

4 LANES, AT LAST



Members of the Triton High School Band lead the celebration by playing the National Anthem.



During her remarks at the celebration, Sen. Amy Klobuchar pointed out how many crashes have taken place on Highway 14 in recent years.



Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz hands out chunks of the red ribbon used to mark the official opening of Highway 14 Nov. 9.

It takes a partnership to build a road

BY KAY FATE
STAFF WRITER

It's a group that has been praised multiple times, and by no less than the governor of Minnesota.

"The advocacy of the Highway 14 Partnership is a model for how to get things done," said Gov. Tim Walz. "Citizen voices that are heard in an effective way to move things forward, for the benefit of everyone."

Walz made the comments last week, as the latest expansion of U.S. Hwy. 14 opened between Owatonna and Dodge Center, completing four lanes from Mankato to Rochester.

Widely criticized as a dangerous roadway, the celebration was just a pause in the progress, not an ending.

"You know that too many people have lost their lives on this roadway, said MnDOT Commissioner Margaret Anderson Kelliher. "Too many people have suffered from life-changing crashes on this roadway. Our fight for safety is not done because the road-

way is done."

The next – and presumably final – step is to expand the highway to four lanes between Nicollet and New Ulm, another stretch of 12.5 miles.

U.S. Rep. Jim Hagedorn, who represents the 1st Congressional District, which includes much of the southern third of Minnesota, praised the work and commitment of the partnership, which was started more than 20 years ago by Owatonna city officials.

"You weren't just focused on your own area," Hagedorn said. "You weren't just focused on here, today. You were focused on Rochester and focused all the way over to New Ulm. I appreciate the way you worked together and stuck together."

Walz called Owatonna Mayor Tom Kuntz "one of the voices that was loudest and most effective during my time working on this, and made this happen, in a big way."

Les Abraham, who served on the Owatonna City Council for 21



With scissors in hand, Gov. Tim Walz cuts the red ribbon officially opening Highway 14 outside of Claremont Nov. 9. Joining the governor in the celebration are, from left: U.S. Rep. Jim Hagedorn, Claremont Mayor Tasha Dahl, Walz, Minnesota Sen. John Jasinski, MnDOT Commissioner Margaret Anderson Kelliher, U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, Minnesota Rep. John Petersburg (hidden behind Klobuchar), Mark Schoenfelder, District 6 engineer, Nate O'Reilly, president of Southeastern Minnesota Building and Construction Trades, Kevin Raney, president of Highway 14 Partnership and Mark Panek, assistant district engineer holding the ribbon on the end.

Despite loss, state rep celebrates 14's opening

BY RICK BUSSLER
PUBLISHER

Last week's Highway 14 opening proved to be one of those bittersweet celebrations for Rep. John Petersburg of Waseca.

While he celebrated the roadway's opening with hundreds of others, Petersburg was also mourning the loss of his wife, Susan, who died less than 18 hours before the event after an eight-month battle with cancer.

Petersburg had planned to be at the celebration even with his wife sick at home and requiring constant care. He said he had "sitters" lined up to care for her so he could be at the celebration. However, they weren't needed as she died at 4 p.m. on Nov. 8 with the veteran lawmaker at her side.

And Petersburg said missing the Highway 14 opening wasn't even an option.

"I looked at how important that project was to the community," Petersburg said. "It certainly

was more important than my grief."

At last week's opening, Petersburg reminded the audience how more than "50 years of people's hopes, dreams and hard work" went into getting Highway 14 accomplished.

Petersburg played an instrumental role in the ultimate passage of legislation to fund Highway 14, though he said he often tried to do so behind the scenes. He said Highway 14 was one of the biggest campaign promises he made to voters during his re-election bids in recent years.

"It was over 10 years of work, and Susan was a part of that," Petersburg said, adding she would have wanted him to attend the Highway 14 opening.

The Highway 14 project was personal in other ways for Petersburg. He grew up on a farm north of Claremont, less than three miles from the new roadway. He also served on the Claremont School Board and later Triton School Board.

Asked if he ever thought Highway 14 would



Even though Rep. John Petersburg's wife died less than 18 hours before the Highway 14 opening, he attended the celebration and spoke about the impact of the roadway to southern Minnesota.

be completed, Petersburg said: "Of course I did. I just didn't know when it would happen."

"If you keep trying, it will work. Eventually, you are successful. You have to believe in what you are doing."

The past year has been rough for Petersburg. In March, Susan Petersburg was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer. The representative found himself focused on caring for his wife, though he said he was still able to handle his legislative duties.

"I didn't go up to the Twin Cities as much as I had before," Petersburg said. "One of the benefits of having Zoom meet-

ings is that I could do it from downstairs (of the house)."

Before her cancer diagnosis, Susan Petersburg often helped her husband in his bid for office. "She enjoyed door-knocking and campaigning more than I did," said John Petersburg, adding that she did not enjoy all the political meetings.

Petersburg said he was committed to supporting his wife during her battle. By July, she needed constant care as it became increasingly difficult for her to stand up. "Her health and strength continued to quickly decline," he said. "It deteriorated her muscles. Her arms and legs became just bone."

Chemotherapy and radiation treatments did not work for Susan Petersburg, according to John Petersburg, who commended his wife for deciding on her own to go into hospice care at home. That was Aug. 1.

By the end, Susan Petersburg was unable to do anything on her own. "I had to feed her, take care

of her and bathe her," he said. "It was the reverse of a growing baby."

Despite the struggles at the end, John Petersburg was happy with their 12-year marriage. "Susan and I had a wonderful life together," he said. "When Susan and I were together, we did the things that were important to each other."

John Petersburg said their strong faith helped them through this difficult time. They are members of Trinity Lutheran Church in Owatonna, where he had been the church administrator for many years before retiring a few years ago.

Through it all, John Petersburg said he has learned one thing.

"We need to treat each other like they are the greatest treasure that we have in life," John Petersburg said. "They need to hear that. We shouldn't leave things unsaid."

This isn't the first battle with cancer for John Petersburg. His previous wife, Carol, died of lung cancer in 2007.



Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz speaks at the opening of the newest stretch of four lanes of U.S. Highway 14. He said the project is proof "that issues of transportation and communities bind us together."

Remembering lives lost on a dangerous stretch

BY KAY FATE
STAFF WRITER

Nine years and three days after Scott Hodgman died, and less than a mile from where Rachel and Emerson Harberts were

killed, people took a moment to remember them – and so many others who have been victims of crashes on the heavily traveled, two-lane road between Owatonna and Dodge Center.

"It's changed our lives forever," said Don Hodgman, Scott's father. "It changed our entire family. His friends – Scott had so many friends. We'll never be the same." See REMEMBERING on B15 ▶

"Every Minnesotan deserves safe, dependable roads that get them home to their families. And for too long, Highway 14 has not been safe."

- Gov. Tim Walz**
- "It's over 50 years of people's hopes, dreams and hard work of getting this accomplished."
- John Petersburg**
MN State Representative
- "We hope no more preventable deaths will take place on this road."
- Kevin Raney**
Highway 14 Partnership
- "This project was 40 years past due—and now it will save countless lives."
- John Jasinski**
MN State Senator
- "It's a great day in southern Minnesota."
- Margaret Anderson Kelliher**
MnDOT Commissioner



After the celebration, a State Patrol cruiser led Gov. Tim Walz's caravan on the new stretch of Highway 14. They were the first vehicles to officially drive on the westbound side. The eastbound side had been opened up about 30 minutes prior with a pair of State Patrol vehicles leading a passenger car and semi tractor trailer as the first vehicles to drive on the new stretch.

U.S. HIGHWAY 14 TIMELINE

- Mid 1950s:** People recall discussions about Owatonna to Rochester being 4-lane within "a couple of years."
- 1960s & 1970s:** Kasson to Rochester completed, 13 miles, \$5.5 million.
- 1998:** Highway 14 Partnership/Coalition formed and remains in existence today.
- 2001:** Dodge Center to Kasson section completed, 9 miles, \$24.2 million.
- 2003:** Eagle Lake to Owatonna section began and completed in three stages ending in 2012, 32 miles, \$192 million.
- 2003:** Owatonna to Dodge Center section began and completed in four stages with the most recent ending in 2021. Total of the stretch: 18 miles, \$201 million.
- 2012-2021:** At least 5 fatal crashes involving 9 deaths since November 2012 on 12-mile stretch between Dodge Center and Owatonna.
- May 2018:** Gov. Mark Dayton signs the 2019 bonding bill into law, including funding for expansion of Highway 14 from Owatonna to Dodge Center.
- November 2019:** Groundbreaking is held to complete the Owatonna to Dodge Center stretch and construction soon begins.
- March 2020:** Legislature passes bill to complete expansion of Highway 14 from Nicollet to New Ulm.
- December 2020:** A dedicated deer crossing, the first of its kind in Minnesota, is constructed under the expanded Highway 14 near Claremont. The oversized, box culvert, goes from one side of the four-lane to the other, and is about 200 feet long, 20-foot high and 9-feet wide. The underground crossing, which cost \$219,000 to construct, is expected to reduce the possibility of vehicle-deer collisions along this stretch of the road.
- Nov. 9, 2021:** The 12.5-mile stretch of 4-lane stretch between Dodge Center and Owatonna opens, completing the 72-mile stretch of continuous, 4-lane roadway from Rochester to Mankato. Total for this stretch: \$188 million. Sources: Interviews, newspaper archives and MnDOT records.