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'Corridor' plan a plus for Hwy. 14

Why It Matters: Highway 14 will be able to tap a new funding stream approved by the Legislature

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---- — Even though Gov. Mark Dayton nixed expanding the gas tax for road funding, a plan passed by the Legislature to issue trunk highway bonds for “Corridors of Commerce” offers a good chance to jump start funding on parts of Highway 14.

The Legislature approved the issuance of \$300 million in trunk highway bonds to fund very specific projects approved in the “Corridors of Commerce” program. That idea came about in part because of the strong local push for Highway 14 funding by the Highway 14 Partnership, local governments, businesses, communities as well as average citizens.

While the main push this year was aimed at expanding the gas tax to make a dent in the billions of dollars in road funding needs, the bonding money will help to continue the push to complete Highway 14 as a four-lane from Rochester to New Ulm.

The Corridors of Commerce program will require projects to apply for funds and each will be judged on a competitive basis, depending on criteria set in law. Legislators point out that the program was almost custom-made for Highway 14 because many of the criteria match the current makeup of Highway 14.

The criteria include roads that go back and forth from two lanes to four lanes, something typical of Highway 14. Projects also will be approved if they can show economic benefits of improving the road, faster travel times, fewer delays and support for emerging industries. With the new Walmart distribution plant scheduled to open in 2015, truck traffic will expand exponentially on Highway 14. The program also is aimed at outstate roads, so projects like Highway 14 won't have to compete with the huge dollar projects of metro interstates.

And most importantly, projects will meet criteria if they can show improvements in road safety. Such considerations are obvious to most people, but have been secondary or almost non-existent in previous transportation programs authorized by the Legislature. Highway 14's safety problems have been well-documented and again, fit right into the Corridor criteria.

The program also does not require the project to be on MnDOT's 20 year list (Highway 14 was not) and it even allows interested parties and stakeholders — not just MnDOT — to submit proposals for projects.

While there are many projects in outstate Minnesota that will likely compete for the \$300 million, informed observers say they will be very surprised if Highway 14 isn't awarded some of those funds. And although

\$300 million will not go terribly far in addressing all outstate transportation needs, it will be a small down payment on getting a lot of these projects started.

Next year, Gov. Dayton and the Legislature can then take a crack at providing real transportation funding to meet the critical needs throughout Minnesota.

But approval of the Corridors of Commerce program is another breakthrough in the push for badly needed funding. For years, cities, counties, businesses and citizens have lobbied for an improved and safer Highway 14. Legislators and to some extent the governor have partially answered those calls.

Gov. Mark Dayton last year after hearing from residents, legislators and businesses about the dire needs of Highway 14, approved a four-lane expansion from North Mankato to Nicollet through existing MnDOT funds. We can appreciate those efforts.

That was a response in part to a 2010 Free Press series that showed part of Highway 14 had a fatality rate twice the state average and a follow-up independent report by MnDOT that showed parts of it had a fatality rate three times the state average.

Now the timing seems right to push for full funding of completion of the four-lane from Rochester to New Ulm, including unfinished pieces between Owatonna and Dodge Center and Nicollet and New Ulm.

The projects would not only vastly improve safety and save lives but leverage an economic development boom across southern Minnesota.

The approval of the Corridors of Commerce funding also shows that citizens can make a difference, and now stakeholders have a tool to make improvement of Highway 14 a reality.