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MnDOT, Nicollet residents disagree over Hwy 14 intersection

By Josh Moniz

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---- — NICOLLET — Strong disagreement between the Minnesota Department of Transportation and Nicollet residents emerged Monday night during a presentation on options available for dealing with the new intersection between U.S. Highway 14 and Minnesota Highway 111.

Highway 14 already intersects with Highway 111 in Nicollet. A new intersection will be created when the four-lane expansion of Highway 14 from North Mankato to Nicollet reroutes the highway 2.5 miles south of Nicollet.

MnDOT officials and Nicollet residents each expressed preference for different layouts designed to reduce the chances of accidents.

MnDOT District 7 Project Manager Zak Tess said MnDOT prefers a Reduced Conflict Intersection (RCUT) layout, which costs much less than other plans and inherently prevents the deadly types of collisions.

Nicollet residents strongly supported an interchange layout. Nicollet Mayor Fred Froehlich said he is seriously concerned that a layout that makes entering Nicollet difficult would discourage people from visiting the city. The Nicollet City Council even passed a formal resolution Monday night opposing any other intersection layout.

Despite the difference in opinion, both sides said they felt the meeting was a productive way to share options for the intersection. Tess said MnDOT will work with Nicollet officials in the coming months to find a compromise plan.

Problem spot, variety of options

According to MnDOT's analysis, the old Highway 14 and Highway 111 intersection has experienced six crashes from 2008 to 2012, including one fatal crash and two injury crashes. The intersection's average crash rate and severe crash rate was roughly double the state average.

Similarly, the average time motorists spend waiting to cross Highway 14 is set to increase from an average of 21 seconds per crossing to over three minutes per crossing in 20 years.

MnDOT presented five possible intersection layouts to prevent these problems with the new Highway 14 bypass:

- RCUT: MnDOT's preferred layout will allow normal traffic along Highway 14, but prevent Highway 111 traffic from making left turns across Highway 14. Instead, motorists are routed to the right, onto the opposing lane of traffic with special U-turn areas and back to Highway 111.
- Interchange: The approach preferred by Nicollet residents had two options: a simple interchange layout or the same approach with Nicollet's other local roads into town closed off. The second approach will route most of Nicollet's remaining traffic through Highway 111.
- Traffic light stop: a simple approach with some additional costs and maintenance requirements related to the electrical components.
- Roundabout: a circular layout that has become popular in recent years. MnDOT officials said they are opposed to using this new approach on the highway due to the speed of Highway 14 traffic.

MnDOT will host another public hearing in February with the Nicollet City Council. The event will provide the public another opportunity to share their input with MnDOT and discuss alternatives before formal action is taken with the city. The entire Highway 14 four-lane expansion is scheduled to be completed by 2015.