

THE Messenger

NEWS

Money for highways is top issue at U.S 20 summit

Flat revenues, soaring costs dog efforts, says DOT's Richardson

By BILL SHEA, Messenger staff writer

SIOUX CITY — After decades of work, those who view U.S. Highway 20 as the key to safe travel and economic growth in northwestern Iowa are starting to win over state leaders.

With what appears to be growing consensus on the need to make the route four lanes wide, a lack of cash now remains the biggest obstacle.

"We will four-lane U.S. 20 in Iowa," Nancy Richardson, the director of the state Department of Transportation, said Friday at a gathering billed as the U.S. 20 Summit.

"The issue continues to be how quickly we can complete it," she added. "We've got it in the queue, but we've got to have construction money to finish it."

Richardson spoke mostly about the challenge of getting the money to complete the estimated \$518 million job of widening the last two-lane section between Moorland and Merville in Woodbury County.

She was one of 12 speakers at the daylong session in the Sioux City Convention Center. About 100 people, including some from Illinois and Nebraska, attended.

Richardson recounted how the state's ability to invest in roads has been weighed down by flat revenues and soaring construction costs.

"Are we in a crisis? No, but we can see it over the hill," she said.



Nancy Richardson, director of the Iowa Department of Transportation, talks to Buck Boekelman, of Fort Dodge, Friday at the U.S. 20 Summit in the Sioux City Convention Center. Boekelman is a member of the U.S. 20 Corridor Association. Nearby, Suzan Boden (in red jacket), the chairwoman of the Iowa Transportation Commission, confers with Shirley Phillips, the president of the association.

To address the problem, the Department of Transportation late last year unveiled a proposal called Transportation Investment Moves the Economy in the 21st Century (TIME-21). The proposal called for a variety of fee increases that would enable an additional \$200 million in annual road spending. Money from TIME-21 would be divided between between the state and local governments, with the state getting 60 percent of the money while the cities and counties each would get 20 percent.

As part of TIME-21, U.S. Highway 20 is listed for "accelerated development," according to Richardson.

In response to that proposal, leaders of the House Transportation Committee crafted a plan that included a 1-cent per gallon increase in the tax on diesel fuel, higher registration fees on pickup bought in the future and a \$5 increase in the cost of vehicle title transfers.

State Rep. David Tjepkes, R-Gowrie, is the senior Republican on that committee and has had a big role in developing that plan.

But the plan has not yet been introduced as a bill. With just eight working days scheduled for the remainder of this year's legislative session, highway advocates are getting a bit concerned about the plan's fate.

"I'm still optimistic that we'll at least get something," Richardson said.

She noted that debate on new revenue for highways comes after lawmakers have already voted to raise the tax on cigarettes.

"No legislative body wants to raise lots of taxes and fees on we the taxpayers," she said.

As a candidate, Gov. Chet Culver said he was against raising fuel taxes. But Richardson said Friday that he has indicated he'll seriously consider any bipartisan bill that includes a fuel tax hike.

The federal government has invested money in the highway via earmarks from representatives Tom Latham, R-Alexander; and Steve King, R-Kiron.

"I'm very pleased that we have made advances," Latham said during lunch time speech at the summit. "It's not quick enough."

He said the delays on the highway job have been the most frustrating element of his government career.

Northwest Iowa, he said, has "lost out" because the highway isn't four lanes wide.

He said the last multiyear authorization bill for highway programs gives Iowa an additional \$117 million per year.

The booming biofuels industry provides even more reason to finish the highway.

Two-thirds of Iowa's ethanol and biodiesel plants are within 60 miles of the highway, according Jeff Jobes of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development Office.

Biodiesel plants alone will put another 38,940 trucks on the highway, said Bill Neese, director of transportation and logistics for Renewable Energy Group Inc.

Shirley Phillips, president of the U.S. 20 Corridor Association, concluded the summit with a plea for people to lobby state lawmakers for highway funding.

"We need to continue to tell the Legislature that this is the time to find some funding for our transportation system," she said.

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