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Put HWY 14 plan on MnDOT 20-year list

Why it matters: Completion of Highway 14 will bring huge benefits in safety and commerce to residents across a wide region of Minnesota

The Mankato Free Press

---- — We can't remember a public push for a highway project that was greater than the blitz going on right now to get MnDOT to include Highway 14 as a priority for funding in the next 20 years.

It doesn't seem like a lot to ask. While a large coalition of businesses, government and average citizens are backing completion of the roadway to secure safe driving for motorists and bolster crucial and burgeoning commercial development along the corridor, the main request right now isn't even funding: It's simply to put the project on MnDOT's so called "20-year plan" for priorities in funding.

While the 20-year plan sounds like a bureaucratic step that doesn't mean anything, it appears to be the important document in terms of priorities for the billions of dollars in road funding available over the next few years. It apparently can be amended, but it's unclear just how that would work.

The 20-year plan has evolved a bit in that it now only lists specific projects for the first seven years of the plan. Projects can be added when more funding becomes available. But the Highway 14 Coalition also notes that being left off the 20-year plan could make getting federal funds for the project more difficult. MnDOT officials disagree with that assessment.

Congressman Tim Walz and civic leaders were in New Ulm Monday to make the case. Walz called for Dayton and Transportation Commissioner Charles Zelle to put Highway 14 on the list. New Ulm Mayor Robert Beussman pointed out that MnDOT has only committed to 6.5 miles of Highway 14 improvement with the more than 30 miles that need expanding. It's a figure he and others find unacceptable. Rightly so.

The recently approved project from North Mankato to Nicollet is on the list. But the Highway 14 partnership, a coalition of governments and businesses, has been pushing to get the entire project as priority. That would include another 19-mile stretch between Nicollet and New Ulm and another similar area between Owatonna and Dodge Center.

All of the logical reasons for this project have been put forth in great detail, including a three-day series by this newspaper in 2010.

MnDOT has shown support for Highway 14 in some uneven ways. It conducted its own safety study on the North Mankato to Nicollet portion a few years ago and found an even more profound safety hazard

than previously thought. The part between North Mankato and Nicollet had a fatality ratio three times the state average. To its credit, MnDOT responded by pushing for the funding of that project and getting Gov. Mark Dayton's support.

But MnDOT also has remained somewhat steadfast in this idea of only listing projects that can be funded given current funding streams. They're hesitant to put Highway 14 on the priority list for risk of skirting federal guidelines that require pavement repair first. While we can sympathize with the need to follow protocols, we think MnDOT's approach needs more flexibility and needs to risk offending a federal official or two. Minnesota taxpayers want to know the real needs of transportation and safety and then they can make a pitch for more funding.

Area residents and indeed legislators of both parties have signed on to the idea that Highway 14 has real needs, both for safety and commerce. MnDOT should put it on its list and keep the momentum going for this critical infrastructure that will pay huge dividends to the state of Minnesota and its taxpayers.

Other view on this topic

“Six-point five miles of progress on the entire Highway 14 corridor over the next 20 years is unacceptable”

— New Ulm Mayor Robert Beussman