

## **Funding is a step in the right direction for Steele, Dodge counties**

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It may not be a giant leap, but Tuesday's announcement about additional funding for the Highway 14 expansion is a big step in the right direction.

On Tuesday, Gov. Mark Dayton announced that \$7.3 million of the Corridors for Commerce funding will go toward right-of-way purchases along Highway 14 east of Owatonna.

Though that's a big step — well, at least a step — there's still a long way to go.

Let's put Tuesday's announcement into perspective. Before the Minnesota Department of Transportation can start on the next phase of expanding Highway 14 from two lanes to four lanes between Owatonna and Dodge Center — something that has been promised since the 1960s — additional property has to be purchased. MnDOT can't simply start on the roads unless the state owns the land.

But there's a lot of land to be purchased along the remaining 13 miles of two-lane road between Owatonna and Dodge Center. In fact, MnDOT itself estimates that it would have to spend anywhere between \$25 million and \$30 million just to acquire the rights of way for the property it would need to make the expansion.

And that's at today's prices.

That \$7.3 million that the governor promised in Tuesday's announcement, while very welcome and much appreciated, won't even get MnDOT a third of way to where it needs to be just in order to purchase the land for the expansion. The price tag to complete the expansion between Owatonna and Dodge Center will run in the hundreds of millions of dollar.

So does that mean that we should not be appreciative about Tuesday's announcement? Not at all.

For too long, it seemed as if the powers that be in the state were much more focused on getting things done on transportation issues for the Twin Cities metropolitan area without considering the needs of Greater Minnesota.

But this is the third allocation of Corridors of Commerce funds toward the expansion of Highway 14 between Owatonna and Dodge Center in just the short time that Corridors of Commerce program was started.

Though the funds are a long way from being enough to complete the project, it seems that at long last the state is remembering how important a four-lane Highway 14 is to the southern part of Minnesota for both the safety and economic well-being of its citizens.

If next year is supposed to be the “Year of Transportation” in the Legislature, then we need to make certain that we push even harder to get more funds for the expansion.

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