

Mathiowetz selected for Highway 60 work

Discrepancy in plans led to re-bid of project, which was supposed to be awarded in May

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Mathiowetz Construction is the apparent low bidder to build the first phase of a four-lane expansion of Highway 60 in southern Minnesota.

The Sleepy Eye-based Mathiowetz submitted a bid of \$17.8 million for the project, which is part of a \$100 million, three-phase effort to expand Highway 60 from two lanes to four lanes between Bigelow and Worthington.

The Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) opened bids for the project Friday morning.

Construction will likely begin in August, about a month later than previously expected. The delay stems from a re-bid of the project, which was necessary because of a discrepancy in the original construction plans. There was a discrepancy in the

amount of earthwork to be performed and the type of excavation required," explained Chad Fowlds, assistant district engineer in MnDOT's District 7. "We rectified that" and put it out for a re-bid.

Fowlds said the \$17.8 million bid is actually about \$120,000 less than the original low bid.

"We were anticipating a bid that was fairly close to the first one we received," he said.

The apparent low bidder in the first round was Wisconsin-based Hoffman Construction. Hoffman's subsequent proposal was \$19.4 million, up from \$17.9 million in the original bidding.

Fowlds said he can't explain why Hoffman's bid went up. A Hoffman official reached by phone Thursday declined to elaborate on the issue.

Meanwhile, MnDOT officials say phase one construction will wrap up next year.

Highway 60 needs attention because stretches of the road switch from two lanes to four lanes and back again, which is inconsistent with good design, according to MnDOT. The expansion will make the road safer and improve traffic flow.

The upgrades are part of a long-term plan to expedite travel between the Twin Cities and Denver, noted Stephen

Schnieder, public works director for Nobles County.

Minnesota's plans tie in with similar highway expansions in Iowa, Nebraska and Colorado.

Motorists in southern Minnesota have long clamored for improvements to Highway 60, which some view as unsafe. The roadway sees heavy truck traffic in and out of the bio-fuel plants in the area, and the design forces drivers to make frequent merges.

Concerns inspired the creation of a citizens' group called the "Southwest Minnesota Highway 60 Action Corporation." The group's slogan is "Pray for me, I drive Highway 60."

Schnieder said southwest Minnesota residents have been seeking Highway 60 improvements for more than 50 years.

"They were one of the first highway action groups formed in Minnesota to lobby the state to finish a major corridor," he said.

Despite the recent delay associated with the construction-plan error, the expansion effort appears to be gaining momentum.

In 2008, the department completed a four-lane expansion on Highway 60 that extends from the Iowa border to three miles north of the border, bypassing the



town of Bigelow, Minn.

If everything stays on schedule, all three phases of the Bigelow-to-Worthington expansion should be complete by 2013.

"If we get some normal weather, reasonable weather, they should be able to complete [phase one] grading operations by the end of this fall," Schnieder said.

The three-phase project advanced in the construction queue because of the 2008 Legislature's \$6.6 billion transportation funding package.

"This is all state funds," Fowlds said.