

Is MnDOT setting us up for more disappointment about Highway 14?

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We suppose officials with the Minnesota Department of Transportation were just being realistic and said what they had to say, but we can't help but think that they're just preparing us all — those of us who live in communities along Highway 14 — for another round of disappointment.

What happened was this: On Tuesday of last week, Gov. Mark Dayton signed into law a bill authorizing an additional \$31.5 million for the Corridors of Commerce program — \$6.5 million for this year and another \$25 million for next year.

Those of us in Owatonna already know that the Corridors of Commerce dollars can go toward the completion of the Highway 14 expansion from Rochester to New Ulm. We know because last year it was announced that a three-mile stretch of the highway just east of Owatonna would be expanded from two lanes to four lanes — a project that is slated to begin in July and that will carry a price tag of between \$16 million and \$20 million.

And we know that the additional \$31.5 million the governor put in the Corridors of Commerce would not begin to pay for what it would cost to finish the four-lane expansion from Owatonna and Dodge Center. That price tag is estimated to be about \$218 million or roughly seven times what the governor approved.

That being said, we also know that that money would go a long way toward acquiring the right-of-way on the remaining 13 miles between Owatonna and Dodge Center — something that MnDOT officials estimate would cost between \$25 million and \$30 million if purchased within the next four years.

In other words, about the amount of money that the governor placed in the Corridors of Commerce program.

We're not so greedy as to suggest that the entire pot of money go toward the Highway 14 expansion right here in our own backyard — though we wouldn't object if it did. However, we would like some of it to go toward the Highway 14 expansion.

And that brings us back to our friends in MnDOT.

No sooner had we asked about the Corridors of Commerce funds than MnDOT officials started reminding us that the Corridors of Commerce is a statewide program and that no project was going to get all of the program's money.

Yes, we know that.

But given the way that MnDOT has consistently underfunded any progress on Highway 14, we couldn't help but think that that cautionary message from MnDOT was meant as a way of warning us beforehand that Highway 14 would be getting none of the money this time around.

That would be a disappointment.

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