

Tim Walz talks Highway 14 in Owatonna, urges inclusion in 20-year plan

By AL STRAIN • astrain@owatonna.com | Posted: Monday, September 16, 2013 1:46 pm

Highway 14's expansion received another vote of support on Monday afternoon, this time from a congressman

U.S. Rep. Tim Walz, whose district includes Steele County, made a stop at Ag Power in Owatonna on Monday to discuss the expansion of Highway 14. Walz also made stops in Rochester and New Ulm on Monday to address local officials about the highway.

"This is a case of just looking at the numbers. These communities (along Highway 14) are not just the most dynamic in Minnesota, they're the most dynamic in the Upper Midwest and in the country," Walz said. "My colleagues in Congress can't believe it when I talk to them about this, whether it's New Ulm, Mankato, Owatonna or Rochester."

Walz began his day by speaking with officials and media in Rochester before making his stop in Owatonna. He finished his tour of southern Minnesota in New Ulm.

Several elected officials, business and community leaders were on hand at Ag Power to hear Walz's address. Some leaders even spoke out themselves about how it's imperative that Highway 14 be included in the Minnesota Department of Transportation's 20-year Minnesota State Highway Investment Plan (MnSHIP), which will be released soon.

"We still have not completed our process. We still need to get it done from New Ulm to Mankato, and we need to get it done from Owatonna to Dodge Center," said Owatonna Mayor Tom Kuntz. "We cannot allow that to be pushed back for 20 years. That is not allowed."

Kuntz cited the growth along Highway 14 as a prime reason to expand the road to four lanes. Kuntz said Owatonna is expected to grow by 16 percent over the next 10 years while Rochester is expecting 22 percent growth over the same time.

Despite a united voice from communities across the region and support from Walz's office, officials are doubtful that Highway 14 will make it onto the MnSHIP list.

"I can see, based on the criteria that (MnDOT) has established, that it's not going to be there," said Les Abraham, president of both the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership and the Owatonna City Council.

"What they need to do is have one list with projects that they have funding for and another list for projects that says, 'We need funding to get this done, because this also needs to be done.'"

Jennifer Libby, president and CEO of the Owatonna Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, spoke on behalf of the Owatonna business community and the health care community, said the safety, or lack thereof, on Highway 14 has led to problems.

“The Owatonna Hospital has testified on many occasions that they feel that it is safer to transport their patients via a helicopter versus an ambulance using Highway 14 due to the backup and safety concerns with accessing the shoulder,” Libby said. “The hospital also cites Highway 14 as a hindrance to recruiting and retaining employees. People are concerned with traveling the two-lane section.”

Highway 14’s expansion was discussed several times and was included in several transportation bills during the most recent legislative session. In the end, Highway 14 was included only in a bill that allocated \$300 million in trunk highway bonds for “Corridors of Commerce,” which can be used on highways that meet certain criteria around the state.

Sen. Vicki Jensen, DFL-Owatonna, said she has been told by officials around the state that Highway 14 is a priority.

“Actions speak louder than words. (MnDOT) is deciding the priorities that they want to put on their 20-year plan,” Jensen said. “I am afraid, and several of us are afraid, that a project that has been out there for 50 years and hasn’t been completed will not be on that 20-year plan. That cannot be anything else other than a failure of the state to realize that a project has to come to completion.”

A statement from Jensen’s office also encouraged people to contact the governor’s office to encourage Highway 14’s inclusion on the MnSHIP list.

Walz said even though most people in attendance in Owatonna felt Highway 14 should be MnDOT’s top priority, they weren’t asking for it to be put at the top of the list. Walz said Highway 14 needs to be included in the plan, or else it was “virtually impossible” for it to be eligible for federal funding if it becomes available.

Walz said the alliance of organizations, businesses and representatives advocating for Highway 14 is rarity when it comes to lobbying.

“It is a rare occurrence when you’ll get business and labor, Democrats and Republicans and mayors up and down this all unified for a smart, targeted use of taxpayer dollars to improve safety, to improve commerce and to improve their quality of life,” Walz said. “We’re willing to understand that the governor and the MnDOT folks have priorities ... If we’re not first on that list, we definitely should be on the list.”

Walz said he has had discussions with Gov. Mark Dayton about including Highway 14 in the plan. He said Highway 14’s completion must be a priority for the state.

“For us, this is not a choice of whether you can or cannot do it. This is not one of those ‘nice to have’ things,” Walz said. “My constituents down here have made it clear to me that this is what they want us advocating for. I think that puts us in a position of strength to come at it from different ways.

“(If it’s left off the list) we’ll regroup. We’ll come back and approach new ways of doing this. I think that will maybe be a catalyst, especially for this part of the state, to say ‘the way we’re doing transportation is not working in this state. Let’s come together, Democrats and Republicans, to figure this out.’”

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