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Northfield, Schoenberg spar over village's hiring of ex-IDOT official

Senator's charge of conflict latest act in Willow Road saga

By John P. Huston, Tribune reporter

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<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/ct-met-willow-road-flap-1116-20101115.0.574741.story>

State Sen. Jeff Schoenberg is questioning the involvement of a former Illinois Department of Transportation attorney who is now working for [Northfield](#) to fight a Willow Road widening project.

Ed Gower, through his firm Hinshaw & Culbertson, was hired in October 2008 by Northfield on an "as-needed basis" to provide advice, review documents and file information requests, said Stacy Sigman, Northfield's village manager. Through August, he had been paid \$62,167, records show.

Gower's background as chief counsel for IDOT was a major reason the village hired him, Sigman said.

"I think we looked for someone who had a background in the transportation area and was familiar with the processes and could help us through it," Sigman said.

But Schoenberg, who has been publicly battling with Northfield over a potential Willow Road widening project, said the relationship raises ethical concerns.

Stopping short of using the phrase "conflict of interest," Schoenberg said the arrangement "raises serious questions given Mr. Gower's prior position and direct oversight of the contract involved with Willow Road. I don't think it's appropriate that he should be involved in the same transaction as a private attorney."

On Oct. 29, Schoenberg made a Freedom of Information Act request to IDOT seeking documents "within the purview" of Gower regarding the configuration, design and expansion of Willow Road.

In an interview, Gower said his involvement with the Willow Road plan during his tenure at IDOT — from 1991 until 2003 — was minimal and did not preclude him from working with Northfield.

"I knew about it, but it was handled from a planning perspective," Gower said. "I don't recall being involved with any legal issues associated with Willow Road."

He disagreed with Schoenberg's ethical concerns.

Northfield wants to keep Willow from expanding beyond three lanes, citing child-safety concerns around adjacent schools and parks. Neighboring towns say the 1.2-mile stretch of two-lane Willow Road creates congestion and traffic accidents and should be widened to four lanes, two in each direction.

Controversy over the potential road project goes back at least 15 years, but the most recent fireworks started Sept. 8, when Schoenberg submitted a FOIA request to Northfield alleging a "slush fund" of money used by the village to fight the expansion of Willow Road to four or five lanes.

Northfield denied the accusation, and on Sept. 20 it provided a three-page, 15-year financial breakdown saying it spent \$686,709 of its own money, plus \$762,394 that was reimbursed by IDOT, since the issue first surfaced in 1995.

Schoenberg responded Sept. 29 by saying Northfield officials were deliberately failing to comply with the FOIA request by providing a summary instead of actual documentation. He pledged to appeal to the Illinois attorney general's office and expanded his original request.

Northfield responded by producing 6,277 pages of documents and by sending Schoenberg a \$926.55 bill for photocopying. Schoenberg is appealing that bill.

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