

Owatonna, communities across state advocate for inclusion in MnDOT plan

By AL STRAIN astrain@owatonna.com | Posted: Tuesday, July 30, 2013 4:45 pm

OWATONNA — Even though the plan isn't set to be adopted for more than a month, Owatonna City Council President Les Abraham is fairly certain that Highway 14 will not be included in a plan for future construction on Minnesota roads.

On Monday, communities from around the state took part in a public hearing via video conference with the Minnesota Department of Transportation to advocate for specific highways to be included in MnDOT's 20-year State Highway Investment Plan, known as MnSHIP.

No officials from Owatonna or Steele County offered testimony during the public hearing, and instead chose to let Amanda Duerr of the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership offer testimony representing the entire partnership of 18 governing bodies and 45 businesses.

On Tuesday, Abraham, who is also president of the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership, said he didn't believe Highway 14 would be included in the plan.

"We're trying to get Highway 14 on their list," Abraham said. "I don't think that is going to happen."

At the opening of the public hearing, MnDOT Commissioner Charlie Zelle said the 20-year plan is a matter of weighing long-term goals against existing resources.

"This is an important MnDOT process. It is one that requires that we prioritize state investments with existing resources over the next 20 years," Zelle said. "It is not reflecting the vision for MnDOT. We know that vision is also 20 years, and one that we feel should be embraced ... We know that what is available under the existing resources isn't fully reflected in this plan that would be required to meet that vision."

During the hearing, a majority of the conversation centered around the expansion of Highway 14 and the expansion of Interstate 94 around St. Cloud, which was advocated by the Central Minnesota Transportation Alliance.

During her testimony, Duerr said that Highway 14's completion continues to be an "overwhelming priority" for southern Minnesota.

"Despite hundreds of letters, emails and phone calls from citizens along the Highway 14 corridor, our overwhelming participation at MnDOT's stakeholder events regarding this plan's development and the urging of Congressman Tim Walz, it's frustrating to see that completing Highway 14 is still not a priority in this plan," Duerr said.

Duerr said Highway 14's fatality rates and commercial traffic rates are about 1.5 times the state average for similar roads. Abraham said Highway 14 should at least be included in the plan because if federal funding becomes available, it is given to roads that are part of a prioritized plan.

"They will ask for a list of projects that we want to spend it on. And if Highway 14 is not on the list of projects, it

will not be considered for any money,” Abraham said.

Highway 14 was included in a transportation bill during this year’s legislative session that included a program for “Corridors of Commerce,” which allocated \$300 million in trunk highway bonds to be used on roads throughout the state that are important to economic development.

It’s currently unclear how the Corridors of Commerce funds will be allocated, but Abraham said he was concerned that Highway 14 will be forgotten again and that projects in the metro area will be more likely to receive funding from the trunk highway bonds.

“To me, Corridors of Commerce are to upgrade and make the flow better,” Abraham said. “Here you’re talking about going from two lanes to four lanes and then back to two lanes, or just getting something made into four lanes so it improves the flow of traffic. That’s what the Corridors of Commerce is for.”

Owatonna Mayor Tom Kuntz said the city will try and get written testimony to MnDOT urging the inclusion of Highway 14 in the MnSHIP plan. He said the funding is necessary to help facilitate growth both in Owatonna and along the Highway 14 corridor.

“We are a destination and we’re located between Mankato and Rochester. We’re located on I-35 and 75 percent of all the economic development in southern Minnesota seems to occur along Highway 14,” said Kuntz, who was unable to attend the public hearing and spoke by phone from Washington, D.C. “From the economic development point of view, it’s very important that we have safe traffic going back and forth.”

MnDOT will gather the testimony given on Monday and further evaluate the plan. Final revisions for the plan will take place at the beginning of August, followed by commissioner approval and adoption in September.

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