

West Concord widow discusses "horror highway" with state Legislators

By DEREK SULLIVAN dsullivan@owatonna.com | Posted: Wednesday, February 27, 2013 5:22 pm

OWATONNA — Beth Hodgman, whose husband died on Highway 14 three months ago, told the Minnesota House Transportation Finance Committee that it's time to make the road safer.

For the third consecutive Wednesday, members of the Highway 14 Partnership traveled to the state Capitol to discuss the expansion of Highway 14 from two lanes to four lanes between Owatonna and Dodge Center as well as Nicollet and New Ulm — the last two two-lane stretches of the highway between New Ulm and Rochester.

The Highway 14 Partnership attended the House Transportation Finance Committee to promote the passage of House File 210, authored by Rep. Kathy Brynaert, DFL-Mankato, which appropriates \$409 million to expand 43 miles of two lane road on Highway 14 to four lanes.

Hodgman's husband, Scott, was killed on Nov. 6, Election Day, just west of the point between Kasson and Dodge Center where Highway 14 goes from four lanes to two lanes.

"My husband Scott was on his way home from work and heading to vote when his vehicle and another collided head-on, killing three people and injuring another. The other two people that were killed were the 10-year old boy who was receiving treatment at the Mayo Clinic and his father," Hodgman told the committee. "I know this accident could have been avoided if this deadly stretch of Highway 14 would have been a four-lane. I know if Highway 14 was a four-lane that my children, my grandchildren, and I would still have Scott here with us."

Hodgman's vehicle collided with a vehicle driven by Jack Reich of Zap, N.D. Both men died as did Jack's 10-year-old son Vander Reich.

Beth Hodgman, who has lived her entire life two miles from Highway 14, read about the Highway 14 Partnership's earlier trips to St. Paul. The partnership met with the Senate Transportation and Public Safety Committee on Feb. 13 and the House Transportation Policy Committee on Feb. 20. She reached out to people in the partnership and asked to be a part of presentation to the House Transportation Finance Committee on Wednesday.

Even before her husband died on Election Day 2012, Hodgman felt Highway 14 was unsafe. Both her mother and sister were a part of a car accident on the road. While all three survived, they needed to rehabilitate for months and her mother and sister still walk with "terrible limps."

“It bothers me that the best we do, the best we can hope for, is to get on a 20-year plan,” Beth Hodgman said on Tuesday. “Twenty years — that is too long. When the bridge collapsed in the Twin Cities (in 2007), the (Legislature) found money overnight. Eleven people died. How many people have died on Highway 14? I’m not saying that the bridge collapse wasn’t a tragedy, but they started on Highway 14 in 1960, the year I was born, and they are still working on it. You can’t fund one project and not say there isn’t funding for another. I believe in my heart that the Twin Cities always comes first.”

Hodgman referenced a bill, also authored by Brynaert, that asked the House Transportation Policy Committee last week to place Highway 14 expansion in MnDOT’s 20-year plan for transportation funding.

Hodgman was advocating as much for additional safety features as she was for an expansion to four lanes. She would like to see better lighting, flashing signs and more of them on the road. While she will never truly know, she believes that Jack Reich, who lived 600 miles away in Zap, N.D., had no idea that Highway 14 was switching from four lanes to two lanes west of Dodge Center.

“I believe if just a few simple things would have been done, the accident could have been prevented,” said Hodgman, who, even before the accident, rarely drove to her job in Rochester on Highway 14.

Rep. John Petersburg, R-Waseca, sits on the House Transportation Finance Committee and grew up in Claremont. Petersburg, whose district includes Owatonna, said he knew Scott, who was six years behind him in school.

“It was tough to listen (to Beth),” Petersburg said. “I also heard about the accident the day after Election Day, which made that time bittersweet for me. He was a good young man and he left behind a family.”

While running for election, Petersburg said Highway 14 expansion was a top priority. He continues to say something will get done, and the only way it doesn’t is, “if we quit.”

Petersburg, as well as Rep. Patti Fritz, DFL-Faribault, is a co-author on Brynaert’s bill. He also co-authored a bonding bill written by Rep. Duane Quam, R-Byron.

“I still think there is something we will be able to do,” Petersburg said. “It may need to be a bonding bill. It may need to part of a four-year plan. ... We need to use these bills as tools in a toolbox and create some flexibility.”

Petersburg said that Transportation Finance Committee chair Frank Horstein, DFL-Minneapolis, has been very receptive to finding solutions to projects that are 40 to 60 years old.

In addition to Hodgman, the committee also heard from Owatonna Hospital president Dave Albrecht; Dave Berg, Mayo Health Clinic System-Owatonna administrator; Les Abraham, Owatonna city council president; Jonathan Zierdt, president and CEO of Greater Mankato Growth; and Audra Shaneman,

president and CEO of New Ulm Area Chamber of Commerce.

Albrecht went to discuss the large number of hospital transfers between Owatonna and St. Marys in Rochester. Last year, 581 patients were transferred to Rochester, many by helicopter, because, Albrecht said, "There are many hazards on 14." The road also includes railroad tracks and often will be used by farm equipment, which will slow the ambulance.

"I thought it went really well," Albrecht said. "There were great conversations. We discussed the economic growth along the corridor. With that growth, something needs to be done with it."

The appropriation bill was laid over for possible inclusion in an omnibus transportation finance bill. Petersburg said the committee will hear from presentations from other areas of the state with road concerns throughout March and then work on an omnibus bill.

He remains hopeful that Highway 14 will find a place in the final bill.

"We need to continue to let people know that Highway 14 is not just an important road for us, our area, but also an important artery in the state of Minnesota," Petersburg said. "We need to continue to let people know that."