

The Free Press, Mankato, MN

February 5, 2014

MnDOT switches to interchange for Nicollet intersection

Dayton backed new layout

By Josh Moniz

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--- — NICOLLET — After two months of conflict and negotiations, the Minnesota Department of Transportation has agreed to build an interchange at the new intersection of Highway 14 and Highway 111.

The final layout has been a subject of serious debate in Nicollet, and an informal meeting held there Wednesday drew more than 160 people.

MnDOT had proposed an intersection that would have required drivers on Highway 111 to make U-turns to go left on Highway 14 or even to cross the highway.

Nicollet mayor Fred Froehlich said a "decisive" step in resolving the dispute was a recent letter from Gov. Mark Dayton that agreed that an interchange was the safest layout for the intersection. Dayton said he would ask MnDOT Commissioner Charlie Zelle to work with the community to build an interchange.

"You and other very dedicated leaders along Highway 14 have been working far too long to fund the much-needed improvements. I appreciate your commitment to ensure the Nicollet Bypass is completed and completed correctly," said Dayton in the letter.

The intersection will be created when the Highway 14 four-lane expansion from North Mankato to Nicollet routes the highway around the southern side of the city. Highway 99 traffic coming from St. Peter will then be directed to Highway 14 along Highway 111, which will increase crash risks.

MnDOT originally proposed a cheaper layout, which would have blocked Highway 111 traffic from crossing Highway 14. The traffic would be routed to the right along Highway 14 to a special U-turn lane. Drivers would be directed along the opposing Highway 14 lane back to Highway 111. The design is intended to allow drivers to only focus on one direction of traffic.

Nicollet residents and businesses along Highway 14 opposed the design. The residents called for a simple interchange layout. The Nicollet City Council passed a resolution opposing the MnDOT proposal.

Nicollet residents loudly voiced their positions over the following two months with numerous signs, letters and multiple petitions that generated a combined total of 1,015 signatures. Troy Hewitt of Nicollet purchased billboard space at the current intersection of Highway 99 and Highway 14 that urged the state to "Just Do It Right," similar to the yard signs.

MnDOT District 7 Project Manager Zak Tess said Wednesday that MnDOT had heard the wishes of Nicollet residents. He said the department will do everything it can to build a safe and cost effective interchange. The crowd cheered his statements.

Tess said the new layout will involve an interchange with "teardrop" roundabouts on Highway 111 on either side of the intersection. He said the roundabouts will slow the speed of Highway 111's increased traffic and reduce crashes.

Rep. Clark Johnson said the crowd should feel proud because their hard work and dedication had ensured the interchange layout.

MnDOT will hold a formal meeting with Nicollet County and the City of Nicollet on Feb. 10 to finalize details.