

Highway 14 expansion between Owatonna, Dodge Center receives \$7.3 million

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OWATONNA — The four-lane expansion of Highway 14 between Owatonna and Dodge Center is one step closer to becoming a reality.

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

“This is another instance of great news for the Highway 14 expansion,” said Sen. Vicki Jensen, DFL-Owatonna. “We’ve had a run of positive steps over the past year, as we move closer to getting this project finished. Even though it’s long overdue, this is a welcome development for the highway and our communities.”

This is the third allocation of Corridors of Commerce funding for the Highway 14 corridor between Owatonna and Dodge Center.

In 2013, a \$12 million four-lane expansion of the Highway 14 east of Owatonna from Highway 218 to County Road 43 — about a three-mile stretch — was on a list of 10 projects being funded by the program that included \$300 million in trunk highway bonds, which aims to complete the missing links and build capacity on Minnesota’s highway corridors. Construction on that project began in July and is expected to be completed next summer.

This spring, the Minnesota Legislature added \$31.5 million — \$6.5 million allocated for 2014 and \$25 million for 2015 — to the Corridors of Commerce program, and unlike the 2013 funding, the funding was appropriated out of the Trunk Highway Fund that includes gas tax, motor vehicle sales tax and tab fee revenues, which has allowed more flexibility on what the dollars could be used for.

In June, \$1.5 million was allocated for right-of-way acquisitions on Highway 14 between Owatonna and Dodge Center.

To acquire rights of way, the Minnesota Department of Transportation will buy land from private owners to eventually expand highway sections.

Heather Lukes, MnDOT District 6 project manager, said the four-lane expansion of Highway 14 between Owatonna and Dodge Center was divided into three phases for funding purposes.

Phase 1 is a four-lane expansion of the current roadway from Highway 218 to County Road 43, which is currently under construction until next fall.

The remaining 13 miles between County Road 43 and Dodge Center includes Phases 2 and 3, which includes constructing a new roadway, similar to what was done between Waseca and Owatonna, and to do this, purchasing rights of way is necessary.

Mike Dougherty, MnDOT District 6 spokesperson, said the estimated cost of purchasing rights of way for Phases 2 and 3 is between \$25 million and \$30 million.

“That’s if it’s purchased within the next several years,” Dougherty said.

Lukes said for Phase 2, it will cost about \$7.3 million to acquire the land between 54th Avenue and Steele County Road 16, and Phase 3 will cost about \$17.1 million “plus manpower hours.”

Dougherty said the allocation will “greatly move things ahead” in terms of purchasing rights of way.

“This is a signal that we have money to purchase land, and I think we’ll hear from quite a few landowners now,” he said.

Lukes said MnDOT has already acquired two properties along the corridor, but there is more work that needs to be done.

“We have been talking to more landowners, too,” she said. “It is very exciting that we can continue those discussions.”

Acquiring land is a step toward a four-lane expansion of Highway 14 between Owatonna to Dodge Center.

“The importance of this step can’t be understated,” Jensen said. “Without this additional right-of-way funding, Highway 14 wouldn’t be eligible for continued Corridors of Commerce money due to the way that money is distributed. This money allows the project to move forward where it otherwise wouldn’t have been able to.”

There was more good news for the Highway 14 corridor on Tuesday as the intersection of Highway 14 and Highway 15 in New Ulm received \$700,000 for preliminary design work.

“The U.S. Highway 14 Partnership is very pleased with the progress that the Corridors of Commerce program continues to bring to the expansion of Highway 14,” said Bob Beussman, Highway 14 Partnership president and New Ulm mayor. “The two Highway 14 investments announced today were recommended priorities of the partnership, getting important projects ready to go for when a statewide transportation investment is passed.”

Amanda Duerr, a spokesperson for U.S. Highway 14 Partnership, said 2015 is a budgeting year for Minnesota Legislature, and transportation will be a major topic.

“The partnership will continue to advocate strongly for additional transportation funding and for the Corridors of Commerce because it has been a successful program for us in moving forward with Highway 14,” she said.

Jensen said the state needs “comprehensive transportation reform.”

“I will work to ensure that our projects in Greater Minnesota are put front and center when we’re addressing the shortfalls the state is facing,” Jensen said. “We need Highway 14 done — and this is exactly the kind of year, with the kind of attention, we need to accomplish that.”

Buessman said Highway 14 is southern Minnesota’s most important economic corridor.

“We will keep advocating for the resources we need until we have four lanes from Rochester to New Ulm,” he said.

The Corridors of Commerce program has funded 27 transportation projects since November 2013.

Twelve of the projects announced Tuesday will be funded with existing funding that Dayton and the Legislature invested in the Corridors of Commerce initiative in 2014, and 13th project – \$45 million devoted to a \$58 million expansion to four lanes on Highway 371 from Nisswa to Jenkins – was made possible by cost savings at MnDOT.

Funding for this project was provided through bid savings on the extension of Highway 610 and other MnDOT efficiencies in the Corridors of Commerce program. MnDOT will begin construction on the project in 2016, two years earlier than planned.