

## Highway 14 Partnership to advocate for Corridors of Commerce funding for right-of-way acquisition

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OWATONNA — During this year’s Minnesota legislative session, the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership advocated for more transportation funding.

And on Tuesday, Gov. Mark Dayton signed into law an additional \$31.5 million for the “Corridors of Commerce” program as part of the supplemental budget bill that was passed by Legislature. The bill included a \$6.5 million appropriation in 2014 and a \$25 million appropriation in 2015 for the program.

“Securing additional funding for the Corridors of Commerce program was the top priority of the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership this session,” said Bob Beussman, New Ulm mayor and partnership president. “Significant progress is being made on Highway 14 because of the initial funding of Corridors of Commerce in 2013. It’s important to keep up this momentum until we have four lanes from Rochester to New Ulm.”

Last November, Dayton and the Minnesota Department of Transportation Commissioner Charlie Zelle announced that the expansion of Highway 14 east of Owatonna as well as an expansion from North Mankato to Nicollet and a Nicollet bypass were on a list of 10 projects being funded by the “Corridors of Commerce” program that included \$300 million in trunk highway bonds, which aim to complete the missing links and build capacity on Minnesota’s highway corridors.

The portion east of Owatonna from Highway 218 to County Road 43 — about a three-mile stretch — is set to begin this July that 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 other two Highway 14 projects funded through the Corridors of Commerce will begin in 2015.

Unlike the 2013 funding, which came in the form of trunk highway bonds, the new funding is appropriated out of the Trunk Highway Fund that includes gas tax, motor vehicle sales tax and tab fee revenues.

Amanda Duerr, a representative for the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership, said using the fund enhances flexibility, which may mean the program could fund the Highway 14 right-of-way acquisition.

“The three Highway 14 projects that were part of the initial Corridors of Commerce awards were essentially shovel ready,” Beussman said. “However, to complete Highway 14’s expansion west of Nicollet to New Ulm and between Owatonna to Dodge Center, right of way will need to be purchased.”

Mike Dougherty, MnDOT District 6 spokesperson, said the right-of-way acquisition for the remaining 13 miles of Highway 14 between Owatonna and Dodge Center would cost between \$25 million and \$30 million if purchased within the next four years.

“Acquiring land is a process, and some landowners agree sooner than others,” Dougherty said.

Owatonna Mayor Tom Kuntz said because of the right of way, the Corridors of Commerce money has a chance of being a good thing for Owatonna.

But he said that the Highway 14 Partnership is committed on working to have Highway 14 completed from Rochester to New Ulm, so if other projects along the corridor receive the funding, it’s a good thing.

“If you look at the big picture, it’s a real blessing, but I think it’ll be a challenge to get those projects shovel ready for funding,” Kuntz said.

Beussman said the partnership will “make a strong case to MnDOT that using the new Corridors of Commerce appropriation for [the right-of-way acquisition] would be a smart investment.”

But Dougherty said Corridors of Commerce is a statewide program.

“People have to remember this is a statewide program, so no project is going to get all of the Corridors of Commerce money,” he said. “The program is designed to move projects forward and keep others moving along.”

Beussman said that members of the Highway 14 Partnership played an active role in advocating for the program’s funding by sending hundreds of postcards to corridor legislators, holding a lobby day at the Minnesota State Capitol, and contacting legislators and Dayton during the end-of-session negotiations.

“I’d like to thank our Highway 14 legislators and the House and Senate Transportation chairs for going to bat for Corridors of Commerce funding,” Beussman said. “This program is the key to continuing to make progress on Highway 14, so establishing Corridors of Commerce as a funding priority is an important accomplishment as we move forward.”