

MnDOT funds portion of Highway 14 expansion in Owatonna

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OWATONNA — In 2014, a portion of the four-lane expansion from Owatonna to Dodge Center begin construction.

And for local officials and residents this is good news.

“It’s a huge victory,” said Sen. Vicki Jensen, DFL-Owatonna.

But the entire expansion has yet to receive funding.

On Thursday afternoon, Gov. Mark Dayton and Minnesota Department of Transportation Commissioner Charlie Zelle announced at a press conference in the Twin Cities that a four-lane expansion of Highway 14 east of Owatonna from Highway 218 to County Road 43 — about a three-mile stretch — is on a list of 10 projects being funded by the “Corridors of Commerce” program that includes \$300 million in trunk highway bonds, which aim to complete the missing links and build capacity on Minnesota’s highway corridors.

According to MnDOT, the initial project will cost between \$16 million and \$20 million, which is a portion of the estimated \$218-million price tag for the four-lane expansion from Owatonna to Dodge Center.

The project was among more than 400 proposals representing more than 100 unique projects that MnDOT received earlier this fall from public-sector partners, stakeholders and interested citizens from across the state.

Les Abraham, president of the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership and Owatonna City Council president, said he didn’t expect to see any money go toward the Owatonna to Dodge Center expansion because of the number of projects in the state looking for funding, but was appreciative of the funding the corridor did receive.

“Anything we can get at this point we will take and use it to the best of our abilities,” Abraham said. “We will get that section of the road done.”

Tom Shea, Steele County administrator, said the county is pleased and excited about the announcement.

“It’s great news,” Shea said. “It’s been a long time coming.”

As listed in the MnDOT program handout, the segment is being funded to support the Rochester Destination Medical Center and its projected 40,000 jobs, provide a gateway to southern Minnesota's regional trade centers and address critical safety challenges.

Jennifer Libby, Owatonna Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism president, said she was thrilled to hear the news.

"We are very appreciative of all the businesses that have put their resources, their communication and their time toward supporting this project," Libby said.

There was also good news for other areas along the Highway 14 corridor as two other projects were funded, including a four-lane expansion from North Mankato to Nicollet and the Nicollet four-lane bypass. With the three Highway 14 projects, the corridor is receiving \$73 million.

"That's outstanding. I'm very excited about that. All of our members along the corridor need to get the job done," Abraham said. "We're a team in this whole thing, and we will continue to be a team."

Owatonna Mayor Tom Kuntz said the funding "speaks loudly of the governor's and MnDOT's commitment to Highway 14."

Rep. John Petersburg, GOP-Waseca, said he's happy to see something being done.

"It certainly is a start, but the question is how long until the next phase starts? We have to keep the pressure up and explain how critical this expansion is and I will continue to work on this until it's completed," Petersburg said.

Other transportation improvements funded by the "Corridors of Commerce" include the addition of lanes, bypasses and shoulders to essential travel corridors in the state, including Interstate 94 between Rogers and St. Michael, and Highway 34 between Detroit Lakes and Nevis. The bonding authority is effective July 1, 2014, with five projects scheduled to start in 2014, three in 2015 and two in 2016.

"These projects represent a great first step for the Corridors of Commerce program," Zelle said. "These critical improvements demonstrate our commitment to providing a commerce-friendly network of freight corridors to ship goods and provide safety and mobility to all users."

The bonding authority is effective July 1, 2014, with five projects scheduled to start in 2014, including the three-mile expansion east of Owatonna, three in 2015, which include the other two Highway 14 projects, and two in 2016.

But Zelle said there is more work to be done.

"Unfortunately, we have more projects than money to go around. I've been traveling around the state this fall to draw attention to the need for a long-term stable funding source for

transportation,” he said. “My hope is that state and local governments, stakeholders and user groups will join together to address this problem today to keep our state competitive tomorrow.”

And Jensen said that will take more investing.

“We still have a lot to fight for,” she said. “We need a comprehensive transportation solution that fully invests in the important projects we have in the state. Highway 14 needs to be completed, and we need renewed investments to get it done.”

Abraham said the partnership wants to get the job finished.

“What we got is fantastic. What we want to try and do is get the job finished,” he said. “I thank them whole-heartedly for what they’ve given us.”

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