

Highway 14 expansion's future uncertain as MnDOT puts together 20-year plan draft

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OWATONNA — The future of the four-lane expansion of Highway 14 from Rochester to New Ulm, including the stretch from Owatonna to Dodge Center, is still uncertain.

The Minnesota Department of Transportation has held public meetings in each of the state's districts to present a preview of its 20-year Minnesota State Highway Investment Plan.

“We wanted to accomplish three things,” said Ryan Wilson, planning engineer at MnDOT’s Office of Capital Programs and Performance Measures. “We wanted to share the information we heard from the public at our fall outreach, explain how MnDOT made its investment plans and what the investments mean.”

And the four-lane expansion of Highway 14 from North Mankato to Nicollet that was promised by Gov. Mark Dayton last year is the only segment included in the plan, and it has a construction start date in 2017.

There is no plan for completing Highway 14 from Owatonna to Dodge Center.

Les Abraham, president of the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership, said the plan reflects everything the partnership has been hearing all along.

“They’ll do what they can with what they have,” Abraham said.

It comes down to one thing, Wilson said. Funding.

Wilson said the department currently needs \$30 billion to meet its transportation needs for the next 20 years, but has a predicted revenue of about \$18 billion for that time frame.

“We looked at what’s important, and (Highway 14) comprises our \$30 billion needs fund,” Wilson said.

Wilson said MnDOT looked at different things when producing its 20-year plan, including state and federal law requirements, impacts on other areas in the state, impacts on the department’s other transportation plans as well as public input.

State Sen. Vicki Jensen, DFL-Owatonna, said she is disappointed with the role the public has in MnDOT’s decision.

“MnDOT asks us to weigh in and then they present it to us, and it’s different from what we want,” Jensen said. “They continue doing what they’ve always done.”

However, she is glad MnDOT holds public meetings so individuals can understand the decisions made by the department.

Jensen said the draft preview showed projects in the first 10 years only.

“There are no projects in the next 10 years because all the funds are gone. It’s just maintenance work,” she said.

Wilson said MnDOT regularly updates its state highway investment plan every four years. The next update is slated for August, and MnDOT will present a draft version on July 1 to allow public comment.

He said MnDOT looks at the first 10 years of the plan annually because of potential changes.

“More funding may present itself,” Wilson said.

Jensen said she didn’t see anything about Highway 14 on the plan.

“I am hopeful that Corridors of Commerce will help fund the project,” she said.

In May, the Minnesota state Legislature passed a transportation budget that included funding for the “Corridors of Commerce” program that includes \$300 million in trunk highway bonds, which aims to complete the missing links and build capacity on Minnesota’s highway corridors.

The Corridors of Commerce is set up as a competitive grant program, in which eligible projects will be selected by the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

Wilson said if more funding were to become available, MnDOT would look at the recommendations from the state’s Transportation Finance Advisory Committee.

“The committee sets the framework for our highway plan,” Wilson said.

And Highway 14 has been discussed in the committee, he said.

Jensen said she’ll continue to be a voice for the vision of transportation.

“A lot of people are putting money into the partnership so their voices can be heard,” Jensen said. “I’m going to be there as a voice for the vision.”

MnDOT encourages the public to weigh in on its 20-year state highway investment plan draft in July.

At the end of June, the draft MnSHIP document will be available online at <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/planning/statehighwayinvestmentplan/index.html>.

Feedback received during the comment period and public hearing will be considered for the final plan, due in August 2013.

Individuals may visit the following website for information they can weigh in on MnDOT’s plan:

<http://www.dot.state.mn.us/planning/statehighwayinvestmentplan/participate.html>.

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