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Northfield Village Board

Senator's FOIA request draws ire from Northfield officials

Village responds to Schoenberg, defends Willow Road expenses

by Laura Michaels

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Northfield Village President Fred Gougler said he was "personally offended" by allegations of a Willow Road "slush fund" by Sen. Jeff Schoenberg and the approach taken by Schoenberg in requesting 15 years of financial information related to Willow Road.

The Village of Northfield has responded to Schoenberg's Sept. 8 Freedom of Information Act request for records pertaining to money spent on "maintain [ing] the existing configuration of Willow Road."

In his letter to Village Manager Stacy Sigman, Schoenberg, D-9th, said the Village has wasted "an obscene amount of local taxpayer dollars" on attorneys, media strategists and other "hired guns" to maintain Willow Road's two-lane status.

"For years, Northfield officials have not only obstructed responsible efforts to make Willow Road safer for pedestrians and motorists, but they have also operated as if they have had a blank check to spend as much as they want on politically-connected attorneys, lobbyists and public relations firms who have run up huge bills at local taxpayers' expense," Schoenberg said in a statement.

Gougler, however, was adamant in refuting Schoenberg's allegations.

"We have never been supportive of a two-lane road," Gougler said Tuesday, Sept. 21, during the Northfield Village Board meeting. "There is no slush fund related to this project."

In his letter to Schoenberg, Gougler said Northfield is "extremely frustrated by the current condition of the road," and reminded the senator of his support for a plan that would make the road safer for motorists and pedestrians while preserving property values and the character of the community.

Between 1994 and 2005 the Village spent approximately \$480,000 to develop an alternative plan for Willow Road, according to financial information provided by the Village in its FOIA response. This money was reimbursed by the State of Illinois, and in the response Sigman also wrote that \$762,394, "or over half of all the funds expended by the Village," were expenses either reimbursed or paid for by the State for Phases I and II of work on the approved three-lane plan.

"During the 15 year period our records indicate that Northfield's expenses were all toward a wider three-lane roadway or to explore other alternate roadway configurations," Sigman wrote.

During the board meeting Trustee Joan Frazier said she was "tremendously offended" by Schoenberg's letter, which she saw as an "insult to the good faith effort to work to improve Willow."

Trustee Brian Kozminski agreed and pointed to the fall newsletter released by Schoenberg's office as further evidence the senator is not supporting Northfield's work toward a three-lane solution.

The newsletter states, "engineering work for a four-lane Willow Road in Northfield is progressing on schedule and the state has committed \$25 million in capital funding for the improvements."

The Illinois Department of Transportation maintains it has not made a decision and will explore alternatives to widening the road.

Robert Hayward – chairman of Northfield's Traffic and Transportation Committee and a member of the

Community Advisory Group working with IDOT – called the four-lane plan "Schoenberg's Highway" and said the senator is an "absolute disgrace" to his office.

During his report to the Village Board on Sept. 21 Hayward said "it's absolutely critical that [Northfield] maintain funding" of the three-lane plan. On the meeting's agenda was an ordinance to amend the fiscal year 2010-2011 budget to increase the appropriation for the Willow Road project.

Trustees unanimously agreed to increase the project's budget by \$50,000 – from \$64,550 to \$114,550.

Gougler said \$40,000 has been spent this fiscal year and the additional \$50,000 is to fund the project through the end of this calendar year.