

The worst highway?

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People who live along U.S. Highway 14 say it's the deadliest highway in Minnesota. From the South Dakota border to Rochester, residents and business owners say an expansion of the two-lane highway is way overdue. Some supporters of the project say metro road improvements have sapped state transportation funds, and they're worried about being ignored as the transportation debate focuses on the Twin Cities suburbs.

Linda Maher is still recovering from a car accident that occurred over a year ago on Highway 14.

"I had broken in several places my pelvis, I had broken my shoulder, actually crushed the ball or shoulder joint and elbow was completely demolished," she says.

Maher says she's lucky. About 100 people were killed in accidents on Highway 14 over the last seven years.

"I left for work early for a change. And just shortly after I turned onto Highway 14, I had seen a car swerving. That was the last thing I remember," according to Maher.

Another driver had fallen asleep at the wheel and collided with Maher head-on. Maher blames the accident on the design of the road, saying a median would have prevented it. "Had we had an expansion that has been promised to us for many many many years, this accident probably would not have happened."

People who have businesses along the highway are concerned about 14 as well. Steve Kiesler owns Kiesler's Campground on 14, just east of Waseca. He says the the road is a problem for his customers and for the trucking companies that use it.

"This road is overrun with semi trucks. And I'm sure that it's a problem for them too because of the small towns and stoplights and things they have to go through. This isn't a one way deal. It's a problem for them to make a living. The only way to solve it for everyone concerned is to get the road fixed," Kiesler says.

For the past 30 years MnDOT officials have been talking about expanding the two-lane road to four lanes and adding bypasses around regional centers like Waseca.

MnDOT spokesman Brian Jergenson says the department is struggling to please everyone. Jergenson says state leaders have rearranged their priorities. He says in the past legislators and governors neglected transportation so now MnDOT has to play catch up. So the agency is seeing many more needs come to the surface.

And one of the many on that list is Highway 14. In the last five years MnDOT work crews have completed the first steps of the project. Jergenson says the state has already spent \$77 million on Highway 14. It will cost about twice that to complete the project. Jergenson says because of the tight transportation budget, MnDOT has to maintain roads before they expand them.

"If you're a homeowner and planning on adding an addition, it doesn't make sense to do that if the roof is leaking. You want to invest those dollars in the roof first to preserve what you have as opposed to expand into something new," he says.

The mayor of Owatonna, Pete Connor, says 14 should take priority over some metro projects because it's such a dangerous road. "To me it really becomes a matter of conscience. You can say anything about traffic on I-35 or bottleneck anywhere else, but when you have a roadway that is as deadly as this one, it becomes a matter of conscience," says Connor.

Connor says Owatonna, Mankato and Rochester make contributions to the state. So Highway 14 should be a state concern.

"We have a state of Minnesota. Not everything has to be in (the) metro. Owatonna, Minnesota, is a vibrant community of 22,000 people. Maybe it could be a vibrant community of 30,000 people. Let's not diminish rural Minnesota as second class or a second-rate place to be."

Conner and others say making it easier for people to live and work in rural Minnesota would mean more people would want to live outside the metro area. They say that would help reduce traffic congestion in the Twin Cities. Part of doing that, they say, is investing in transportation outside the metro area. And they say the Highway 14 project is a good place to start.

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