

# LOCALNEWS

## Orange cones will return

U.S. Highway 53 construction projects planned

BY EMILY GEDDE  
Staff Writer

The countdown is on until Minnesota's busiest season – road construction season.

As part of an ongoing effort to improve U.S. Highway 53, motorists can expect to see orange construction cones return to the northern Minnesota roadway as it prepares for more changes that will begin this summer.

"We are trying to make the highway safer than it is today," said Bob Anderson, chairman of the U.S. Highway 53 task force.

Anderson said a 34-mile mill and overlay project will begin on the south side of International Falls near Crescent Drive and will likely cause travel delays, but, he said it'll be worth it in the end.

"For certain there is going to be the need to slow down when (crews) are doing the milling and overlaying," he said. "There is the possibility for some single-lane traffic this summer and people can expect delays. After that, it'll be so much better."

In addition to the mill and overlay portion of the project, turn lanes will be added to areas of the highway that right now can pose as a travel hazard, Anderson said. Center turn lanes will be included at the turnoff near The Gateway Store in Kabetogama, the Ash River Trail, the inter-



FILE PHOTO

Motorists can expect to see the return of orange construction cones along U.S. Highway 53 again this summer.

section near the new school between Orr and Cook, and at Highway 73 toward Chisholm and Hibbing, as well as other areas.

"The turning lanes are certainly helpful to cars traveling fairly fast and allowing folks to slow down in front of them while turning," Anderson said. "Traffic behind the vehicles turning can continue forward. These turn lanes will add a great deal of safety to these portions of the highway."

**Cha-ching**

Bids for this summer's projects have not been awarded, and Anderson said he was unsure of the exact cost. Since the Highway 53 projects began in 1999, the effort accumulated a price tag of "well over \$50 million," he said.

"I'm assuming the work done this summer alone will cost tens of millions," Anderson added.

The pot of money that has been set aside for highway improvements is nearing the end, but Anderson said task force officials are hopeful more funding can be secured for any future projects.

"We are keeping a close eye on what happens in Washington D.C., as well as what happens in St. Paul," he said of potential funding. "We are hoping we can continue with projects, but that will depend on what funding is available."

**A little history**

While the hope to receive

more money is on the forefront of the project right now, it seems funding has managed to find its way to the effort since it began more than 15 years ago.

The task force was formed in 1999 and it immediately developed strategies to improve the busy highway. Anderson said former Congressman Jim Oberstar, who died last year, was instrumental in getting projects off the ground.

"He deserves a lot of credit," Anderson said.

In addition, county commissioners for Koochiching and St. Louis counties have attended countless meetings and have secured funding for the ongoing project.

"Some folks have attended every meeting for the last 15 years," he said. "They are passionate about this. Many people have contributed a lot of time and effort to make life better in Borderland."

Last summer, 20 miles of four lanes were completed just south of Cook. Hopefully, Anderson said, that will eventually extend all the way to Borderland.

Because of changes in the economy over the last decade and a half, the highway has been less traveled, but, as projects continue to be completed, Anderson said he is optimistic traffic will increase along 53.

"Highway 53 has changed immensely for the better," Anderson said. "We hope that can only continue."

## Expanded state program could benefit RLMC

JOURNAL STAFF REPORT

Legislation recently introduced by a state senator could benefit Rainy Lake Medical Center by expanding a state program helping medical professionals in rural areas.

Sen. Greg Clausen, DFL-Apple Valley, presented legislation expanding the state's Health Professional Local Forgiveness program for participants who serve up to four years in high-need areas.



Dan Odegaard



Sen. Greg Clausen

In exchange for practicing in high-need areas, these medical professionals would have, on average, 60 percent of their college debt forgiven.

RLMC CEO Dan Odegaard said the hospital is a National Health Service Corp site, and already uses the program as an incentive for recruiting health care professionals.

The program is designed to recruit and retain quality health care professionals to needed areas and facilities in Minnesota, according to a news release. Expansion of the program will make it less burdensome for physicians to practice in under-served areas, providing much-needed health care access to rural Minnesota.

Odegaard said an expanded program might increase the number of applicants, however, a greater impact could be seen if incentives were increased.

"A greater impact would be realized if increased incentives were added for practitioners seeking loan forgiveness in very remote locations, such as ours," Odegaard said. "Although this program is designed to recruit health professionals to rural areas,

Koochiching County still has to compete with rural areas that are much closer to urban areas."

Specialty physicians, including surgeons, aren't eligible for loan forgiveness under the program, Odegaard said. The hospital doesn't currently have a health care professional who participates in the program, he said.

There is an ever-increasing shortage of medical personnel in rural areas, and transportation and distance barriers contribute to an increasing economic destabilization of rural health care services, said a release. As a result, many doctors, nurses, and other medical personnel have favored urban and suburban practices over rural areas.

The Department of Health's Office of Rural Health and Primary Care reports there are 16 counties where there are fewer than six practicing physicians per 10,000 residents. Additionally, there are another 16 counties that have fewer than nine physicians practicing per 10,000 residents.

"My legislation will improve health care across the state by encouraging medical professionals to stay in rural Minnesota or in other high-

need areas," Clausen said. "Current participants report the loan forgiveness program has a major effect on their choice of practice location, and studies show that the vast majority of health care professionals remain in the same or similar locations as where they start their careers."

In addition to the need for medical professionals in rural Minnesota, 91 percent of 2013 University of Minnesota medical doctor graduates have student loan debt. With the average burden being \$158,125, many physicians need lucrative practices to repay high education debt. According to Clausen, his bill is one way to reduce student loan debt for medical students.

"We all know that student loan debt is becoming insurmountable," Clausen said. "This program helps alleviate the problem of student loan debt and brings highly trained professional health care providers to areas of the state where we need them most."

The program doesn't just apply to new graduates, Odegaard said, so employers can look for experienced applicants who qualify for the program.

"Employers are always looking to recruit the most experienced applicant they are able to," Odegaard said. "This especially applies in the health care industry. Eligibility for loan forgiveness is not affected by the numbers of years out of school. As long as the practitioner has student loans, they may apply."

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