ulm route, but also for a four-lane from Dodge Center to Owatonna. With the completion of those segments, Highway 14 will be able to handle the growing needs of commerce, agriculture and commuters from Rochester to New Ulm.

Such a continuous four-lane project fits well with state plans that call for highways to become corridors of commerce, moving goods and people safely and efficiently in greater Minnesota.

The Highway 14 Partnership points out that the two unfinished segments have fatality rates above the state average. The North Mankato to New Ulm fatality rate is almost three times above the state average and the Dodge Center to Owatonna rate nearly twice the state average.

Fortunately, MnDOT and Gov. Mark Dayton announced this year a plan to expand the four-lane from North Mankato to Nicollet in the next five years or so. Immediate safety improvements to prevent head-on crashes will be made by November.

Those actions came in response to an independent study that showed the fatality rate was nearly three times the state average and after an in-depth Free Press series in 2010 showed the stretch was the most dangerous in the state.

MnDOT reacted to the public safety concerns on those projects and now should strongly consider a further commitment to fund the rest of the road and make it a priority. Ultimately, it will make sense to complete the four-lane from Dodge Center to Owatonna as well.

The public has a real opportunity to influence these road decisions. The local MnDOT district engineer sets priorities with advice from an advisory committee of local government and business leaders known as the Area Transportation Partnership.

Highway 14 should be near the top of the priority list.



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