

# Owatonna leaders head to Capitol in support of Fritz's Highway 14 bill

By DEREK SULLIVAN [dsullivan@owatonna.com](mailto:dsullivan@owatonna.com) | Posted: Friday, March 22, 2013 6:26 pm

OWATONNA — Rep. Patti Fritz, DFL-Faribault, brought a bill to the House Transportation Finance Committee on Friday, which — if passed — would expand Highway 14 from Owatonna to Dodge Center to four lanes.

Fritz's bill provides \$199 million in trunk highway bonds to complete the four-lane expansion of Highway 14. At the end of the hearing, the bill was laid over with recommendation to advance to the Capital Investment Committee.

“Highway 14 is vital to southern Minnesota’s well-being,” said Fritz, whose district includes parts of Steele County, in a press release. “Traffic in this area is increasing and Dodge and Steele counties are growing. We must update this highway to keep up with the growing population and economic activity.”

Testifying for Fritz's bill was the Highway 14 Partnership. On Friday, Steele County Administrator Tom Shea, Owatonna Hospital President Dave Albrecht and Beth Hodgman, whose husband Scott died in a car accident on Highway 14 last November, spoke in support of the expansion.

On Feb. 27, the same House Transportation Finance Committee heard testimony on a bill by Rep. Kathy Brynaert, DFL-Mankato, which would have not only expanded Highway 14 from Owatonna to Dodge Center, but also from Nicollet to New Ulm.

Amanda Duerr, lobbyist for the Highway 14 Partnership, said legislators wanted to see bills which split the project up into segments, instead of one bill that would have — if approved — made Highway 14 four lanes from Rochester to New Ulm.

Shea said that in 1974, he criticized the Minnesota Department of Transportation for not committing to expanding Highway 14 until the 1990s. He did say that a lot of work has been done to the road. Forty years ago, the only four lane on the state highway was from Rochester to Byron. Now, it's four lane from Rochester to Mankato, with the exception of the 20-mile stretch between Owatonna and Dodge Center.

“There is a lot of support,” Shea said. “It's not a partisan issue — there is bi-partisan support. It's a financial issue. They just need to find the money.”

Shea added that Highway 14 needs to be expanded not because of its inconvenience to drivers or because of traffic congestion, but because of safety issues. From 2002 to 2011, there were 49 fatalities and 34 serious injury crashes on Highway 14 between New Ulm and Rochester. Of these,

nine fatalities and seven serious injuries occurred between Owatonna and Dodge Center. Those numbers do not include Scott Hodgman's death in 2012.

"I woke up to a phone call early the day after the election to hear that a man had been killed on this stretch of the highway. For me, this issue has become personal and I want to make sure that Highway 14 is safe for our family, friends and community members," Fritz said. "We can't afford to put this project off. The longer we wait, the higher the costs of the project and the more lives we risk losing."

Reach reporter Derek Sullivan at 444-2372, or follow him on Twitter @OPPSullivan