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[Highway 14 moves ahead with a little help from friends](#)

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Looking back, my idea was met with some justified skepticism. I proposed our newsroom do a project that would prove or maybe disprove that Highway 14 was indeed the most dangerous road in the state.

The politicians and longtime interest groups had long called it the state's most dangerous road or the state's "worst" road.

The problem with that pitch was that it was rarely backed up with the kind of crash data the Minnesota Department of Transportation uses to determine the safety of roads. And with funding always short, there was little incentive to investigate that claim by MnDOT itself.

The groups could tell you how many fatalities there were, but that wasn't the number MnDOT looks at. It's more like fatal and serious crashes per lane mile, per vehicle mile and tends to be complex and nuanced.

So our project by veteran reporter Mark Fischenich was to pore over all the boring detail and try to come to some kind of conclusion. It could have turned out that the road was no more dangerous than other roads of that type. We doubted that, but we knew it may not be the "most dangerous" in the state. Turns out it was very close, with our study in 2010 showing it had a fatality rate twice the state average on a piece of the road from North Mankato to Nicollet.

A subsequent independent report commissioned by MnDOT came up with a fatal crash rate three times the state average using a few different metrics than our study.

In any case, that was the report that got the ball rolling on getting what is now amounting to \$70 million in highway funding. But The Free Press was just one part of the push. While we wrote editorials advocating for the changes, hundreds of people and businesses across the corridor and the Highway 14 partnership, a coalition of government and businesses, played a big role in getting that funding.

It's one of the best examples of public affairs journalism and grass roots lobbying I've ever witnessed. Other legislators around the state and the chairs of the transportation committees all acknowledge the effort, according to Patrick Baker, director of government and institutional affairs for Greater Mankato Growth and Amanda Duerr, the Highway 14 partnership lobbyist.

I sat down with them Wednesday afternoon to talk about the success of the project and what the future holds.

There are just a couple of pieces of the highway from Rochester to New Ulm that are not yet funded for four lane expansion -- a stretch from Nicollet to New Ulm and a stretch of about 13 miles east of Owatonna to Dodge Center.

Baker and Duerr are hopeful that the Legislature will fund the Corridors of Commerce program to the tune about about \$200 million a year for the next several years, leaving room for the Highway 14 projects that would cost about \$150 million total.

That would require a new funding stream to pay the bonds off. It may be a wholesale gasoline tax or a straight gas tax or some other mechanism. The conversation will likely begin this year, but political observers say a new tax proposal may not move until after the 2014 election.

In the meantime, there's plenty of construction projects to do on the roadway. Baker says the \$70 million or so the project got from the Corridor of Commerce program, almost 25 percent of the total program funds, was a huge "out of the ballpark" win for the Mankato area.

I don't disagree with that. GMG will be continuing to emphasize the commerce angle for the Mankato area, showing the rest of the state this Highway 14 is not just another rural road, but rather it connects two of the faster growing areas in jobs and GDP in the state -- Rochester and Mankato. Baker suggests there are not two other metropolitan statistical areas in the upper Midwest that are not connected by a four-lane highway.

He may be right and if true, it should offer more support for finishing the Highway 14 project.