



Winnetka/Northfield

Northfield produces financials on Willow Road struggle

By [John P. Huston](#) Tribune reporter Sep. 23 at 11:27 a.m.

The war of words between state Sen. Jeff Schoenberg and Northfield officials can now become a war of numbers: To start, \$686,709 in local taxpayer dollars spent since 1995 regarding the controversial widening of Willow Road.

Northfield responded Sept. 22 with statistical data in response to an accusatory press release and Freedom of Information Act request from Schoenberg seeking the village's expenditures over the past 15 years.

According to its data, Northfield has spent \$686,709 of its own money, plus \$762,394 which was reimbursed by the Illinois Department of Transportation, since the issue first surfaced in 1995.

The bulk of local funds — \$480,000 — were used to support a previous IDOT plan from 2005 that would only have expanded Willow from two to three lanes across, officials said.

After that plan was scuttled, Northfield has spent \$208,206 to fight a movement to widen Willow Road to four or five lanes. The village supports expansion to three lanes, citing safety and community design concerns.

Schoenberg favors widening Willow Road through Northfield to four or five lanes and creating an underpass between Clarkson and Willow parks.

He alleged Sept. 13 the village had operated a "slush fund" and had spent "millions of dollars over the years," leaving Northfield "strapped for cash and seeking to raise new taxes."

Northfield refuted the allegation and chastised Schoenberg for not waiting until the statistics could be provided.

Schoenberg said Wednesday that he hadn't received the information from Northfield. Northfield Village Manager Stacy Sigman said the data had been mailed to Schoenberg that morning. A digital copy was provided to the Tribune.

Along with the financial records, Northfield forwarded a letter to Schoenberg written by Village President Fred Gougler. In it, Gougler criticizes the state senator for politicizing what he calls a safety issue.

"I would like to take this opportunity to express my disappointment and deep regret related to your recent inaccurate and defamatory allegations concerning Willow Road and the Village of Northfield," Gougler wrote. "The false, malicious and offensive language used in these allegations clearly do not reflect well on a person of your prominence and distinction. As a non-partisan and volunteer elected official admittedly I do not understand the provocative purpose behind these remarks which are directed at the very citizens you were elected to represent."

Gougler said a previous IDOT plan to widen Willow Road to three lanes was through the engineering process and ready for construction in 2005, but state funding never came through and it was sidelined.

Schoenberg originally supported the three-lane concept, but later changed his mind, Gougler said.

Schoenberg said the 2005 plan was deemed unfeasible.

"When I became senator for the area west of the Edens (Expressway) in 2003, I asked IDOT to conduct an independent analysis of both the traffic and financial feasibility of the Northfield proposal," Schoenberg said. "Those independent studies showed that Northfield's plans were inadequate. And I've subsequently tried to build consensus across the north shore on a plan that would provide for a safer and more smoothly running traffic flow on Willow Road."

By abandoning the 2005 plan, Gougler accused Schoenberg of wasting money that had already been spent.

"It is now abundantly clear that it is your politically motivated vacillation and intervention over many years concerning Willow Road that has been the true example of government waste," Gougler wrote in his letter to Schoenberg. "After expending substantial state funds towards an alternative project that you supported and could have been built years ago, you then change your position for apparent political gain, encumbering the state once again towards a \$2 million study of Willow Road and eventual construction of a project that may exceed \$ 32 million. Is this responsible government?"

Gougler said the 2005 plan would have cost \$7 million.

Schoenberg and neighboring towns such as Glenview and Northbrook sought to support a wider expansion of Willow Road. That process is now in a study phase, as IDOT is hosting a two-year Community Advisory Group process to gather input and feedback from residents and stakeholders.

Records show Northfield also spent \$671,394 from 2001-05 on the Willow Road expansion project, but that money was reimbursed by IDOT. Since 1994, a total of \$1.5 million of public money has been spent locally on the Willow Road expansion issue, records show.