

Political Notebook: Push for U.S. 14 funds linked to Mayo Clinic expansion

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Could Mayo Clinic's \$6 billion expansion plan known as Destination Medical Center help boost the case to expand U.S. 14?

That's what some supporters of the long-awaited highway project are hoping. The Minnesota Department of Transportation is in the process of determining how to divvy out \$300 million in funding for "Corridors of Commerce." The Minnesota Legislature appropriated the money with the goal of using the dollars to improve the movement of freight, get rid of bottlenecks and reduce barriers to commerce.

As of Oct. 11, MnDOT had received 68 suggested projects, although a dozen of those did not meet the funding criteria, according to MnDOT spokeswoman Christina Joyce. The deadline to apply for the money was Friday. She said the state plans to announce the award recipients in early to mid-November.

The U.S. 14 Highway Partnership launched an effort early to get its members to send letters of support for the project.

In a letter to MnDOT Commissioner Charlie Zelle, the partnership's President Les Abraham, points to Mayo Clinic's 20-year expansion plans as just another reason to expand a stretch of U.S. 14 from Dodge Center to Owatonna from two lanes to four lanes. He said 18,000 people already use the highway to commute to work every day. With DMC expected to create 35,000 to 45,000 new jobs, he argues that the highway "will soon be rendered even more deficient to meet the commercial demands of the region."

Dodge County Board Chairman David Erickson made a similar argument in his letter to Zelle. More than 8,000 vehicles use the 16-mile stretch of highway every day. Of those, 15 percent are commercial traffic. He said Mayo's expansion will exacerbate problems on what is already a dangerous roadway.

"Highway 14 is simply not built to safely handle the expected traffic and will only hinder the economic growth of the area," Erickson wrote.

Also writing letters of support for the project were Mayo Clinic and the city of Rochester.

Ventura visits Rochester

Former Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura will be in Rochester tonight to sign copies of his new book, "They Killed Our President: 63 Reasons to Believe There Was a Conspiracy to Assassinate JFK."

Fifty years after President John F. Kennedy's assassination, Ventura re-examines the case and concludes the U.S. government was behind the plot. The event begins at 7 p.m. at Barnes & Noble in Apache Mall.

Heather J. Carlson covers politics for the Post-Bulletin and writes the Political Party blog.