

Rep. Petersburg talks Highway 14 expansion, LGA with Waseca, Owatonna officials

By JENNIFER HOLT jholt@wasecacountynews.com | Posted: Tuesday, March 26, 2013 3:07 pm

State Rep. John Petersburg met with Owatonna and Waseca city leaders Tuesday to talk about the Hwy. 14 expansion project and local government aid.

Petersburg, R-Waseca, said one of the most important things for him right now is Hwy. 14.

Many counties that lie along Hwy. 14 want to see the entire stretch become a four-lane roadway from Rochester to New Ulm.

“I try to make sure that we don’t go through too many committee meetings without mentioning Hwy. 14 at least once,” Petersburg said.

One of the things discussed at the meeting was the importance of the economic impact of Hwy. 14.

Owatonna City Administrator Kris Busse said the road enhancement isn’t just about safety, which is of concern to her, but the road is many city’s economic life blood.

“It’s our major corridor,” Busse said. “We’re all about jobs and growing the economy but we need the transportation.”

Many people who are big supporters of the project don’t want to see it on the state’s 20-year plan – they want it done sooner.

The project was scheduled to begin more than 40 years ago, and Waseca City Council member Les Tloughan said if people want to start looking at timelines, the highway project is due.

One concern Waseca City Manager Crystal Prentice has is that from New Ulm to Rochester, Waseca County is the only county not projected to grow, another reason city officials would like legislators to push to get the expansion project done as soon as possible.

Local government aid

Another topic almost equally as important to the cities is local government aid (LGA).

A majority of Minnesota cities have had to go without millions of dollars over the last four years after former Gov. Tim Pawlenty and the state Legislature reduced state aid to cities. Current Gov. Mark Dayton has recommended adding \$80 million a year to local government aid in his new proposal.

The League of Minnesota Cities, Coalition of Greater Minnesota Cities, the metro cities, and

Minneapolis and St. Paul have all joined together to give the Legislature an agreed upon LGA proposal and have asked Petersburg for his support of the proposal.

“We’ve all joined together to say, 'Here is what we think is fair,’” Busse said, “and how often does that happen? I think that’s pretty remarkable in itself and it’s true reform – making (LGA) simpler, more fair, more sustainable and stable.”

In Waseca, to maintain the current service levels without LGA, the city would be required to increase the property tax levy by 66 percent, and “we just couldn’t do that,” Prentice said.

“That is why local government aid is extremely important to Waseca and Owatonna,” she said.

Busse said LGA is essential to help fund core services in Owatonna.

“For us, we get \$3.1 million in 2013, and just to fund our police and fire is \$5.8 million,” Busse said.

Petersburg told city leaders he couldn't guarantee his vote in support of Dayton's proposal.

Waseca Mayor Roy Srp believes Petersburg is in an excellent position as a representative in the minority party.

“The DFL and governor (are) appearing to want to go with the LGA formula and it is going to mean good things for greater Minnesota,” Srp said. “And if you support this you’re going to see some backing from constituents that you probably wouldn’t have had before.”