

Klobuchar, MnDOT Commissioner visit Owatonna to discuss Highway 14's future, funding

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OWATONNA — For years, progress along the Highway 14 corridor, including the stretch from Owatonna to Dodge Center, has boiled down to funding.

And today, that's still what it comes down to.

On Wednesday, Minnesota's senior U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar and Minnesota Department of Transportation Commissioner Charlie Zelle toured U.S. Highway 14 from Rochester to New Ulm to talk about the future of the corridor and to highlight their desire to complete it.

“As you all know, it has been a long, laborious process, but at its core, a partnership with state, federal and local, and I really can truly say there is no coalition in the state that has been so focused and together on transportation issues like the Highway 14 coalition,” Klobuchar said.

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

And that was a topic of discussion in Owatonna Wednesday morning as Klobuchar and Zelle met with Owatonna, Steele County and Dodge County officials and business owners at the Owatonna MnDOT office.

“Transportation and Corridors of Commerce are so important,” said Owatonna Mayor Tom Kuntz. “We've got buses from all over the southern Minnesota communities that are traveling to Rochester to deliver employees, so we need to make sure we get people from point A to point B. We've got commitment from our industry in Owatonna for 100-plus new jobs in our community, and the labor source is very short within our community, so we're going to have to bring those from other communities and trying to bring those people in on the roads is a real challenge.

“The Corridors of Commerce is one of the avenues we really need to make sure gets funded in order to supply that transportation need.”

Last week, 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, which appropriated \$6.5 million for 2014 and \$25 million for 2015 for the program.

The program, which included \$300 million in trunk highway bonds last year to complete the missing links and build capacity on Minnesota's highway corridors, helped fund an expansion of

Highway 14 east of Owatonna as well as an expansion from North Mankato to Nicollet and a Nicollet bypass. The three projects were among 10 projects that the bonds funded.

The portion east of Owatonna from Highway 218 to County Road 43 — about a three-mile stretch — is set to begin this July and 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.

“We were fortunate because that project was shovel-ready, but we’ve been challenged because the remainder — from the railroad tracks to Dodge Center — require the purchase of the right-of-way to make it shovel-ready,” Kuntz said. “We’re hoping that some of the money for this year’s Corridors of Commerce will make it there, so they can make shovel-ready projects.”

Zelle acknowledged that the new allocation of Corridors of Commerce funding, which is appropriated out of the Trunk Highway Fund, could be used for right-of-way acquisition along the Highway 14 corridor.

“We’re thrilled about the Corridors of Commerce program that we’re going to look at today,” Zelle said. “We have a little new allocation — a very small amount during this last session — and we’re hoping we can help do some ground work to keep some projects going around the state.”

The right-of-way acquisition for the remaining 13 miles of Highway 14 between Owatonna and Dodge Center is estimated to cost between \$25 million and \$30 million if purchased within the next four years.

“The problem is there was a time when MnDOT had a lot of projects on the shelf ready to go,” Zelle said. “Well, during these past periods of scarcity, we don’t have a lot of projects that are ready to go. So this might help do that.”

Zelle said there is a gap between resources and the number of transportation projects in Minnesota that require funding, and he’s been working to find a long-term solution.

“(Highway 14) is a perfect example of one that really needs funding for the prosperity of our state, but we don’t have the funding to get it done,” he said.

Klobuchar has pushed for increased federal funding for transportation infrastructure and secured funds for Highway 14 upgrades and safety improvements in the past.

“As you know, it has been frustrating for us,” Klobuchar said. “If Tim Walz and I could do earmarks, we think this project would be done, but we are no longer allowed by law to set aside money for particular projects, but what we can do is advocate for the biggest pool of money we can possibly get out of the federal government to go to the state.”

With the possibility of earmarks eliminated, Klobuchar said federal grants and allocations as well as state focus on highway projects are possible options for funding.

Klobuchar said there is one fact she turns to when she argues for increased federal transportation funding for Minnesota.

“The fact that this particular stretch that we’re focused on today from Owatonna to Dodge Center has a crash rate and death rate twice that of the state average,” she said, “I don’t know what other statistic you need than that one to prove that we need this funding to get this done.”

Klobuchar also touched on the importance of the corridor for businesses, including agriculture, in the region.

“We also look at the importance of this road for transporting goods to market and making sure that these businesses that are thriving and expanding in the Owatonna area are able to keep thriving and expanding,” she said. “To do that, you need a transportation system that actually fits the economy that we have now.”

Jennifer Libby, president and CEO of Owatonna Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, said the four-lane expansion of Highway 14 in the remaining areas would help businesses.

“We all know business is faced with a lot of challenges. This would very much make it easier to give businesses a reason not only to come to this area regionally but to stay here and to continue to see the growth,” Libby said. “It’s really critical to our businesses, so we really appreciate all your support and your advocacy.”

Klobuchar plans on working with the state to find additional transportation dollars.

“That’s why Commissioner Zelle and I are here together, and I think you know the governor is devoted to this and is really focused on getting this done,” she said.