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Highway 14 good choice for new program

Why it matters: Highway 14 expansion will spur significant economic development in southern Minnesota.

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As the Minnesota Department of Transportation begins making decisions on allocating the program's \$300 million in trunk highway bonds, Highway 14 should receive strong consideration.

The Highway 14 Partnership, a coalition of governments, business and individual citizens from Rochester to Sleepy Eye, has recently sent a letter to MnDOT urging the Highway 14 projects that are not yet four lanes be granted funds from the commerce fund.

The coalition is impressive. Cities like Rochester, Mankato and New Ulm have long been associated with the effort. But many private sector employers know the value of this public infrastructure. The coalition's website lists members that include major employers such as Mathiowetz Construction, Mayo Clinic Health System, HyVee, McNelis Steel and Xcel Energy.

These stakeholders have all come to realize the significant economic development benefits that will come with a four-lane Highway 14 from Rochester to New Ulm. All know a four-lane Highway 14 along its own "corridor of commerce" will move goods efficiently, create business expansions and jobs.

The partnership makes a case for expanding Highway 14 from Nicollet to New Ulm to remove a bottleneck of commercial traffic that is 1.5 times the average rural traffic for two-lane highways. New Ulm is the largest city in Minnesota not served by any four-lane highway, and the city has become uncompetitive for that reason in attracting new economic development.

An interchange at State Highway 111 and Highway 14 at Nicollet would help correct one of the most dangerous intersections on the roadway, one that MnDOT's own safety audit cited for significantly higher crash rates. And as Highway 14 has already been expanded from North Mankato to Nicollet, the traffic will be traveling faster and create more backups for Highway 111 without an interchange. Large agricultural vehicles often use this roadway and safety would likely be compromised without an interchange.

The coalition's letter also notes that the current North Mankato to Nicollet expansion will end east of Nicollet thereby creating a narrowing of the roadway and a dangerous curve just as vehicles are increasing their speeds. A bypass would mitigate the safety concerns and was included in MnDOT's environmental impact statement on the project.

And finally, an interchange at Highway 14 and State Highway 15 is needed for safety and economic development. Some 1,000 trucks traveling into and out of New Ulm each day face a bottleneck as local companies try to efficiently ship their goods like Schells beer and Kraft food products across the country.

But the eastern end of the project also is worthy of MnDOT funding. The existing two-lane stretch between Dodge Center and Owatonna has 1.7 times the average commercial traffic for similar roads in the state. A large contingent of commuter traffic between regional centers in Rochester and Owatonna create further backups. And that commuter traffic will only grow with populations of Rochester and Owatonna expected to increase by double digit percentages over the next 10 years.

The group points to the proposed expansion of the Mayo Clinic in Rochester that is estimated to add 35,000 to 45,000 jobs as further reason to expand the highway.

In 2015, Wal-Mart will open its largest distribution center in Minnesota just off Highway 14 in Mankato. The company predicts hundreds of trucks arriving and departing daily.

Political leaders know the state needs to increase funding for roads, they just haven't figured out how to do it on a wholesale basis. But the Corridors of Commerce program offers a start. It can be a textbook example of how we can invest in these crucial infrastructure programs that bring dividends to taxpayers, not expense.

We urge MnDOT and Commissioner Charlie Zelle to approve the coalition's request for funding on Highway 14.