

MnDOT 20-Year plan: Speak out for Highway 14

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The draft 20-year State Highway Investment Plan (MnSHIP) recently released by the Minnesota Department of Transportation lacks vision and does not reflect public input. It stings that Highway 14 — a project that is an overwhelming priority of the citizens — is still not a priority of MnDOT.

The only four-lane expansion project of Highway 14 that's included in the plan is the project Gov. Dayton committed to completing, from North Mankato to Nicollet. While I'm glad this project is moving forward, the lack of inclusion of the full expansion from Rochester to New Ulm is frustrating for the communities that have waited for over 50 years for the highway's completion. In 1968, when I was discharged from the Army, I returned home and saw headlines stating that a four-lane Highway 14 would be finished within 10 years.

This plan really isn't much of a plan. It certainly doesn't outline an investment to build the infrastructure that our state's businesses need to ship their products and provide their services. It doesn't take into account growing our region's population centers and the increased demand that will place on already unsafe roads. It doesn't reflect that we have Congressman Walz on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee and not listing Highway 14 on the plan makes it more difficult for him to direct federal resources toward the project. Unfortunately, the plan instead just spends the limited transportation dollars we have in a way that tries to meet performance measures and requirements.

Minnesota needs something better — a real vision. It's up to our legislators to provide the resources to build the transportation infrastructure our state needs and it's up to MnDOT to show they will allocate those resources wisely on the projects that need to get done.

I understand that this 20-year plan is different than those plans of the past. Individual projects are only listed for the first seven years of the plan. MnDOT has also stated that projects can be added to the plan if additional funding becomes available. I also understand that this plan is only designed to allocate the existing sources of transportation revenue, and that these funding mechanisms are limited and diminishing. And I know moving forward, there are still funding opportunities available for Highway 14 under the new Corridors of Commerce program, which doesn't require a project to be included in the 20-year plan to be eligible.

However, Highway 14 still needs to be considered a state priority.

The department is asking for public input on the plan, and I'm calling on the communities of the Highway 14 corridor to provide it. You can go to

<http://www.dot.state.mn.us/planning/mnship/participate.html> to submit a written comment. Otherwise, MnDOT is hosting a statewide public hearing on July 29. You could stop by one of the MnDOT offices in Mankato, Rochester, or Owatonna to take part in the video conference and make a case for Highway 14. Your input will help provide our state's leaders the support they need to do something meaningful for Minnesota's transportation system.

Les Abraham is president of both the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership and the Owatonna City Council.