

## Highway 14 Partnership makes bid to get completion back on MnDOT's 20-year plan

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ST. PAUL — With a new state Legislature in place and a new face backing its proposal, the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership returned to the State Capital on Wednesday to request that the highway's completion be put back in the 20-year plan for the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

Appearing in front of the state Senate Committee for Transportation and Public Safety, public figures and business representatives from across southern Minnesota pleaded their case for the highway's completion in a new bill authored by state Sen. Vicki Jensen, DFL-Owatonna, who also sits on the committee.

"I couldn't go anywhere in my district (24) and not have a discussion about Highway 14," Jensen said during the hearing. "It's nice to do it at this level."

The bill calls for a total of \$431.6 million to be appropriated for the completion of the highway, \$219 million of which would go toward the section between Owatonna and Dodge Center and the remainder going toward completing the portion between Nicollet and New Ulm. The remainder of the highway is already four-lane or scheduled to be expanded to four-lane from Rochester to New Ulm.

The partnership is continuing to lobby for the completion of the highway from Owatonna to Dodge Center and from New Ulm to Nicollet. According to statistics presented by the partnership, there were 52 fatalities between Rochester and New Ulm between 2002 and 2011 to go along with 41 serious injury crashes. The fatality rate is above the state average, and eight more fatalities occurred in 2012.

The highway is also a corridor for businesses throughout the southern region.

Aaron Lambrecht, a resident and business owner in New Ulm, lives and works along the highway.

"My wife and I do not let our children ride the school bus because it is unsafe for the bus to stop on Highway 14," Lambrecht said. "Further, as a business involved in sales and delivery of building materials, we are hindered by Highway 14. Distributors along four-lane highways have a definite competitive economic advantage. We may have to look elsewhere if we want our company to grow."

Traffic along the highway is only expected to increase over the next 15 to 20 years. From North Mankato to New Ulm, traffic is expected to increase between 60 percent and 80 percent by 2025, while traffic from Owatonna to Dodge Center is expected to increase by 50 percent by 2034.

Owatonna City Council President Les Abraham also serves as president for the partnership. During

the hearing, he talked about how when he got out of the Army in 1968, there was talk of completing the highway. Forty-five years later, Owatonna to Dodge Center is still two-lanes, Abraham said.

Members of the Public Safety Committee acknowledged that the stretch of highway is unsafe.

“It’s probably the most dangerous highway in Minnesota, sometimes for reasons we don’t understand .. but the statistics bear that out,” said GOP state Sen. Dave Senjem, who has signed on as a co-author of the bill. Senjem represents Senate District 25, which includes the cities of Rochester, Byron, Kasson and Dodge Center, all of which are along Highway 14.

If the project is not put back on the 20-year plan, it will not be eligible for funding that may become available, which will continue to jeopardize safety and raise project costs, the partnership says. Jensen has authored another Senate bill, which lists Senjem as one of the co-authors, that requires Highway 14 to stay on the next 20-year plan if its placed on it. That bill has yet to be heard.

During her remarks to the committee, Jensen noted the safety and economic consequences if the highway isn’t put back on the plan, and that in order for the southern region of the state to continue to thrive, Highway 14 needed to be included in MnDOT’s 20-year plan.

“The only solution that will work and meet the economic and safety needs of southern Minnesota is a full four-lane road from Rochester to New Ulm,” Jensen said.

Rep. Kathy Brynaert, DFL-Mankato, has authored a bill similar to Jensen’s in House. Her bill, which lists John Petersburg, R-Waseca, as a co-author, will be heard by House committees on Transportation Finance and Policy over the next two weeks. The Highway 14 Partnership will also meet with the House Transportation Policy Committee at 2:15 p.m. Wednesday and with the House Transportation Finance Committee at 10 a.m. on Feb. 27. Petersburg sits on both committees.

Jensen said she is pleased with all of the work done by lawmakers from all across southern Minnesota.

“There has just been great show of support all across the (Highway 14) corridor,” Jensen said Thursday. “We have a lot of people working toward the completion of the highway for safety reasons, business reasons, freight reasons, economic reasons.”

Jensen’s bill was laid over for possible inclusion in an omnibus transportation finance bill. With 2013 being her first year on the committee, Jensen wasn’t sure when the omnibus bill will be finished. Highway 14 Partnership lobbyist Amanda Duerr, who previously was a researcher for Senate Transportation Committee, said she believes the omnibus bill could get finished in late March or early April. Before any funds are released the entire Minnesota Legislature would have to approve the bill. Jensen believes there is some momentum to pass a transportation bill this year.

Also present to give testimony at the hearing were Katie Nelson of the Owatonna Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, Noreen Otto of Hy-Vee, President and CEO of Greater Mankato Growth

Jonathan Zierdt and Waseca Mayor Roy Srp. Despite the fact Srp has seen the portion of the highway that runs along his city go to four lanes, he still testified to the importance of finishing the project.

“We have our four lanes finished, but that doesn’t make us any more or less supportive of other communities along the corridor,” Srp said.

Abraham said that the expansion for Highway 14 is important for Rochester as well. Mayo Clinic recently announced plans to build construct a \$6 billion “Destination Medical Center” in Rochester, where the hospital is headquartered. Abraham said having a safe route to Rochester from across the southern region is important.

“That won’t be successful if we can’t get the traffic to that, which means that the connection here is imperative,” Abraham said. “With their success, we will have success. The growth will go beyond the boundaries of the city of Rochester.”

Abraham was pleased with the result of the meeting, in which the bill was put on for possible inclusion for a transportation finance omnibus bill.

“I think it went well,” Abraham said. “My only hope is that they really take it to heart and that they do follow up and force MnDOT to put it back on the list.”

*People’s Press reporter Derek Sullivan contributed to this story.*

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