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Highway plan gets hearing

By Dan Linehan

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---- — MANKATO — Keith Keogh of St. Peter said he suspects the head transportation honchos in St. Paul don't really need a regular guy's opinion, but as long as the public was invited he figured on giving his two cents anyhow.

About a dozen people attended an open house by teleconference Monday afternoon in Mankato about the Minnesota Department of Transportation's 20-year plan. Keogh was the only one who spoke.

He said after the meeting he was disappointed MnDOT isn't going to overlay the northbound lanes of Highway 169 next year between St. Peter and Le Sueur. The state is raising about two miles of the road above the floodplain and repairing about nine miles of it, but only the southbound lanes.

These highways were originally built in the early '60s, when the Minnesota River's high-water elevation was assumed at about five feet lower than the actual 100-year flood elevation.

Keogh would also have preferred a gas tax increase of 5 cents a gallon. Gov. Mark Dayton's opposition doomed the measure last session.

Amanda Duerr, a lobbyist with the Highway 14 Partnership, testified about Highway 14, saying she was disappointed the state was not making the highway a priority. The four-lane upgrade from North Mankato to Nicollet is funded, beginning in 2018, but the two remaining gaps – from Nicollet to New Ulm and from Owatonna to Dodge Center – are not.

Terry Genelin, who represents the townships of Nicollet County on the Region Nine Development Commission, said central Minnesotans who testified about Highway 94 made a good case for the six-lane expansion from Rogers to St. Michael.

And he said new federal standards, called MAP21, are putting pressure on states to spend more money maintaining high-volume interstates.

"Under MAP21, I don't think that's going to be in the cards for awhile," he said of the Highway 94 request.

The refrain seemed to be that MnDOT doesn't have enough money to satisfy the public. The transportation commissioner noted on the teleconference that the plan isn't MnDOT's "vision," but only what it could accomplish with what it's given.

Attendee Richard Keir of Mankato, a bicycling advocate, got that message.

"If you want to live in a nice state, it's going to cost money," he said.

In the first 10 years of the plan, maintenance projects will gobble up more than two-thirds of revenues. It gets worse in the second 10 years, when it will take a projected 89 percent of revenues. This would, of course, change if revenues increase.

Genelin said MnDOT spent \$5 million on a study of a mileage-tracking system, which would allow the state to tax motorists based on how far they drive, not on the gas they buy. This would help counteract the trend of declining gas

consumption with more fuel-efficient vehicles.

But he said the recent controversy over NSA surveillance has reduced the public appetite for a tax of this sort.

The 20-year plan will be modified based on public comments next month, and if the commissioner approves it a final version will be posted online in September.