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Highway 14 advocacy group: State transportation bill is progress, but not a solution

OWATONNA—After the state legislature passed its first large transportation package in years, members of the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership gathered in Owatonna on Wednesday to discuss the legislature’s actions and chart a course forward.

The Partnership’s primary goal for the 2017 legislative session was to obtain additional funding for the Corridors of Commerce program. The Legislature’s transportation package, which Gov. Dayton signed into law, includes \$50 million in cash over the next two years and \$300 million in bonding over the next four years for this key program.

“The U.S. Highway 14 Partnership is committed to the expansion of Highway 14 to four lanes all the way from New Ulm to Rochester,” said Mankato City Councilor Karen Foreman, President of the U.S. Highway 14 Partnership. “We support any funding source that helps move us toward that goal.”

Significant progress has been made in recent years, but two sections of the highway remain unfinished: 12 miles from Nicollet to New Ulm and 12.5 miles from Owatonna to Dodge Center. The Partnership believes that the injection of bonding and cash into the Corridors of Commerce program will help, but falls short of an ultimate solution.

“We are pleased that the legislature made a serious investment in Corridors of Commerce, but our work isn’t done,” added Foreman. “These funds will keep us moving forward, but aren’t enough to get us to the finish line.”

Corridors of Commerce was established in 2013 as a statewide program designed to fund transportation projects that reduce barriers to commerce by expanding capacity and/or improving freight movement. Several U.S. Highway 14 projects have received funding through the

program, including the expansion of Highway 14 from North Mankato to Nicollet, the two-mile expansion west of Owatonna, and significant land acquisition.

This year, the Partnership was particularly instrumental in helping to secure a cash appropriation for the program. “It’s crucial for Highway 14 that Corridors of Commerce have cash available because the projects include a great deal of land acquisition, which bonding funds can’t be used for,” said Owatonna City Councilor Kevin Raney, Vice President of the Partnership.

The Partnership also played a central role in re-shaping the language that governs how Corridors of Commerce projects are selected. When Legislators sought changes to the way Corridors of Commerce doles out money, the Partnership supported language that requires funding be regionally balanced, ensuring that Highway 14 projects will remain strong candidates for these funds.

According to Partnership members, the expansion of Highway 14 is long overdue and the need will only get greater over time. In addition to safety concerns, communities along the corridor fear they’ll miss out on vital economic development opportunities.

“Expanding to four lanes is essential to keep communities along Highway 14 moving forward,” said Raney. “Businesses will be hesitant to move in or expand if southern Minnesota’s largest cities continue to be connected by two-lane roads.”

“We have seen the impact of Highway 14 expansion in Mankato,” said Foreman. “Wal-Mart’s Mankato Distribution Center was made possible by the progress we’ve made, and now more than 400 people go to work there every day. We want to see that kind of success all the way across Highway 14. We will continue to work with legislators from both parties until that happens.”

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