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Highway 14 upgrades are budgeted **(<http://mankatofreepress.com/local/x564664973/Highway-14-upgrades-are-budgeted>)**

By Mark Fischenich

The Free Press (<http://mankatofreepress.com>)

— Legislation that would provide funding to eliminate remaining two-lane stretches of Highway 14 between New Ulm and Rochester saw its proposed appropriation drop by more than \$20 million during a state House committee hearing Wednesday.

That reduction, however, was actually good news for people looking to see more four-lane constructed on the highway.

Rep. Kathy Brynaert, DFL-Mankato, amended the bill to cut the appropriation from \$431.6 million to \$409 million because Gov. Mark Dayton's 2012 promise to expand Highway 14 to four-lane expressway between North Mankato and Nicollet is no longer just a promise.

The Minnesota Department of Transportation confirmed that the long-sought project to upgrade the dangerous stretch of Highway 14 west of North Mankato, which Dayton last summer pledged would be completed in 2017-18, has officially been programmed into the MnDOT budget.

"Now we have that confirmation that the money has been set aside for that portion," Brynaert said.

Completion of that section, which has fatal crash rates well in excess of typical Minnesota two-lanes, will still leave two-lane stretches of Highway 14 between Nicollet and New Ulm and between Owatonna and Dodge Center. The Brynaert bill attempts to speed up completion of an unbroken four-lane from Rochester to New Ulm that has long been a top priority of community leaders along the route.

"It has been a regional goal for over 40 years," said Brynaert, whose legislation is co-sponsored by lawmakers from both parties from throughout the corridor including Republican Reps. Tony Cornish of Good Thunder and Paul Torkelson of Lake Hanska and Democrat Clark Johnson of North Mankato.

Chamber of Commerce executives from Mankato and New Ulm testified Wednesday about the importance to the regional economy of upgrading the increasingly busy highway.

And a West Concord woman told the House Transportation Finance Committee of the head-on crash that killed her husband and two others on the two-lane stretch east of Owatonna.

Years earlier, Beth Hodgman said her parents and sister spent months recovering from another serious crash on the highway.

"When is it going to stop?" Hodgman said. "We must find the funding."

Transportation Finance Committee Chairman Frank Hornstein told the committee he intends to try. Hornstein's message was different from the response that typically results from the Highway 14 legislation -- which has been introduced repeatedly over the years, often more as an attempt to draw attention to the need than as a realistic attempt to get legislative approval for funding.

The Legislature has traditionally attempted to avoid allocating hundreds of millions of dollars to specific road projects, preferring to leave those decisions to MnDOT officials and keep politics out of the decision-making.

But Hornstein said he is tentatively planning to push legislation later in the session to fund improvements in "corridors of commerce" around the state. He invited committee members to offer ideas, including methods of funding projects when MnDOT is consistently faced with substantially more in requested upgrades and needed maintenance work than can be financed through the state gas tax and other existing funding sources.

"I really want to figure out a way we can move some of these forward," said Hornstein, DFL-Minneapolis. "... Hopefully we can get this done on a bipartisan basis."

Hornstein is scheduled to meet with Mankato-area business leaders and transportation officials during a visit to Mankato Friday.

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