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Top 10 story, No. 6: Deadliest stretch of Hwy 14 gets funding

Four lane funding added, work to begin sooner

By Mark Fischenich mfischenich@mankatofreepress.com

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---- — MANKATO — For supporters of the long-sought Highway 14 expansion, it was the same old story in September. A congressman, a smattering of mayors, some state lawmakers and a batch of business leaders orchestrated a New Ulm press conference to talk about the injustice of the project being left out of a 20-year state transportation plan.

“We can’t rest and we won’t rest until this is completed,” said U.S. Rep. Tim Walz of Mankato.

Giving it a rest might have been tempting for some of the area folks who had been pushing the longest to complete an unbroken four-lane expressway from Rochester to New Ulm. While Walz has pushed hard for federal funding for the project since his election in 2006, he was just a Nebraska grade-schooler when the first push for the four-lane was made.

Creation of the Highway 14 Partnership in the 1990s ramped up the pressure on state and federal officials to fund the project, and big strides were made between Rochester and Mankato. Key segments of the expansion were built in the first years of the 21st century between Eagle Lake and Janesville. By 2006, it was completed to Waseca. Last fall, the expressway opened between Waseca and Owatonna, and work was under way on a new interchange and a small stretch of additional four-lane on North Mankato’s west side.

Gov. Mark Dayton also had promised in 2012 — following a MnDOT study that confirmed an in-depth series by The Free Press that the highway west of North Mankato was one of the state’s deadliest stretches of two-lane — to get construction completed from North Mankato to the east edge of Nicollet by 2019.

But after that, it looked like the funding was drying up. Possibly for a couple of decades or more. Which is what prompted the press conference, one of countless events organized over the past four decades to push for the project.

“Six-point-five miles of progress on the entire Highway 14 corridor over the next 20 years is unacceptable,” New Ulm Mayor Robert Beussman said at the event.

Beussman’s ultimate goal is to see the entire Rochester-to-New Ulm corridor completed, including the \$200 million section from Nicollet to New Ulm. But at a minimum, he said, the state should be funding 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 was the MnDOT plan in September — to extend the four-lane to the eastern edge of Nicollet with a \$19 million project scheduled for completion in 2018 or 2019.

And there was no mention in the 20-year plan of the more-than-15-mile stretch of two-lane between Nicollet and New Ulm or a nearly 15-mile two-lane section between Owatonna and Dodge Center.

The MnDOT plan notes that over the two decades, about \$18 billion in revenue is expected from gas taxes, license tabs and other sources. During the same period, the agency said there will be 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.

A new source of funding, however, was created by the Minnesota Legislature. The Corridors of Commerce program borrows \$300 million, repaying it over many years with existing revenue sources, to fund near-term upgrades to highways statewide. On Nov. 14, Dayton announced that Highway 14 was one of the big winners in the competition for the funds.

With the new funding source, the four-lane upgrade between North Mankato and Nicollet will start in 2015 instead of two years later. In addition, a four-lane bypass of Nicollet, slated to cost \$15 million to \$25 million, is also slated to begin in 2015.

A third Highway 14 project — a \$16 million to \$20 million four-lane upgrade of three miles of the two-lane stretch from Owatonna to Dodge Center — also was funded.

Local legislators praised the progress while promising to continue the long march to get the entire corridor completed.

Rep. Clark Johnson, a North Mankato Democrat who sponsored a bill to fund the Nicollet bypass, was pleased that town's busiest and most dangerous intersection will be safer.

"It's a white-knuckler every time," he said of the left turn from Highway 111 onto Highway 14.