

## Northfield reports on Willow Road spending

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By **CHRISTOPHER PETERSON** [cpeterson@pioneerlocal.com](mailto:cpeterson@pioneerlocal.com)

Northfield has spent more than \$686,000 during the last 15 years on Willow Road-related efforts — although village officials said that money was not used with the intent of preserving a two-lane road.

Rather, most of it was used to study and engineer a three-lane plan approved by the state in nearly a decade ago.

Northfield recently responded to a Freedom of Information request issued by State Sen. Jeff Schoenberg, D-9th, who has accused the town of spending excessively to fight Willow Road expansion.

Northfield and state officials have debated for decades over whether and how the 1.2-mile stretch of Willow Road in Northfield should be widened.

The three-lane plan touted by Northfield — which accounts for roughly \$480,000 of the money spent — was scrapped in 2005, but officials and residents have continued to fight to keep it alive, often referring to it as a "shovel-ready" project that could end the debate once and for all.

In terms of money that was not reimbursed by other entities, Northfield spent \$686,709.

According to Northfield records, another \$762,394 was spent and reimbursed by the Illinois Department of Transportation for Phase I and II engineering work associated with the three-lane plan, as well as money for a subsequent study conducted by the Lakota Group consulting firm in 2007 and 2008.

Another \$35,595 was reimbursed by the Village of Winnetka, the Northfield Park District and Sunset Ridge School District 29, which also participated in the Lakota study.

Schoenberg's initial FOIA request, dated Sept. 15, asked that the village provide details of money spent by the village "to maintain the existing configuration of Willow Road" beginning January 1, 1995." He said Northfield had maintained a "slush fund" to obstruct the debate.

Schoenberg favors a wider road and has said multiple times that the road will be widened to at least four lanes, despite IDOT claims that talks are ongoing.

In response to Schoenberg's specific request, the village said no money was spent to maintain two lanes, but rather to promote an expansion to three lanes, or to explore other options for the road.

In a letter to Schoenberg, Village President Fred Gougler said the village is not interested in keeping the road as it is today, and he called Schoenberg's "slush fund" statement "malicious."

"We are extremely frustrated by the current condition of the road and have consistently expressed our desire to see the road improved," he said. "This frustration is compounded by the knowledge that such improvements could have occurred five years ago at considerable savings for Illinois taxpayers."

Gougler has argued that the three-lane plan would have cost about \$7 million. The state has currently reserved about \$31 million to widen the road, although no plan has been approved.