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Southern Minnesotans pitch case to improve Highway wy 14 to Senate panel **(<http://mankatofreepress.com/local/x964904394/Southern-Minnesotans-pitch-case-to-improve-Highway-wy-14-to-Senate-panel>)**

By Tim Krohn**Free Press Staff Writer (<http://mankatofreepress.com>)**

ST. PAUL — As a friendly state Senate audience listened, a group of southern Minnesota business and civic leaders laid out their case for why two remaining sections of Highway 14 should be turned into four lanes.

Les Abraham, president of the Owatonna City Council, said the promised four-lane corridor still hasn't been realized after 45 years.

"In 1968 when I got out of the Army, I got home and read that Highway 14 was going to be made into a four-lane from Rochester to Mankato. We got part of it done, but it's still not all done."

Noreen Otto of Hy-Vee Inc. told the Senate committee that the Highway 14 corridor is the prime location for future growth of the grocery store chain. Otto said the corridor needs to be upgraded not just for the safety of its 400 truck drivers, but because of the economic impact the highway has.

Aaron Lambrecht of Shelter Products, a manufacturer in New Ulm, noted that New Ulm sends out an extremely high amount of semi-truck traffic for a city of its size — trucks that have to travel on perhaps the most dangerous, deadly road in Minnesota.

Jonathan Zierdt, president/CEO of Greater Mankato Growth in Mankato, said residents and businesses need a completed four-lane corridor. He said that population growth in five counties along the corridor is expected to grow between 13 to 33 percent by 2020 and he noted that Mankato will be the home to a new Wal-Mart distribution center.

"This means the regional economy along Highway 14 is going to increase as well."

David Berg of Mayo Clinic Health System—Owatonna and Waseca Mayor Roy Srp also spoke in

support of the project.

Lawmakers are pushing a bill that would upgrade about 21 miles of two-lane from Nicollet to New Ulm and 14 miles of two-lane from Owatonna to Dodge Center. (The two-lane from Nicollet to North Mankato is already scheduled for a four-lane upgrade.)

Sen. Vicki Jensen, DFL-Owatonna, is sponsoring the Senate bill while Kathy Brynaert, DFL-Mankato, is sponsoring the House version.

The bill would appropriate nearly \$432 million. Just less than half the money — about \$213 million — would be used to purchase land and construct New Ulm link while the rest — \$219 million — would be used for the Owatonna piece.

In what the chairman of the Transportation Finance Committee called “show and tell day,” backers of several highway improvement bills from around the state made their pitch for increased safety and economic impact. No action was taken at the Wednesday afternoon meeting.

In an interview with The Free Press prior to the hearing, Jensen said she and Brynaert wanted to include the entire corridor in one bill.

“The corridor is important to the whole region. We’ve been talking about a four-lane the entire way since the 1960s,” Jensen said. “Going from four lanes to two lanes is a real problem.”

While many of the other highway projects being pushed Wednesday were aimed at relieving congestion in the metro area, Jensen and Brynaert said Highway 14 has the strongest case because of safety issues.

“There are other corridors, Highway 10 and 52 with similar safety and economic development concerns,” Brynaert said. “But we do know that our safety data puts us pretty much at the top of the list. I think that’s had an effect on the awareness of the other legislators.”

And Jensen said things will only get more dangerous on Highway 14. Projections are that semi-truck traffic will increase about 57 percent by 2020 on the four-lane near New Ulm and by 50 percent near Owatonna.

Brynaert said no one expects lawmakers are going to appropriate the money for the project this session, but said it’s vital the project is planned for.

“The bottom line is to get Highway 14 in that 20-year MnDOT plan — that is really critical. And we need to keep it at the table with other projects,” Brynaert said.

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