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Contact: Carolyn Jackson

[ccjackson@flaherty-hood.com](mailto:ccjackson@flaherty-hood.com)

651-259-1928

## **As advocacy group's membership grows, calls for completion of Hwy. 14 project get louder**

ST. PAUL—With the Rochester Area Chamber of Commerce as its newest member and a \$1.9 billion state budget surplus, the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership expressed optimism at its annual meeting that 2016 could finally be the year the Minnesota Legislature commits to providing the funding necessary to complete the decades-long project to expand Highway 14 between Rochester and New Ulm.

“The opportunity is ripe for success,” said New Ulm Mayor Bob Beussman, who was re-elected to serve a third term as president at the Partnership’s membership meeting on Thursday. “We have well-placed, effective legislators, a program perfectly designed for one-time highway funding, and combination of general fund surplus and trunk highway bonding capacity available.”

Dodge County Commissioner Steve Gray, who was re-elected as vice president of the Partnership for a third year at the meeting, noted that the Partnership’s membership has continued to grow over the past year to more than 60 cities, counties, townships, businesses and organizations. Notably, the Rochester Chamber became its most recent member at the end of December, which means that all of the chambers of commerce between New Ulm and Rochester are now part of the organization.

“The fact that we have every chamber of commerce in the area in the Partnership highlights just how important the completion of the Highway 14 project is to economic development in our region,” Gray said.

Beussman added that with only two sections of the expansion project remaining (Nicollet to New Ulm and Owatonna to Dodge Center) and viable funding options available, the Partnership is eager to see the project through to completion.

“Our members – cities, counties, chambers, businesses and citizens – are united and outspoken in their support for expanding Highway 14. Now we all need is a four-lane highway to connect them,” Beussman said.

While the Partnership continues to support a comprehensive transportation bill with long-term funding of at least \$200 million a year for the Corridors of Commerce program, it is urging legislators to look at other alternatives if the Legislature remains unable to reach an agreement on a comprehensive bill this year. The Partnership is encouraging area legislators to support two options in either the bonding bill or the transportation bill: \$500 million one-time appropriation for Corridors of Commerce (\$200 million in cash from the budget surplus, plus \$300 million in trunk highway bond proceeds) or \$300 million in trunk highway bonds specifically for Highway 14.

“If our Highway 14 legislators can’t do anything else, they should do this,” Gray said. “We have bi-partisan support, a team of engaged legislators and a simple program that is ready to fund.”

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