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MnDOT 20-year plan being drafted; some hope for Hwy 14

By Josh Moniz

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Staff Writer , The Journal

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ST. PAUL - The majority of the remaining Highway 14 four-lane expansion project will not be included in the July release of the new draft version Minnesota Department of Transportation's (MnDOT) updated 20-year State Highway Investment Plan (MnSHIP).

The four-lane expansion of Highway 14 from North Mankato to Nicollet, which was promised by Gov. Mark Dayton last year, is the only part included in plan, and it has a construction start date roughly scheduled for mid-2017.

MnDOT regularly updates its MnSHIP plan every four years, and the next update will be passed in August. In the meantime, MnDOT will present a draft version on July 1 to allow public comment. This week, MnDOT has been touring communities to provide officials and advocates with informational previews of the draft plan they will release next month.

The presentation material on the draft plan notes that MnDOT will have a \$12 billion deficit over the next 20 years for its 141,000 miles of roadways. The deficit is due to shrinking revenues, particularly the gas tax, coming in at \$18 billion, well below its estimated \$30 billion needed for the next 20 years. The presentation states this shortfall will mean MnDOT will be limited in the projects it can take on and will have to focus more on maintaining its existing infrastructure. In fact, MnDOT has scheduled little to no funding for some categories based on its current revenue projects: Interregional Corridor Mobility receives no funding in the plan. Twin Cities Mobility only receives \$520 million in first 10 years and no funding in the last 10 years. Similarly, Regional and Community Improvement Priorities, which is a catch-all for safety and generalized projects like Highway 14, only receives \$520 million in the first 10 years and no funding in the subsequent 10 years.

However, there is some hope for the Highway 14 four-lane project getting back into the 20-year plan - new funding sources for MnDOT. The 20-year plan is built with allowance for more projects being added if new funding is passed by the Legislature.

The Highway 14 Partnership has been pushing hard for years to make sure the entire Highway 14 project is in the 20-year plan. The group argues that inclusion that the plan simply sets spending and project priorities, so Highway 14 has the best chance of benefitting if the federal government passes new highway funding.

Partnership spokesperson Amanda Duerr said that given the struggles with the 20-year plan, it was even more important that the "Corridors of Commerce" program was passed this session. She said the program is funded outside of MnDOT's constrained budget, so it can help projects like Highway 14 when MnDOT is unable to address it.

The public will be able to view the draft plan online after its July 1 release at www.dot.state.mn.us/planning/statehighwayinvestmentplan/draft_plan.html

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