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New Ulm rally urges last-minute Highway 14 funding

Pending 20-year MnDOT plan ends expansion at Nicollet

By Mark Fischenich mfischenich@mankatofreepress.com

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---- — NEW ULM — A congressman, several state lawmakers, a handful of mayors and bunch of business leaders were hoping to persuade a single commissioner — or maybe the commissioner's boss — to join them.

At a trio of press events and rallies, Congressman Tim Walz and local leaders called for Minnesota Department of Transportation Commissioner Charles Zelle to include in a pending 20-year transportation plan the expansion of Highway 14 to four lanes between Rochester and New Ulm. After decades of effort by civic and political leaders along the route, most of the corridor has been transformed to a four-lane expressway.

But gaps remain east of Owatonna and west of North Mankato. While a draft 20-year plan includes previously announced work to expand roughly six miles of the dangerous two-lane portion of the highway between North Mankato and Nicollet and bridge replacements at New Ulm, the plan is silent on the final 19 miles between Nicollet and New Ulm and a similar stretch between Owatonna and Dodge Center.

The Highway 14 advocates want Zelle or his boss, Gov. Mark Dayton, to rectify that before the plan is finalized.

"We're asking to be on the list," Walz said during an event at a Chevy dealership just north of the highway in New Ulm.

New Ulm Mayor Robert Beussman said his goal is to see the entire Rochester-to-New Ulm corridor completed, including the \$200 million section from Nicollet to New Ulm. But Beussman believes the state plan, at a minimum, should include a bypass of Nicollet to avoid dropping a 65 mph stretch of four-lane into a small town with two intersections that have a history of deadly crashes. That would be the situation under the current MnDOT plan, which would extend the four-lane to the eastern edge of Nicollet with a \$19 million project scheduled for 2018-19.

Beussman also wants to see more of a commitment in the 20-year plan to continue the momentum for the expansion beyond the North Mankato-to-Nicollet project.

"Six-point-five miles of progress on the entire Highway 14 corridor over the next 20 years is unacceptable," he said.

The press conference was the last of three Monday, with similar groups of business leaders and elected officials rallying with the Mankato Democrat in Rochester and Owatonna.

Walz and Beussman said they expect the final MnDOT plan to be released in the next few weeks and urged supporters of Highway 14 to lobby Dayton about the safety and economic necessity of funding more of the expansion. Walz said it's crucial in obtaining funding at the federal level to be able to show that a project is also a state-funding priority.

"We can't rest and we won't rest until this is completed," Walz said.

Under MnDOT's plan, "Regional and Community Improvement Priorities" are allocated \$520 million from 2014-2023 — and the project between North Mankato and Nicollet is at the top of the list of examples in that category. In the second decade, however, funding for the category drops to zero.

Over the two decades, about \$18 billion in revenue is expected for about \$30 billion in transportation needs. In the face of that \$12 billion funding gap, the plan focuses its second-decade spending almost exclusively on preservation of the existing road and bridge system, something MnDOT officials say will be necessary to meet federal maintenance requirements and to preserve the state's bond rating.

It won't be popular, the plan concedes: "... Public opinion of MnDOT is likely to decline during this period."