

Widow calls on lawmakers to fix deadly stretches of U.S. 14

Heather J. Carlson | Posted: Wednesday, April 17, 2013 5:38 pm

ST. PAUL — Clutching photos of her husband, Beth Hodgman stood before a crowd of transportation advocates on Wednesday and called on lawmakers to find the money to fix U.S. 14.

"I am here today because on Nov. 6, I lost my best friend, husband, father to my children and grandfather to my grandchildren," she said.

Scott Hodgman was killed in a car crash on a two-lane stretch of U.S. 14 between Claremont and Dodge Center. Also killed in that crash were a father and son from Zap, N.D. — Jack P. Reich and his 10-year-old son, Vander.

Since her husband's death, Beth Hodgman has traveled to the Capitol four times and met with DFL Gov. Mark Dayton, calling on lawmakers to upgrade U.S. 14 into a four-lane highway from Winona to the South Dakota border.

"They have been lobbying to get this fixed for years and years and years, and everybody passes the buck. Nobody will take responsibility to fix it," she said.

During the rally, local officials, business groups and labor leaders voiced frustration with transportation bills advancing in the DFL-led Legislature that fail to address a \$21 billion transportation shortfall over the next 20 years. Key lawmakers had been pushing for a gas tax increase to boost transportation funding, but backed off that idea after the governor announced he did not support it. That has Democrats scrambling to come up with other ways to raise money for transportation.

Sen. Vicki Jensen, DFL-Owatonna, told the crowd of roughly 200 they need to start putting pressure on lawmakers.

"Now is the time for you to go and talk to your legislators and let them know you are willing to raise revenue so that we can put people to work, start building our infrastructure, make our roads safer, enhance our economic development and make this a better state," she said.

But some legislators argue the problem is not a lack of transportation funding. Rather, it's a failure to properly prioritize projects like U.S. 14. Rep. Duane Quam, R-Byron, said people in southern Minnesota have been calling on the state to fix this stretch of highway for 50 years.

"My view is if you haven't done it in 50 years, it's a priority issue. It's not high enough on the transportation priority list, and that's the problem," he said.

Expanding U.S. 14 between U.S. 218 and Dodge Center is expected to cost more than \$204 million in 2018 dollars, according to Kristin Kammuehler, a spokeswoman for the Minnesota Department of Transportation. It remains to be seen if the project will be included in the department's long-term investment plan, which is slated to be released in June.

Some Democrats said they are disappointed the governor spoke out against a gas tax increase. Rep. Jeanne Poppe, DFL-Austin, said it's time to invest more money in the state's roads and bridges.

"Frankly, I think the governor is wrong on the gas tax. Nobody likes to pay more on taxes, and we'll hear that now until we adjourn, that's going to be an issue and people have issues about that," she said. "But frankly, it's the best user fee we have and the most direct tax that pays for the infrastructure we need to move goods and services and people."

As for Hodgman, she plans to keep pushing lawmakers to take action. Since the mid-1980s, 145 people have died on U.S. 14, she said. "And we still can't find funding for it. That's terrible. We should be ashamed."

Asked about the reluctance among the governor and some other lawmakers to consider raising the gas tax to pay for transportation, Hodgman said, "Sometimes I think people are more worried about re-election than solving the problem."