

The Free Press, Mankato, MN

June 3, 2013

Session yields slow progress on Hwy. 14

By Dan Linehan

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---- — Though this year's legislative session added no new money for transportation, advocates for Highway 14 expansion see a silver lining in the new Corridors of Commerce program.

Even if legislators generally cannot direct transportation funding to specific projects, this program includes criteria that are “very friendly” toward Highway 14, said Rep. Clark Johnson, DFL-North Mankato.

Those criteria include switches between two and four lanes, truck volume, intersections with other highways, support from the local community and measurable impacts on commerce.

“It just fits with what's going on on Highway 14,” Johnson said, though he added that's not a guarantee of funding.

Corridors of Commerce was funded with what Johnson calls a “down payment” — \$300 million in borrowed money. The state decided it could borrow this money based on projects of revenue from existing sources such as gas taxes, the motor vehicle sales tax and tab fees.

As Highway 14 Partnership lobbyist Amanda Duerr said: “It's not new money, but it is funding a new program.”

Obviously, I think a lot of people would have liked to walk away with a more comprehensive transportation investment,” she said. “But I do think the fact that they set up Corridors of Commerce is ... a small step forward for Highway 14.”

The money won't be allocated until 2014, but Johnson said that's not a disadvantage because projects won't be ready this summer anyways.

About 11 months ago, Gov. Mark Dayton announced that the Highway 14 four-lane expansion between North Mankato and Nicollet would be completed by 2020. Johnson said this spending is already accounted for under separate programs; any Corridors of Commerce funding would be for extra projects.

Two Highway 14 candidates include a bypass around Nicollet and an interchange at Highway 15, near New Ulm.

Advocates say this slow progress is simply how Highway 14 will get finished.

“I'd be willing to bet that in not too long of time you're going to see a completed corridor between New Ulm and Rochester,” said Blue Earth County Commissioner Vance Stuehrenberg. He's in Washington, D.C., this week lobbying Minnesota's senators and representatives on behalf of the Minnesota

Transportation Alliance, on which he's a board member.

The alliance and other groups will be pushing hard next session for tax increases for transportation.

“A lot of what we've been told, waiting for 50 years, is, well, 'We just don't have the resources to get it done,’” said Duerr, the Highway 14 Partnership lobbyist.

Dayton has charged his transportation commissioner with finding creative ways to fund transportation.