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Bill will propose gas tax increase for 'corridors of commerce' highways

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By Josh Moniz

Staff Writer

ST. PAUL - A bill proposing to raise the state gas tax to fund projects like the completion of Highway 14's remaining four-lane expansion and other similarly troubled "corridors of commerce" highways will be introduced in the Minnesota House next week.

House Transportation Finance Committee chair Rep. Frank Hornstein (DFL-Minneapolis) confirmed Tuesday he would introduce the bill that calls for a 5-cent to 7-cent increase in the state's gas tax. The revenue from the increased tax would be put into a fund that would awarded on a competitive basis to the difficult-to-finance "corridors of commerce" highways. To apply the for funds, the project must significantly boost commerce and jobs in its region. A secondary emphasis will be on improving safety.

The gas tax increase is expected to raise \$1 billion over 10 years. The tax funds will be matching dollars to highway bonding, with the expectation of covering roughly 20 percent of the cost of each project.

"I want to find a way to get [highway] corridors going. I want to find a way to get projects like Highway 14 done," said Hornstein, "I think it's viable because [the gas tax] is not a lot. If we can just get the funding, we can jump start these projects."

Hornstein, who has been an advocate for completing Highway 14 expansion, said the project will not be explicitly given funds under the bill. However, Highway 14 safety and commercial growth concerns fit the bill's intention so well that it is essentially guaranteed to receive the money if it is applied for. Many other long-sought highway corridor projects around the state will similarly see big gains if the bill passes.

He hopes that because the gas tax increase has specific targets with tangible needs its chances of passage are improved.

Hornstein said he plans to introduce the bill either Monday or Tuesday. The timing is important because the work on Transportation omnibus bills will begin during the first week of April.

Hurdles face Hwy 14

completion

Advocates for finishing the Highway 14 four-lane project, especially the Highway 14 Partnership, are excited about Hornstein's legislation as a potential tool for finally completing the work after 50 years of advocacy. But, a meeting among Gov. Mark Dayton, MnDOT officials and the members of the Highway 14 Partnership on Tuesday highlighted the serious hurdles still facing the project.

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New Ulm Mayor Bob Beussman, who participated, said Dayton and the MnDOT officials were generally supportive of the idea. He said they are waiting to see public support before moving forward.

Dayton has been an advocate for finishing the Highway 14 project in recent years. He was instrumental in guaranteeing the portion between North Mankato and Nicollet would be expanded to four-lanes by 2018.

However, he repeated his position on a gas tax increase: he highly doubts there is public support for it, and that he will not push an increase unless he sees public and legislative support for it.

A spokesperson for MnDOT said the department supports any new method for providing funding for transportation projects.

However, MnDOT Commissioner Charles Zelle said that Highway 14 needs to show why its problems should be a priority. MnDOT wants to complete projects like Highway 14, but its increasingly tight budget makes these prospects very difficult, he said.

Beussman's take from the meeting is that the Partnership and advocates of the Highway 14 four-lane project must drum up vocal public support. It must be demonstrated that the public agrees with the bill's premise so that Dayton and MnDOT can confidently move forward on it.

Another potential problem may be opposition to the bill by Republican legislators, who have pushed against any tax increases this session. However, the DFL control of this

Legislature and the governor's office may mitigate some of this factor.

(Josh Moniz can be e-mailed at jmoniz@nujournal.com)

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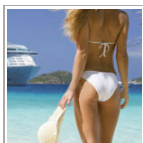
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