

Highway 14 project gains business lobby

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A coalition of southern Minnesota chambers of commerce is lobbying for a large piece of new highway funding — an effort that could be an opportunity to push the long-awaited Highway 14 project forward.

On Tuesday, representatives from the chambers from along the highway corridor, including the Owatonna Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, addressed a letter to Charles Zelle, commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Transportation. They are requesting that a majority of new transportation funds be funneled into the purchase of Highway 14 rights of way.

The request is for the final unfinished sections from Owatonna to Dodge Center and from west Nicollet to New Ulm. The funds would come from the Corridors of Commerce program, which received more funds during the recent legislative session.

“Our region’s economy is the strongest in the state, but lack of a consistent four-lane corridor presents shipping delays, recruitment concerns, and missed development opportunities,” reads the letter, which was signed by chamber leaders from Rochester, Nicollet, Waseca, Owatonna, New Ulm and Mankato.

This spring, the state Legislature placed an additional \$31.5 million into the Corridors of Commerce program, which is aimed at funding road projects that would boost economies. The money presents an opportunity for Highway 14 proponents because it can go toward right-of-way purchases.

The Corridors of Commerce program was implemented last year with funding from trunk highway bonds, which can be used for “shovel-ready” projects, but not right-of-way purchases. The money added this year comes from a Trunk Highway Fund — a cash-based reserve generated from taxes and tab fees. That money doesn’t have the same restrictions as bonds, and could be used on rights of way.



Hwy 14, facing east

Highway 14, east of Owatonna just before the four-lane section merges into two. The stretch between here and Dodge Center is among the final portions of the corridor to expand. (Matt Hudson/People’s Press)

Before work can begin on the remaining two-lane sections along Highway 14, the state must purchase the surrounding land, or right-of-way acquisition. It's the last hurdle before the project is "shovel-ready" and able to receive construction funds from Corridors of Commerce or the MnDOT.

The funds from Corridors of Commerce provide a funding avenue outside of the MnDOT's typical right-of-way process.

"The hurdle is getting the money to make the purchases. The cost of the land is going up daily," said Robert Buessman, mayor of New Ulm and president of the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership.

Buessman said that he was happy to see another group get behind the highway project. The letter was written separate from the partnership, though the groups aren't mutually exclusive. While road safety is a primary concern for Buessman and the partnership, he said it's helpful to add an economic motivation to the effort.

The Corridors of Commerce program serves the entire state, and portions of Highway 14 are already slated for improvement with \$300 million in bonds. According to MnDOT, more than 400 funding requests came in initially. That list was reduced to 128 and eventually, 10 projects were chosen for the first phase.

That includes a three-mile stretch of Highway 14 east of Owatonna, planned to begin in July. A section from Mankato to Nicollet, as well as a bypass in the area, is slated for 2015 under the initial funds. In those areas, right of ways had already been obtained.

In their letter to Commissioner Zelle, area chamber leaders are vying for the majority — as much as 89 percent — of the \$31.5 million to purchase right of ways along Highway 14. That's just for the Owatonna to Dodge Center section. Right of ways are estimated at an additional \$16 million to \$19 million for the Nicollet-New Ulm section.

Mike Dougherty, a southeast spokesperson for MnDOT, said that the regional office and community groups have made a good case for Highway 14 funding. But he added that the agency has a statewide focus when it comes to funding, and the tax funds come from residents across Minnesota.

"We do think that when that decision is made on that funding, we do think that Highway 14 will receive some funding," Dougherty said.

MnDOT officials are expected to announce initial allocations of the new money this summer.

Highway 14 has long been an issue for southern Minnesota. Early projects began in the 1960s, said Rep. John Petersburg, R-Waseca, whose district includes Owatonna. He said that the

legislature has historically had a hands-off approach to directing transportation dollars, and Corridors of Commerce opens up the door for projects that have been waiting in line.

“The \$300 million did most of the shovel-ready projects, and now we need to go further on some other projects,” he said.

Petersburg, who sits on both House transportation committees, said that the Legislature could allocate more transportation money through general fund allocations or tax increases implemented.

Many legislators have said that the next legislative session will focus on transportation issues.

While the state may not send all of the new money to southern Minnesota, proponents of the Highway 14 project say it’s an overdue job. Buessman said that years of lobbying got on the nerves of at least one lawmaker.

“It was kind of ironic that he was tired of seeing us come,” he said. “It’s been a 40-some-year effort to get the job done, and we’re still not getting it done.”