

# Post-Bulletin

## Our View: U.S. 14 might be reason to increase gas tax

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We'll start with the good news: The price of a gallon of gasoline dipped under \$3. In case you haven't been keeping track, the last time gas was this inexpensive was Dec. 20, 2010, when the average price in Minnesota was \$2.91 per gallon.

While that milestone was being achieved, Gov. Mark Dayton announced Charlie Zelle, president of transit company Jefferson Lines, would be the new leader for Minnesota's Department of Transportation.

Zelle chairs a Dayton-created task force that's been studying ways attack a projected \$50 billion shortfall in long-term transportation funding. One of the task force's recommendations to combat this was a 40-cent increase in — you guessed it — Minnesota's gas tax, phased in over the next 20 years.

Dayton announced Zelle's appointment, but at the same time announced his opposition to the gas tax increase because "I think there's not public support for it."

That's an odd argument, and certainly a premature one. We think Minnesota drivers want roads and bridges that are well-maintained and replaced when necessary. Governing means you occasionally must make decisions that might not be terribly popular, so the question Dayton should be asking isn't whether people would like a gas tax increase — really, who would? — but whether the need is dire enough to justify it.

To help answer that question, on Thursday, the Post-Bulletin's editorial board met with Amanda Duerr, communications director for the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership. This group, created in 1998, is a consortium of city governments, county governments, private businesses and nonprofit groups that have united behind the effort to make U.S. 14 a safer four-lane corridor from Rochester to Mankato. Among its nearly 60 members are Olmsted County, the Mayo Clinic Foundation, the city of Byron, the city of Owatonna, McNeilus Steel and the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation.

Duerr explained that several clocks are ticking regarding the U.S. 14 expansion.

"MnDOT is putting together its 20-year state highway investment plan, with the final report due in May," she said. "That document that will list the priorities for project funding for the next 20 years. It's crucial that our two unfinished segments of Highway 14 be included in this plan, because even if increased revenues become available, resources cannot be allocated to transportation projects that are not included in this plan."

Suffice to say we join the partnership in urging MnDOT to include U.S. 14 in that plan.

Another issue concerns an already completed Environmental Impact Statement for expanding the stretch of Highway 14 between Owatonna and Dodge Center. It was finalized in August 2010, but nothing has happened since. Unless some work begins, the EIS will expire in August 2013. "We're going to be making a big push for MnDOT at least start making some progress on that stretch," Duerr said. "Otherwise, there will be further delays, costs and staff time added to this project."

Finally, Duerr pointed out an obvious political truth; namely, the DFL's control of Legislature and governor's office won't be permanent. "It's a relatively narrow window of opportunity, with the majorities the way they are. The partnership and a lot of the advocacy groups are hopeful that some form of substantial transportation funding package materializes this year."

We heartily agree. This stretch of road is already one of the most dangerous in the state, with 44 fatal crashes between Rochester and New Ulm during the past decade and eight fatalities so far this year. And, given current population trends, traffic along this corridor is projected to at least double during the next two decades.

The total cost for this project, including land acquisition, is estimated at just less than \$450 million. Without some form of new transportation revenue, it's difficult to imagine this project becoming a state priority — especially now that MnDOT is

**emphasizing maintenance and safety concerns on smaller, existing roads, rather than large-scale new construction.**

**If an increase in the gas tax would boost the odds of U.S. 14 getting its much-needed upgrade, then we certainly hope Gov. Dayton and the DFL leadership will consider it as part of a larger transportation funding package.**

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