

Waseca mayor testifies in St. Paul regarding Hwy. 14

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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 on Feb. 13 were business representatives from across southern Minnesota and public figures, including Waseca Mayor Roy Srp and Sen. Vicki Jensen, DFL-Owatonna, who sits on the committee and authored the bill for the highway's completion.

"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."

Srp said with his 20 years of involvement in local government in Waseca and 43 years of experience with the railroad, he's familiar with the importance of transportation.

"I won't be near as eloquent as my colleagues are because this is the first time I've been here and I'm by no means slick," Srp said during the hearing, "but I do need to plead the case for Hwy. 14. It's very important that we get that corridor finished and completed."

The recently retired Srp said residents of Waseca are "blessed" to have their portion of the four-lane finished, but that doesn't mean the city is any more or less supportive of the rest of the communities up and down the highway.

The bill being brought to the legislature 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 -- the remainder going toward completing the portion between Nicollet and New Ulm, which the partnership continues to lobby for.

According to statistics presented by the partnership, there were 52 fatalities from 2002 to 2011 between Rochester and New Ulm, 41 serious injury crashes and eight additional fatalities in 2012 -- a fatality rate that is above the state average.

On the Waseca County News' Facebook page, Matt DeWees said he drives regularly to both New Ulm and Dodge Center from Waseca and believes the stretch between Mankato and New Ulm is not as bad as between Owatonna and Dodge Center.

“For the safety I would say the Dodge Center side needs the upgrade more. I have had quite a few close calls with passing cars on that stretch. Mostly my only complaint on the Mankato-New Ulm side is slowing down for towns,” DeWees commented.

Members of the Public Safety Committee also 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 signed on as a co-author of the bill.

If the project is not put back on MnDOT’s 20-year plan, the partnership says Hwy. 14 won’t be eligible for funding that may become available, which will continue to jeopardize safety and raise project costs.

During her remarks to the committee, Jensen said that in order for the southern region of Minnesota to continue to thrive, Hwy. 14 needs to be included in MnDOT’s 20-year plan.

Before any funds are released the entire Minnesota Legislature would have to approve the bill and Jensen believes there is some momentum to pass a transportation bill this year.

Srp said in his 20 years of public service, he’s never seen a situation that connected more mayors, city councils, city managers, county commissions and state and federal legislators.

“This is a very, very, very important. If the things that are proposed for Rochester weren’t proposed this would still be important to finish this,” Srp said Thursday. “So, we ask that MnDOT keep this in the 20 year plan and ask (the legislature’s) support in doing that.”